TV Close-Up: Susan Sarandon

by Eirik_Knutzen

Shooting "Bernard and Doris" for less than $500,000 was a brilliant bit of guerrilla moviemaking loved by a top-flight cast and crew getting paid very little and having the time of their professional lives. When there was no cash left in the skimpy budget for the project, which was shot in 25 days during the 2005 Christmas holidays at a Long Island, N.Y., museum, members of the production team - from Academy Award-winner Susan Sarandon, Broadway star and director Bob Balaban, multiple Oscar-nominee Ralph Fiennes, costume designer Joe Aulisai, set designer Frankie Diago, best boys and interns - all begged, borrowed and depended on the kindnesses of strangers.

SUSAN SARANDON - Academy Award-winner Susan Sarandon portrays eccentric billionaire tobacco heiress Doris Duke in the unusual love story 'Bernard and Doris.' CNS Photo by Victor Spinelli. From a script by Hugh Costello, the motion picture deals with the unusual relationship - essentially a sexless love story - between the highly eccentric billionaire tobacco heiress Doris Duke (Sarandon) and her destitute Irish butler, Bernard Lafferty (Fiennes), a shy, gay, recovering alcoholic straight out of rehab.

They met in 1987, when Lafferty came pounding on Duke's mansion door, desperately in need of a savior. The wild and often weird Duke had left at least two ex-husbands and countless lovers behind (and lost a child) and was looking for honesty, loyalty and a measure of love.

The flexible yet durable bond between the two "lonely, fragile, generous and extravagant" spirits came to an abrupt end when Duke died in 1993 at the age of 80 following complications from a stroke. Lafferty, who inherited $5 million outright, was designated trustee of her estate and left in charge of her huge charitable foundation (though he never had chance to run it due to legal complications), died from a variety of causes only three years later at the age of 53.

Lafferty left most of his estate to Duke's foundation and was one of a few of her family, friends and associates who did not seek to profit from her passing. He scattered her ashes in the ocean the day after she was cremated, and then he was sued by a battery of people, including her business associates, who accused him of everything from her murder to mismanaging her estate.

"It was so much fun," said tall, elegant, 61-year-old Sarandon, "although there were times when I felt kind of guilty because of the hard work for so little money. I kept thinking, 'What have I gotten them into?' But everybody knew what they were getting into and never complained. I have a feeling we all loved flying by the seat of our pants to make this movie.

"Crew members who found unusual items at swap meets on weekends that could fit into our sets bought them and loaned them to us," she said. "With no money for expensive clothing befitting an enormously wealthy woman, we begged high-powered friends to go through their closets for us. Our director, Bob Balaban, borrowed the big dog in our opening scene from a neighbor. At least I think he told his neighbor about it. My own little dog was on Doris' bed in another scene. We had no animal or dog wrangler."

When close-ups of exclusive and expensive items were called for, Sarandon and her fellow film guerrillas put in calls begging for services by designer Donna Karan. They also secured visible merchandise from Vuitton luggage, Christofle silver, monogrammed bed sheets from Pratesi, jewelry from Marilyn Cooperman, RJ Graziano bijoux and millions of dollars in gems from Bulgari, which also provided security for the collection. Dennis Basso provided Bernard's fur coat; Connecticut's Braswell Galleries supplied the antiques.

The movie was filmed at the 101-year-old John S. Phipps estate at Old Westbury Gardens in Long Island, a reasonable facsimile of the house where Duke grew up before and after her tobacco king father - James ("Buck") Buchanan Duke - died of pneumonia (reportedly hastened by his wife). He left his 12-year-old daughter $300 million in 1924.

Sarandon, a native New Yorker who was trained at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., recently reported for work in Berlin for the upcoming big-budget (its coffee and apple strudel tab was larger than the entire cost of "Bernard and Doris") cartoon-inspired "Speed Racer" with John Goodman, Matthew Fox, Emile Hirsch and Christina Ricci.

Sarandon also expects 2008 releases of "Lovely Bones" (as an alcoholic, chain-smoking grandma), "Middle of Nowhere" (starring her 22-year-old daughter, Eva Amurri, by Franco Amurri), and a small part in her partner's (actor-director-writer Tim Robbins) next film, "The Heretic."

"Then there's something with Michael Douglas and a movie in Europe with an American director, possibly in April," she said. "But I hate to go overseas while my two boys are still in school. I just don't know how it's going to work out yet."

"Bernard and Doris" will air Saturday, Feb. 9, 8-9:45 p.m., on HBO.

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