

# PLAYBACK

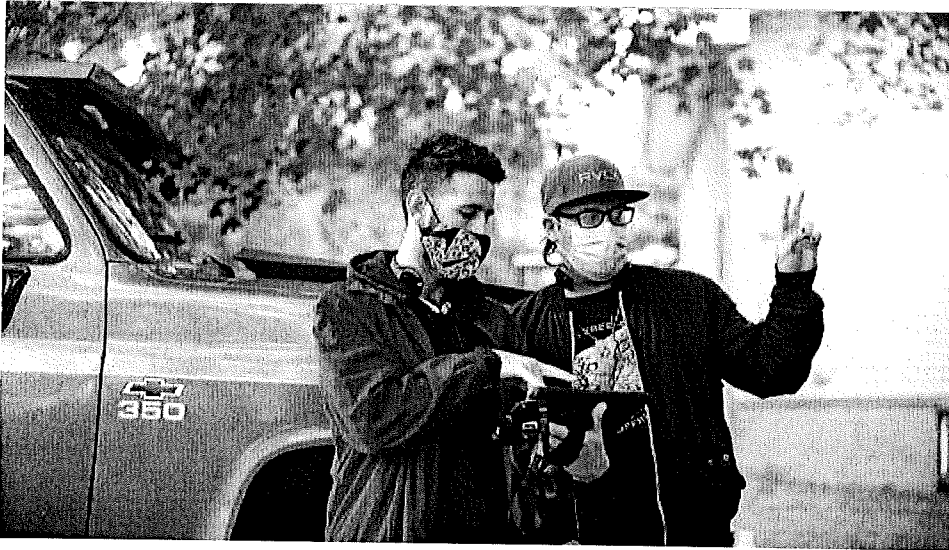
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## Wildhood's long, tumultuous journey to production

Producer Gharrett Patrick Paon shares his long-term strategy for getting the film financial support and how one decision saved the film from a year-long delay.

By Kelly Townsend

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*Wildhood* producer Gharrett Patrick Paon will be the first to tell you his smartest decision in 2020 would have been considered a rookie move in any other year.

Back in February – when COVID-19 was considered a far-off threat, roughly a month before the pandemic derailed production around the globe – Paon made the call to buy production insurance months ahead of a planned June production start.

That very decision is what allowed *Wildhood*, written and directed by Canadian Film Centre grad Bretten Hannam, to go to camera on Aug. 12 in Windsor, NS with a fully insured production that doesn't include a COVID-19 exclusion.

"It honestly came from a lack of experience," Paon told *Playback Daily*. "I thought that I was doing the right thing by paying for insurance that far out, but no one in their right mind would actually do that – maybe they will now."

*Wildhood* is a project a long time in the making for Paon and Hannam, who both come from Mi'kmaq ancestry. The film is inspired by Hannam's own life growing up in Kespukwitk, Mi'kma'ki (Nova Scotia) and gender identity as two-spirit. It follows a 16-year-old boy who goes on a journey with his half-brother to find his mother and his Mi'kmaw heritage after thinking both had been lost, and is joined by two-spirit youth along the way. It will be filmed in both English and Mi'kmaw and is set to wrap by mid-September.

The film is produced under Paon's Rebel Road Films banner, with Julie Balassi (*My Dead Dad's Porno Tapes*) serving as producing partner and Damon D'Oliveira (*The Grizzlies*) as executive producer. It stars Phillip Lewitski (*Utopia Falls*), Joel Thomas Hynes (*Little Dog*), Michael Greyeyes (*Blood Quantum*), Joshua Odjick (*Unsettled*), Steve Lund (*Schitt's Creek*) and the first feature role for Avery Winters-Anthony, who appeared Hannam's short *Wildfire*.

Unlike the spontaneous road trip depicted in the film, Hannam and Paon's long road to production has been carefully plotted. The two met when Paon – an actor at the time – auditioned for Hannam's first short film more than a decade ago. When Paon transitioned to producing, he brought Hannam's script to develop while participating in the CFC's Producers' Lab in 2017. The script went on to win the Telefilm Pitch This! competition at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2018.

Hannam directed a short film version, titled *Wildfire*, so they could introduce the story to the market in 2019 and attract more attention to the feature. The short screened at Canadian festivals such as imagineNATIVE, the Vancouver International Film Festival, Inside Out in Ottawa, FIN Atlantic and the Reelworld Film Festival, as well as international events such as BFI – Flare in London and the Kashish Mumbai International Queer Film Festival. Paon also brought in Balassi and D'Oliveira, whom he says were crucial in getting the film back on track when the pandemic derailed the scheduled June production start.

While Paon's forward-thinking with insurance served as a Hail Mary for *Wildhood*, the team also overcame several bumps in the road to production. They hired an occupational health and safety company and developed protocols based on the Section 21 guideline created for Ontario with local unions. They also had to work with their funders to cover the additional 10% of production costs brought on by COVID-19 – and fast. With the film set during the summer, a bigger delay would have meant holding off production another year, potentially forcing them to recast their teen characters.

Even when it all came together, a Mi'kmaw elder set to appear in the film as one of its lead characters was in a car accident right before filming and they had to scramble to recast with another Mi'kmaw elder. "Every single day in prep, it seemed like there was one insurmountable obstacle that was threatening to derail the entire production," says Paon.

By the time *Wildhood* went to camera, financing was secured through Telefilm, the Canada Media Fund, the Nova Scotia Production Incentive Fund and the Shaw Rocket Fund. CBC Films had also supplied development funding, while the Indigenous Screen Office provided COVID-19 relief funding. "It's been a very calculated strategy, but one that so far has played out seamlessly," says Paon.

The team has also purposefully secured funding without a distributor attached, which Paon says is part of a strategy to attract a larger pool of potential distribution partners once the completed feature is introduced to the market.

Paon says *Wildhood's* target audience are two-spirit youth, a group with a very little on-screen representation, despite the slowly growing LGBTQ+ content in kids and youth programming. Two-spirit is an Indigenous gender identity coined in 1990 that refers to a third or fourth gender, although the history of two-spirit goes back to pre-colonial times, with several different terms across varying Indigenous nations.

"The people that I think will be able to really get the most out of it are the kids that are two-spirit," he says, adding that anyone who watches the film will be able to relate to feeling like an outsider and struggling with your identity. "I hope [*Wildhood*] gives them that ability for an hour and a half to be able to escape and maybe reevaluate their relationship with their parents or their relationship with their identity."

*Pictured (L-R): Gharrett Patrick Paon and Bretten Hannam (image courtesy of Wildhood)*

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**TAGS:**

**Bretten Hannam, Gharrett Patrick Paon, Wildhood**

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