

## First feature film in Muskegon likely not the last

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*Photo courtesy MODERNCINE*

*Tommy Nelson rehearses a scene at a house near Lake Harbor Park in Norton Shores recently. Tommy is an 11-year-old actor playing the hero in "Offspring,"*

As dawn blushed first light Aug. 9, all the fine young cannibals gathered in downtown Muskegon.

As young as 10 years old, they donned fright wigs and streaked on war paint. They were sprayed and dabbed with contusions and grime. The rags they wore resembled skins -- but of what? -- fashioned into loin cloths and tattered halters.

Around 7 a.m., a man tossed a severed leg into the rear of a pickup truck. Then, off they all went to find a same-species meal in the dunes of Lake Michigan, giving pause to morning joggers who spotted them at Lake Harbor Park.

It was all make believe.

The movie "Offspring" is for real.

For the past two weeks, a cast and crew from MODERNCINE film company in New York City has taken up residence in Muskegon at the Watermark Center.

Through the end of August, 28-year-old director Andrew van den Houten will guide them through a horror unprecedented in the city's history.

"Offspring" is a low-budget -- van den Houten won't say how low -- independent movie that best-selling horror novelist-turned-screenwriter Jack Ketchum has adapted from his 1991 book of the same name.

And it is the first full-length feature ever shot in Muskegon. Scenes also have been shot at a centennial farm near the rural Mason County village of Freesoil; and farther north in Manistee.

When all is said and done -- around early November -- MODERNCINE should be well on its way to establishing a permanent presence in West Michigan and a studio in Muskegon.

Muskegon and MODERNCINE are part of the Michigan-made film explosion sparked by the state's financial incentives. In April, a program was signed into law that gives a 42 percent rebate to filmmakers who ply their trade in Michigan.

The rebate drew the interest of van den Houten and Watermark developer Moses Gross, who is credited as an "Offspring" executive producer.

"Part of my goal with this film studio is to develop what could be a resort, essentially," van den Houten said Monday afternoon. "... A film studio that you don't have to leave to accomplish all the needs of pre-production, production and post-production.

"MODERNCINE is a success because of its ability to produce low-budget products that look far more expensive than they actually are."

Also in Muskegon for the "Offspring" shoot is Ketchum, whose novel "Offspring" was a sequel to his 1981 debut book, "Off Season."

Ketchum will have a cameo appearance in the film as a coroner. His assistant will be played by van den Houten, although Ketchum gets priority.

"I poke around in a dead body," said Ketchum, smiling.

"Offspring" is Ketchum's first produced screenplay. The opportunity to work with MODERNCINE and its president, van den Houten, has started to feel like a perfect fit.

MODERNCINE and Ketchum have a history. The company also produced another film adapted from one of Ketchum's books, "The Girl Next Door."

Ketchum, a prolific and award-winning author in the horror-thriller genre, writes on the same dark side as a genre master who is one of his biggest fans, Stephen King. MODERNCINE also works in that genre, making "Headspace," the first feature van den Houten directed.

Set in Maine, "Offspring" involves a feral tribe of human flesh-eaters who invade a secluded home. They shatter the idyll of a young married couple (played by Amy Hargreaves and Andrew Elvis Miller) who, having made a fortune creating computer games, have just moved there with their infant daughter. The wife invites a college girlfriend (Anna Tessler) and her son to visit.

"And then," said Long Island native Hargreaves, "all hell breaks loose. It's very scary. And I'm nervous. I've never done anything like this before."

When the cannibals butcher some people and kidnap others, a retired sheriff (veteran Canadian actor Art Hindle), who thought he'd wiped out the clan 10 years before, is drawn into the investigation. The college friend's abusive husband (Eric Kastel) fits into the mix, as does a boy (11-year-old Connecticut actor Tommy Nelson) who becomes the hero.

Miller, a native of Racine, Wis., recently filmed in Michigan, in "The Job" with Ron Perlman ("Hellboy") and Joe "Joey Pants" Pantoliano ("The Fugitive," "The Sopranos"). It's good to be back in "The Mitten," he said.

"I love Michigan," said Miller. Upon arriving in Muskegon, he "headed straight to a bar-and-grill so I could get my fix of lake perch. Those are the things I can't get on both coasts."

While "Offspring" was putting together a scene backed by a Lake Michigan sand dune Aug. 9, two men with dogs on leashes walked into the shot.

"We weren't rolling," van den Houten said. "And I literally looked up at them, and I said, 'Let's take that back to One. If you can do it again, one more time, and I think we can put a little more emotion into it.'"

"And they looked over. They realized what had just happened, and they were laughing."

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