

# YOU CAN'T SING **HAPPY BIRTHDAY** IN A SMOKY ROOM

## *Impressions of a Local Movie Shoot*

By Mervin Gilbert

“Wanna be in a movie?”

The voice on the other end was Donovan Holtz's. Donovan is the dean of local actors; our liege lord. The image of Lana Turner discovered sucking on a straw in a Hollywood drugstore flashed into my head—what's called the Schwab's Syndrome.

“They need a fisherman with a big belly and gray hair, and it just isn't me.” Well, I could satisfy those criteria, and, besides, Donovan had cast me in a similar role in his own play, *No Guarantees*, which he directed at the Schoeni in 2000.

I showed up at the Nye Ranch, north of Fort Bragg, and met the writer/directors, two guys in their early 20's. One, Brian Zarin, had done TV ads. The other, tall, bearded Camerin Kelly, was already a Hollywood production veteran.

I met 25 very focused, cigaretted young men and women from Chico and the elite Cal Art Film Department in Valencia. Almost a million dollars of the latest digital film gear came up with them.

The story: Burnt out with LA, Travis takes off for a new life at his uncle's in Fort Bragg. He works for, and befriends Billy, a hotheaded local (played by Camerin), and soon meets Billy's girlfriend, Faye, who gloms onto Travis as her escape ticket. Frictions develop and there's a dramatic finale.

A shooting schedule spreadsheet gave a time and place for all of the film's 112 scenes to be filmed at the Fort Bragg Farmer's Market, the Mendocino July 4th Parade, Glass Beach, Camp No. 1, Noyo Harbor and All Aboard Adventures Sea Hawk, and the Golden West Saloon.

Before each of the scenes at the Nye Ranch, production designer Robbie Reeves would pop through the door with a party smoker. Best Boy, James Standley, the official “Wafter,” distributed the fog evenly, using a section of foam board. According to Kyle Burns, the Director of Photography, the atmospherics gives the film a 3-D effect.

Then they would set up the Main Shot in which Kyle would take in the actors, around a table, eating, say. This would be prefaced by Brian's “Roll ‘em!”, Casey Barclay's “Sound!” and Brian's “Action!”, preceded by the

clacking of the obligatory clapboard. The Main would carry the dialogue, mostly improvised. The Cover shots, different angles of the same scene, would follow. The directors encouraged me to depart from the script, and I did, even penning some of my own philosophical maunderings.

Of course, in any production with so many people involved, there would always be a birthday. But, you're not allowed to sing “Happy Birthday” in a commercial film—it belongs to some estate.

Gary Douglas Kohn, who played Travis, has appeared on *The Shield*, *ER*, and *Charmed*, as well as in *Almost Famous*, and other movies. My other acting partner was Dea Reinstead, who is also one of the producers and Co-Director Brian Zarin's mom. She played Daya, Uncle Pete's girlfriend.

Susan Burke, who played Faye, is an LA comedy star. An important cameo appearance was made by MTC's Beth Richmond, who the crew began calling Sabrina, her character's name.

At the end of July, it was over, and I went to work as Sitting Bull, in *Annie Get Your Gun*. It wasn't until Christmas break that I was able to see myself on film. The Nye enclave was again full of relatives and friends, a warm, peaceable kingdom of humans, dogs, and cats, all hanging out.

Of the 40 hours of raw footage, we witnessed a few finished “snippets:” a fight in the Golden West, the initial meeting of Uncle Pete and Travis, and a living room scene that featured Beth Richmond. These flowed seamlessly, complete with background music. “It's down to three hours, now,” observed Camerin, now clean-shaven and looking downright suave, reflecting on the process, and speaking from a universe of filmic knowledge. “I now know what to do with it,” he concluded.

*The Calm at the Edge of the Sea* has been entered in the

Mendocino Film Festival, and will go the round of festivals. It's a shared dream, this making of a movie, thousands of indies come out every year, hoping for a distributor to pick one. Then will come fame and fortune. Or maybe a handshake and a hug.

Roll credits!

Mervin Gilbert is an actor, writer, and cartoonist. For further updates on “*The Calm at the Edge of the Sea*,” go to [www.owlcompany.com](http://www.owlcompany.com).

Scene *The Calm at the Edge of the Sea*

