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Toronto International Film Festival 2006

Canada First! Opening Film: Fido **Currie crafts crowd-pleasing zombie flick**

by [Ilona Beiks](#)
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Director: Andrew Currie
Writers: Andrew Currie, Dennis Heaton, Robert Chomiak
Producers: Mary Anne Waterhouse, Blake Corbet
Cast: Billy Connolly, Carrie-Anne Moss, Tim Blake Nelson, Henry Czerny
Distributor: TVA Films (Canada), Lionsgate Films (U.S.)

Move over Lassie and Old Yeller. Fido, a darkly comical zombie flick, is ready to rip the hearts out of moviegoers - beginning with the TIFF crowd on hand to watch it open this year's Canada First! program on Sept. 7.

"This is unlike any zombie film you've seen before," says Steve Gravestock, associate director of Canadian programming. "We saw well over 200 features, but this was an easy choice for the opening film. It's unique, mixing several genres - historical, satirical, invoking the feel of a suburban 1950s fairy tale. It's smart and reflects what's going on in the world today. The way it's written, designed and executed, you get quickly sucked into that world. You don't doubt at all that that world exists."

"That world" was created by director and co-writer Andrew Currie of Vancouver's Anagram Pictures, who has nurtured Fido for more than 10 years.

"When I graduated from [Simon Fraser University] in '93, with Dennis Heaton and Robert Chomiak, we decided we wanted to write a screenplay together," Currie recalls. "Dennis had the story, and then we started pitching it to each other. And for a number of years, we wrote and rewrote it, constantly expanding the world."

The film is set in Willard, a Norman Rockwell kind of small town frozen in happy faux-Technicolor. And the story is your classic boy-and-his-dog tale, except the dog is a six-foot-tall man-eating zombie played by Scottish comedian Billy Connolly (Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events).

"It's not a horror film," Currie emphasizes. "It's similar to Edward Scissorhands. It works on many levels - it's based on a world of social and political regimes that use fear to control the masses. It's a vicious social satire, but it's also about the human heart - what it means to be alive in the world."

With an \$11-million budget and a cast also featuring Vancouver-born Carrie-Anne Moss of The Matrix films, Tim Blake Nelson (Syriana), Henry Czerny (The Exorcism of Emily Rose), Dylan Baker (Spider-Man 2) and K'Sun Ray (Fielder's Choice), the B.C.-shot film, produced by Anagram's Mary Anne Waterhouse and Blake Corbet, who say it is the biggest indie Canuck flick ever produced in Western Canada.

According to Waterhouse, Telefilm Canada, B.C. Film and Canadian distributor TVA Films have been behind Fido from the get-go. But it's Lionsgate Films' involvement that sealed the deal.

"Once you have a U.S. distributor, it makes a huge difference," she says. "We've already sold in more than 20 countries."

And how exactly does a zombie film generate that kind of interest?

"The project was unique enough that it hit the right people - for financing, distribution, actors," Waterhouse explains. "Our biggest challenge was pulling off something of this scale. Sure, \$11 million is big, but the script is big, the production is big - everything about this film is big."

Finding the right locations was key. The Okanagan Film Commission worked with the producers for seven months finding perfect locations in the interior, while most of the film was shot in the city of Kelowna.

"This project had very specific and unusual needs," Waterhouse adds. "The film commission helped us figure out a number of complex issues."

The tax incentives - domestic features get a 30% tax production credit on B.C. labor, with a 12.5% regional bonus - made for a perfect package, she adds.

For Currie, finding a neighborhood with the right look for the world he had envisioned was essential, and he found it on Maple Street in Kelowna. The director knew exactly what he wanted, researching the 1950s look of Technicolor and spending three months storyboarding the entire film.

So far this degree of preparation has paid off for Currie. *Night of the Living*, a short - about what else, zombies - that he cowrote and directed, won the Telefilm Canada award for best director at the Vancouver International Film Festival in 1997. And then, *Mile Zero* (2001), his critically acclaimed feature directorial debut, played at more than 20 festivals around the world, taking top honors in Houston, Victoria and Moondance in Colorado. It was also one of 10 international films selected in 2002 by New York Times film critic Janet Maslin for her prestigious Town Hall film series in New York. In 2002, along with Corbet, he produced the comedy *The Delicate Art of Parking*, one of the top-grossing English-Canadian films of 2004.

Although *Fido* is not Currie's debut feature, it qualifies for Canada First! because it is his first to screen at TIFF.

Unlike many emerging Canadian filmmakers at TIFF2006, Currie will not be focusing on hunting down sales for his film. With distribution in the U.S. and many foreign territories already in the bag, he is most excited to see how the audience reacts.

"Films are like your children - you want to see them do well in the world," says Currie. "But I'm also hoping that Canadians will like this film, and that it does well here."

The director will find out whether there's life in his story of the undead when *Fido* gets its North American release, tentatively in February.

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