

Thriller being shot in Sudbury



By Jim Moodie

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"Cut!" says Roma Roth, midway through a conversation with The Star. "I want to get a reveal on the close-up here."

Roth, an L.A.-based but Ontario-born producer, is speaking from a set in Sudbury where she is shooting *Stepchild*, her first feature as a director.

"In my career I'm known for cutting out the middleman," she says with a laugh. "I've been a sales agent and producer, as well as a co-writer, and I just felt I'd done enough movies where I sat behind the directors, and thought to myself, 'I'd like to have it done that way,' so I thought I'd try one."

Roth is also executive producer and co-writer on *Stepchild*, which she describes as a "good psychological mystery thriller. It takes the audience on a journey of whodunnit."

Inhabiting the main roles for the suspense flick are a quartet of recognizable stars, led by Lauren Holly of *Dumb and Dumber* fame.

The redhead (actually a natural blonde, according to *People*) was previously married to Jim Carrey and is more recently known for her role as Jenny Shepard in the TV series *NCIS*.

In *Stepchild*, Holly is stepmom to distraught teen Ashley, played by Sarah Fisher, whom *Degrassi* fans will know as Becky Baker.

Fisher's character is "having an emotional breakdown," explains the director and co-writer, "after the death of her father in a supposed home invasion."

When her dad's business partner — played by Paul Johansson of *One Tree Hill* — enters the domestic scene, the teenager "becomes suspicious of his motives and is effectively convinced he has ulterior motives," says Roth.

"They never find the killer of the father, so everybody is a suspect, basically."

Rounding out the cast is Keenan Tracey, who appears as Gunner in the TV show *Bates Motel*.

"It makes my job easier to have such talented performers," says Roth. "We're really lucky to have this noteworthy and exceptional cast working with us."

Holly committed to the project when it was still in its infancy. "Lauren read the treatment I wrote and came on board at that point," says the director. "She lives in Canada and is a big supporter of indie filmmaking."

While Stepchild isn't being made on shoestring — the budget is more than \$1 million — it's not a blockbuster, either, so those involved work very closely and become like a small family, says Roth.

They have to work efficiently, too. "It's tight, because we have a 15-day shoot," says the director. "I have very high expectations of the film, but it's an independent feature and I have to work within budgetary restrictions."

The film is being entirely shot in Sudbury, and cast and crew are all Canadian, notes Roth. (Holly was born in the U.S., but became a Canadian citizen in 2008.)

Logistically, everything has worked out well so far, she says, especially after a set was secured that could double as a hospital and a business.

"We found a fortuitous location at Everest College," she says. "It works as both and has so much to offer that we could use as props."

Most of the filming, though, is occurring in and around a house in the hospital district.

The shoot is scheduled to last until June 26, with production vehicles tying up some space along Worthington Crescent. Simulated gunfire may be heard in the area on June 22.

"There's a fight and death scene involving a gun," says the director.

Most of the drama, however, is subtler than that, with tension built more through pacing and mood than explosions of violence.

"It's not titillating blood and gore," says Roth. "It's more an edge-of-your seat thriller, where you are emotionally invested in the characters."

This represents the second film Roth has worked on in the Nickel City, which has become a hotbed of cinematic production in recent years, with nine more shows scheduled to be shot here this summer alone.

Last year Roth was in town as producer on *The Music In Me*, a TV romance featuring pop singer Debbie Gibson and Gloria Reuben of *ER* renown.

"I'm from London, Ont., and I started my career in Calgary on *Lonesome Dove*, the TV series," says Roth. "I've always been excited about encouraging new Canadian talent and building an industry somewhere that isn't Vancouver, Toronto or Montreal, so I'm a big supporter of developing Northern talent — just to grow something new and exciting."

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