



Published May 24, 2007 06:39 pm - There's well over an hour to go before the actors will arrive on set for the first shot of the day, but nearly two dozen crew members are already hard at work. The scene being prepped Wednesday morning marked the start of the local shoot for "The Life of Lucky Cucumber," co-written by Preston Lacy

Behind the scene: "Lucky Cucumber" begins local shoot ¹

— By Scott Meeker

smeeker@joplinglobe.com

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The Black Hen restaurant at Red Oak II near Carthage bustles with activity — lights are being set up, cameras are tested, the table setting in the booth where the shot will take place is rearranged, and there's a steady stream of people grabbing a bite from the craft-services table.

The scene being prepped Wednesday morning marked the start of the local shoot for "The Life of Lucky Cucumber," co-written by Preston Lacy. Lacy, who wrote and co-starred in MTV's "Jackass" TV series and films, has said that he based the script in part on his experiences growing up in the Joplin area.

The mockumentary is about a man named Lucky (played by Dian Bachar), whose unusual streak of bad luck doesn't end even after a winning lottery ticket turns him into a multimillionaire, and a cross-country trip with Grandpa's kidney in a beer cooler is thrown in for good measure.

Production began earlier this month on a soundstage in the San Fernando Valley, and will return there for several more days after more than a week of shooting in Carthage, Joplin and other locations around the area. In addition to Red Oak II, the movie will feature scenes shot in Joplin at the Kitchen Pass, Underground Paintball and Woody's Woodfire Pizza.

Capturing the flavor

Pausing for a moment as he gets ready for the actors' arrival at the restaurant, director of photography Ed Guttentag said that coordination is key on a film set, even when it's a relatively small scene like the one they're starting with — which will comprise just over four pages of the script.

"It's similar to building a house, where you have some people doing construction, others doing the drywall," Guttentag said. "But you have to have communication between all the people to get it done."

Nearby, camera operator Chapin Wilson preps a digital camera when he's called to begin gathering some footage of some of the Red Oak buildings.

Setting up outside of the Black Hen, he begins zooming in on one of the nearby structures.

"The B-roll footage is all about setting the environment," he said. "Using these shots give you the ability to set the scene and capture the flavor."

Artist Lowell Davis, who developed the 1930s-themed community after moving some of the original buildings from his old hometown, watches with interest as a steady stream of equipment is unloaded outside the restaurant.

"Preston used to hang out here and called to see if they could film here," he said, adding that he had hadn't realized the scope of the independent production.

"This is a really young crew, and they all seem really creative," said Davis. "My son is in Iraq and my grandkids are in school today, otherwise they'd all be out here this morning. They were all excited about it."

One of those young crew members is Joe Hill, who is serving as key grip for the production — the first feature film for the Indiana native who recently moved to Los Angeles.

“The gaffer sets the lights up, and the grips manipulate them,” Hill said, standing near a large pile of lighting equipment that is about to be set up inside. “This is a mockumentary, so thankfully there’s no dollies. This should be fairly easy.”

Also on hand is Robby Stambler, who is editing “The Life of Lucky Cucumber.” A freelance film and video editor from Los Angeles, Stambler said the advent of digital photography has had a huge effect on how movies are made.

“Filming in digital, the editor can cut scenes and show them to the director almost immediately,” he says. “He has the potential to see finished scenes while the movie is still in production.”

After the principal production ends, Stambler estimates he’ll likely spend up to two months editing an estimated 250 hours of footage for a film that will clock in around the 90-minute mark.

“The sheer amount of footage you have to watch is amazing,” he says.

And ... action!

At 10:30 a.m., director Sam Maccarone and the actors arrive on set to begin blocking and rehearsing the scene, which begins with Lucky getting an off-color pep talk from his grandfather (Patrick O’Hagan, whose credits include episodes of “Little House on the Prairie” and “Falcon Crest”), after a flirtatious encounter with a waitress played by Stella Keitel.

Maccarone, who co-wrote the script with Lacy, sits on his knees in the booth behind them as the actors run through their lines.

“That’s great, guys,” he says, then huddles with Guttentag and Chapin to discuss how many times he wants to film the scene and where the cameras need to be.

A few minutes later, the scene is ready to go.

“Ladies and gentlemen, make sure your cell phones are turned off or on vibrate,” first assistant director Tristain Nathaniel announces, signaling that the shoot will begin in five minutes.

Stambler arrives on set again to work the clapboard, and Maccarone looks on as makeup is touched up and cameras are put in position.

And, moments later, Scene 47, Take 1, begins.

Lucky: I’m trying really hard to get some work.

Grandpa: You’re doing a s----- job ... If I hadn’t ripped off those nuns, we wouldn’t even have money to pay for this lunch.

The scene ends with Lucky’s blunt assessment of Grandpa’s advice about his chances with their waitress, which makes Maccarone burst out laughing when the scene cuts.

“I loved what you were doing before,” he tells the actors. “Just do it again ... and action!”

Several more takes are filmed, and then the cameras are repositioned to get some close-ups and shots from the restaurant’s exterior.

Between takes, Keitel steps outside for a few minutes and talks about the character she plays, Candace. “She’s an ... interesting young woman,” she said with a laugh, describing the relationship she has with Lucky and his grandfather. “She’s sweet, but she has a bit of a naughty side.”

The daughter of actors Harvey Keitel and Lorraine Bracco, Keitel said she initially wasn’t interested in getting involved with acting.

“I was not a fan of the business,” she said. “I was exposed to it all while growing up on my parents’ movie sets.”

But an acting class taken two years ago inspired her to step in front of the camera.

“I just fell in love with it and never stopped,” she said.

Bachar, stopping by the craft-services table for a moment, said that the production on the comedy is going well.

“Lucky, he’s just kind of a simple, down-on-his luck guy,” he said. “For every good thing that happens

to him, something 10 times worse will happen. He becomes a multi-millionaire and his friends all turn on him. He makes new friends, who turn out to be even worse.”

Bachar, whose credits include “BASEketball” and “South Park,” marveled at the structures that Lowell assembled for Red Oak II, saying that it makes a perfect movie set.

“This place is awesome,” he said

Both are called back to the set as more actors join them in the scene, including Chris Owen, who played “The Sherminator” in the “American Pie” films.

And with that, it all starts anew as the crew begins preparing for the next shot.

Extras needed

Producers for “The Life of Lucky Cucumber” say that a large crowd of extras are needed for scenes to be filmed at noon Sunday on the square in Sarcoxie.

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Photos



Globe/T. Rob Brown -- Actress Stella Keitel (left), the daughter of Harvey Keitel and Lorraine Bracco, watches as director Sam Maccarone (center) runs through a rehearsal of a scene from “The Life of Lucky Cucumber.” The film began its local shoot on Wednesday.



Globe/T. Rob Brown -- Dian Bachar, whose credits include "BASEketball" and "South Park," is starring in "The Life of Lucky Cucumber."

¹ This article reproduced courtesy of The Joplin Globe