

Exclusive: On Set With “CASE 39,” Part One

Written by Carnell

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Riverview Hospital sits on a palatial mountainside overlooking Coquitlam, B.C., just outside of Vancouver. Dedicated in 1904, the place was built as a psychiatric facility designed to house British Columbia’s mentally ill populace. It was originally intended to accommodate 1800 patients, but its population soon increased to more than 4600. Over the years, many a lost soul dwelled within the numerous structures that dotted its 244 acres of wooded landscape.

The buildings today are, for the most part, closed, but an acting hospital focusing on the needs of adult psychiatry, geriatric psychiatry and neuropsychiatry still operates on the lush grounds. The shuttered and eerily empty buildings are now mostly used as shooting locations for movies (THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT, JENNIFER 8, ALONG CAME A SPIDER) and television (THE X FILES, SMALLVILLE, DARK ANGEL).

Today, Fango has been invited to what, according to signage, is called The Eastlawn Building to visit the set of Paramount Pictures’ supernatural thriller CASE 39. Produced by Steve Golin and Kevin Misher and directed by German filmmaker Christian Alvart (of ANTIBODIES and PANDORUM), CASE 39 is the story of a social worker (Renée Zellweger) who rescues a young girl (SILENT HILL’s Jodelle Ferland) from what appear to be abusive parents—only to realize that her actions have unleashed an ancient and mysterious force which threatens not only her life, but the lives of her young charge and those around her. Rounding out the cast are DEADWOOD’s Ian McShane and THE MIDNIGHT MEAT TRAIN’s Bradley Cooper; following a long series of delays and playdates in the rest of the world, the Paramount Pictures production finally hits U.S. theaters this Friday, October 1 under the Paramount Vantage banner.



Fango arrives on day 27 of a 47-day production schedule to find the normal hustle and bustle of a film set. Grips and production assistants flit about like worker bees, rushing from one end of the location to another on errands both important and mundane, as warm rays of sunshine heat the air and cut through the verdant trees which seem to be everywhere. Fango is met by one of the unit publicists and led toward Eastlawn—a towering institutional structure whose eroded paint hangs from the walls in curled ribbons. The closer we get to the building, the colder the temperature gets, as if not even the sun can warm the atmosphere this close to the towering edifice. We're led down long hallways and up twisting stairways, a sense of foreboding creeping in the deeper we venture into the building.

A meeting room is reached, containing long tables and chairs set in a circle. Being left alone in this place is not something anyone would relish. Soon though, two gentlemen enter: producers Golin and Misher, who discuss the particulars of CASE 39.

“Renée was interested in doing a horror movie,” Golin explains. “She hadn’t done one since TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE: THE NEXT GENERATION and wanted to do one again. So we had her [attached] and we were looking for directors and interviewed Christian, and then introduced him to Renée. She signed off on him, and here we are.”

“They truly connected,” Misher adds. “She was looking for a horror film, but she was also looking for that genre-based movie that would give her a great character—to step it up a bit. So it was a combination of the script [by THE CRAZIES’ Ray Wright] and the way actors acquitted themselves in Christian’s other films that she felt very comfortable with. It seems to be a very good combination so far.”

Alvart soon proved himself to be a highly organized director. “Christian knows exactly what he’s going to do and moves very, very quickly,” Golin notes. “He’s very pragmatic, and everything is very thought through. Nothing is arbitrary.”

“He storyboards everything, every scene in the movie,” Misher interjects. “Not just the action or the FX; he storyboarded every single scene, and he’s sticking to them. It’s very helpful for everybody on the set—including us—so we can all see his interpretation.”

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“Even with cutting together scenes,” Golin says, “the editor can create a shot with the storyboards... I mean, we haven’t filmed the entire movie yet, so there are big chunks of it missing. We can put in a few storyboards and, because they’re so specific, you can track through and understand what Christian’s intention was. Many directors work much looser and try to figure things out on the day of shooting. There’s not a lot of that going on here.”

“It’s better than a shot list,” Misher laughs.

As a result of this level of preparedness, CASE 39 is moving along well. “Actually, they’re going 50 percent faster than any movie I’ve ever worked on before,” Golin says. “They’re just doing a lot of setups, getting a lot done. Christian shoots a number of different angles and does fewer takes and moves very, very quickly. He really keeps moving, and that keeps the energy up for the actors. Many directors take so much time that they lose their energy and their focus. They take an hour or two between setups, where Christian does four setups in an hour.”

At this point, Alvar enters the room and the producers take their leave. The director is tall, bespectacled, wearing (appropriately enough, given his movie’s youth-centric subject matter) a BATTLE ROYALE 2 shirt beneath a suit jacket. The conversation continues on the subject of his storyboarding process. “I’m usually more creative at home than I am on the set,” Alvar says, “because on the set there are a lot of people standing around telling you how much time you have and how the kids need to be gone by a certain hour, so there’s lots of pressure and technical problems to solve. I’ve been setting the goal at home for what I want and trying to get that on set, and that’s hard enough. So, to be unprepared in advance and then come in on the day and hope that genius will strike is scary.

“Also, the way I’m shooting is a little different than most directors,” he continues. “We’re doing way more setups during the day, and it’s impossible to do that if the crew can’t see, ‘Oh, five shots from now, we need the crane and this and that in that position.’ ”

Of course, the presence of an Academy Award-winning actress such as Zellweger gives the film a higher profile than your typical fright flick, even one backed by a studio. “Renée was an interesting choice, because she grounds the supernatural element into something real. I take the stuff in this movie seriously. It’s not like SCREAM or those types of movies that just make fun of themselves or are self-referential. I’m trying to create a serious horror movie with a serious story and she’s taking it seriously too, so that combines very nicely. Ian McShane and all of the other actors are just as straightforward as well—as if it were actually happening in real

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life.”

The addition of veteran McShane was a very early inspiration, the director reveals. “Casting him was the very first thing I did when I came on,” Alvarr recalls. “The first week, I told them that I wanted to have him for the movie. It’s always good when you get hired for a movie; everybody’s so excited that they got you and some other studio didn’t that the first thing you ask for, you usually get. So, the first thing I asked for was Ian McShane.”

TO BE CONTINUED

{comments on}