



‘Primitive’
environment

Director Gwen Wynne looks out over Cape Cod Bay in Dennis, where she filmed the movie "American Primitive," based on her family experiences.

Indie filmmaker returns to Cape to shoot her story about secrets and double lives

By JOHANNA CROSBY
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DENNIS — Following his wife's death, Harry moves to Cape Cod with his two teenage daughters. Madeline, the eldest, wants nothing more than to fit in her new hometown. One night, she goes with friends to a gay disco in Provincetown, and she's shocked to see her father on the dance floor with another man.

His double life threatens to tear the family apart. "Secrets can destroy families," says L.A. director Gwen Wynne, describing the pivotal scene in "American Primitives," her first feature film.

Recently Wynne landed an agent, The Collective in Beverly Hills, to represent the film for domestic sale. She plans to wrap up the film in L.A. in October and shop it at various film festivals including Sundance.

Wynne came back home to the Cape this spring to shoot the \$1.6 million independent film for Cape Cod Films, a company she says she started to champion emerging filmmakers and tell stories that are often suppressed. The ensemble drama features Tate Donovan of TV's "The O.C.," Adam Pascal ("Rent"), Josh Peck, Danielle Savre, James B. Sikking, Susan

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Actors Tate Donovan and Danielle Savre, above, rehearse a scene from "American Primitive." Josh Peck and Savre, below, discuss another scene with director Gwen Wynne at Chapin Beach in Dennis.



Please see **DIRECTOR /B-2**

Director: Wynne films on Cape

continued from B-1

Anspach and John Savage ("The Deer Hunter").

The fictionalized story of a gay father was partly based on her experience growing up on the Cape "and was a story that needed to be told," she says.

In 1977, after the death of her mother from breast cancer, her father, a journalist, moved from New Jersey to Dennis to raise his daughters, run a business and be near the gay community in Provincetown. Father and daughters shared a house with his business partner, Fred Phipps, who made furniture reproductions of American primitives. Wynne warmly recalls Phipps, who died in 1984, as "a wonderful man who helped raise us."

Her father - a Brit from a conservative family - didn't formally come out until she was an adult.

"He was very private," Wynne explains, and was worried that his children would be taken away from him. "He lived with a sense of shame."

Her father's homosexuality was always the "white elephant in the room," Wynne says, until she asked him to read her script. That broke the ice.

Initially, her father was unhappy about her making the film, but came around to accepting the idea before his death in 2000, she says.

Wynne began writing the screenplay in 1996 after graduating from the University of Southern California's School of Cinema-Television. It was a "passion project" that took a year. But getting the film made took a decade. Wynne faced challenges. Although she had directed several documentaries, she was an unknown director and a female, a rarity in "male-centric" Hollywood, she says.

"People were afraid to touch a movie about a gay father," she says.

"Brokeback Mountain," the 2005 Oscar-winning movie about two star-crossed gay lovers, helped to open the closet



STEVE HEASLIP/Cape Cod Times

Director Gwen Wynne relaxes at the beach house in Dennis where she filmed the movie "American Primitive." Her sister, Daphne Nixon, painted the mural on the wall in the background for the film.

door.

Wynne's character-driven comedy/drama is a love story about two men fearful of declaring their love publicly. It's also a coming-of-age story about Madeline, who falls for the wrong guy and learns to accept and love her father for who he is.

"Madeline was hard to write," she says.

Unlike her younger sister, Daisy, who is fun, very naive and accepting of people, Made-

line is angry and feels her father betrayed her mother, she says.

A 1980 graduate of Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School, Wynne says she and her sister, Daphne, experienced negative reactions to being the daughters of a gay father.

"Boyfriends felt intimidated and didn't want to marry us," she says.

Although the climate today is more tolerant, subtle prejudice still exists toward children growing up in gay households,

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GWEN WYNNE

Director, "American Primitive"

she says. "It's actually painful because society has such mixed feelings."

Wynne originally planned to film "American Primitives" in a seaside town in Great Britain. When taxes made that prohibitive, she pushed for the Cape.

"It worked out for the better," she says. "I think the movie gods wanted us to make it on the Cape."

She aimed for local flavor. Cape Cod - its landscape, its people - is a character in the movie.

"There is nothing like the light here," she says, "and the geography is so unique."

Scenes were shot at Wynne's favorite Cape beach in Dennis, the Provincetown dunes, a cranberry bog and a Hyannis nightclub.

She cast two Provincetown teens, Sean Roderick and Chad Edwards, in speaking roles and about 20 locals as extras.

As the title suggest, the film pays tribute to Cape artists, including Edward Gorey, whose works appear in the film. Wynne was excited that the set designer found pieces of Phipps' furniture that are part of the set.

"It was kismet," she says.

Wynne plans to keep her Cape connection by holding the movie's premiere here. She'd also like to set up a base on the Cape to make more movies in the off-season and hold film workshops.

"The Cape is an incredible place," she says.