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Corbin Bernsen directing soap box derby film

Actor-turned-director hopes to save ailing kids tradition

By Borys Kit

April 5, 2010, 11:00 PM ET



Corbin Bernsen (Getty) Box Derby.

The last time Corbin Bernsen, the actor-turned-indie director, stepped behind a camera, it was to help out a small town in Saskatchewan, making a movie that mobilized the community.

Now Bernsen is setting his sights closer to home, on Akron, Ohio, with the hopes of saving an ailing soap box derby tradition.

Bernsen is directing "25 Hill," a family-friendly production with a budget of about \$500,000 that begins shooting Wednesday in the town once nicknamed the Rubber City. He aims to save its nearly 75-year-old racing league, the All-American Soap

In September, Bernsen read an article in USA Today about how the derby had a debt of \$623,000 with a local bank and was facing extinction.

"The derby used to be this huge event; 50,000 people used to show up, and Chevrolet was a huge sponsor," Bernsen said Monday from his production offices in Akron. "But the times, the economy, the kids got into other interests. Sponsorship has really dwindled. It's a nonprofit, and it needs money."

Bernsen decided to do what he did with "Rust," the faith-based movie he directed last year in Saskatchewan: help raise financing through grassroots community efforts and make a movie, using professional actors and professional crews, on a community level.

Bernsen wrote "Hill," the tale of an 11-year-old boy whose derby dreams are left in pieces when his soldier father is killed in Afghanistan. The boy teams up with a father figure whose own son, a firefighter, died in the line of duty, and the two help each other find redemption and revive the derby.

"You know those actors you hear about and you go, 'Is he still alive?' That's what the derby is," Bernsen said. "The idea is to show that the derby is alive and well. This is not a nostalgic period movie."

Bernsen helped the town raise the money for the shoot, which will be done in three segments, incorporating into the schedule his work on USA's "Psych." After an April shoot in Akron, there will be a June shoot in Taft, Calif., followed by a return to Akron in July for the big annual race.

The production also is counting on the community pitching in, and that has already begun: Goodyear is providing a blimp for the racing sequence, while 12 local restaurants are taking care of the movie's catering.

"Corbin was instrumental in bringing more attention to the organization," said Jim Huntsman, CEO of the derby, which is negotiating with the bank to amortize its debt. "Hopefully the people who have stepped up will continue to do so in the future, and this will be a little bump in the road for us."

Bernsen will play the father figure in the film; Nathan Gamble, who played Gary Oldman's son in "The Dark Knight," plays the boy. The cast also includes Michael Tucker, Maureen Flannigan, Meg Foster, Bailee Madison, Timothy Omundson, Ralph Waite and Rolanda Watts.

Chris Aronoff ("Donna on Demand") is producing, and James Grelick ("Rust") is the co-producer.

After "Rust," which just stuck a deal with Sony Pictures Worldwide Acquisition Group's division Affirm Films, Bernsen wasn't specifically looking for another venture to help people out, though he's happy the opportunity came along.

"I love the process of making a movie," he said, "but when it has a another purpose to it, it's more complete."

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Hey, AGENT X, Corbin Bernsen is doing a great job on "Psych" right now. He's perfectly cast for that. You should check it out. I'm also glad he's doing this movie since it's an original idea in Hollywood for a change and it's for a pretty good cause as well.

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