

ALLUVIAL FILM COMPANY

PRESENTS

BALLAST

2008 SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL – DIRECTING AWARD & CINEMATOGRAPHY AWARD,
DRAMATIC COMPETITION

2008 BERLIN INT’L FILM FESTIVAL, COMPETITION

2008 NEW DIRECTORS/NEW FILMS

2008 INDEPENDENT FILM FESTIVAL BOSTON - GRAND JURY PRIZE

2008 SAN FRANCISCO INT’L FILM FESTIVAL - FIPRESCI PRIZE

2008 BUENOS AIRES INT’L FILM FESTIVAL - FIPRESCI PRIZE & DIRECTING AWARD

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SYNOPSIS

Short Synopsis

A single mother and her embattled son struggle to subsist in a small Mississippi Delta township. An act of violence thrusts them into the world of an emotionally devastated highway store owner, awakening the fury of a bitter and longstanding conflict. With the boy's future hanging in the balance, the two adults must reckon with the past while together searching for a new way forward.

Long Synopsis

The opening images of BALLAST present a young boy drifting freely in a vast Mississippi Delta flatscape and a middle-aged man immobilized by grief in the darkness of a small rural home. If, among other possibilities, the first can be regarded as an image of hope for "what can be", and the second an image of regret for "what has become", it is the emotional expanse between these poles that successive images will seek to reconcile.

Although 12 years old, the boy, James, is already beginning to stumble under the weight of poverty endemic to the Delta. As Marlee, his single mother, struggles to sustain their tenuous existence through long hours at a demeaning and poorly paying job, James is left to his own devices. He wanders. His venturings take him into the natural landscape, where he finds solace, and, increasingly, into the turbulent orbit of a group of local teenagers whom he seeks to impress. His willingness to perform the occasional drug drop with his motorcycle bodes well for his acceptance. Patiently, he nurtures this goal.

One morning James points his motorcycle in a new direction. He travels fifteen miles to the home of Lawrence, the middle-aged man. Though it is unclear what motivates the cruelty the boy will inflict upon this devastated soul, familiarly suggests a shared history.

When James' interaction with the teenagers turns abruptly violent, Marlee reacts instinctively to excise him from the conflict. They flee their home in the night and alight, inexplicably, on Lawrence's property. While, in the bodily sense, this will provide them with safe harbor, it will rekindle the fury of a malignant and irresolvable conflict that has existed between Lawrence and Marlee since James' birth. Lawrence awakens to discover the visitors, Marlee lays claim to half of the property.

What ensues is a demonstration of the practical value of humility when the future of a child is in peril. To this end, it is also an exploration of an instinct to protect the ideal of "potential" as it is embodied in youth – in this case, protection from the devastating forces of poverty that seek to mute it. Though grief has left Lawrence hopeless, though guilt has left him suicidal, he must now consider a child. To this child, he can be of use.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

There is an energetic resonance in the Delta that moves me, especially in winter. It has to do with the dignity of endurance in the face of sorrow. Being energetic in nature, language is inherently incapable of communicating the totality of the sensation. For many years I've had the desire to make a film that, at its core, is an attempt to convey some portion of this essentially tonal phenomenon. Because tone is inherently formless, I realized that some degree of narrative structure would be required – some poles to give form to an amorphous tent. My hope is that the narrative has remained minimal and unobtrusive. I hope that it has served to convey the sense of sorrow that envelops this beautiful and complicated place.

BALLAST is a product of intensive collaboration with non-professional actors. With one exception, all characters are portrayed by residents of the Delta townships where the scenes were recorded and have no prior film acting experience. Though a script was created, it was not distributed. Scenario was discussed, then given form, in the course of a two-month rehearsal process. Actors contributed their own language to the rehearsals, dialogue evolved as the result.

All imagery was photographed in existing locations with available light on 35mm film.

—Lance Hammer

CREW BIOGRAPHIES

LANCE HAMMER – Writer, Director, Editor, Producer

Lance Hammer was born in 1967 in Ventura, California. He graduated from the University of Southern California with a degree in Architecture and worked as an art director in the studio film system. He resides in Los Angeles.

Hammer was awarded the Dramatic Directing Award at Sundance '08 for *BALLAST*, his first feature as a writer and director.

LOL CRAWLEY – Director of Photography

Lol Crawley was born in 1974 and lives in Newcastle, England. Since graduating from university in 1997, Lol has worked extensively in the camera department of the UK film and television industries, working on a wide variety of productions ranging from commercials, to network dramas and feature films.

His first significant work as a DP was the acclaimed short film *FIELD* (2001), directed by Duane Hopkins. The film won ten awards on the international film festival circuit including the Gold Hugo at Chicago and Best International Short Film at Hamburg. Following this success, Lol worked on the Film Four/British Film Council funded short *LOVE ME OR LEAVE ME ALONE* (2003), which won a further nine awards, including Best British Short Film at Edinburgh 2003.

He has since worked as a cinematographer on a wide variety of formats and productions ranging from DV cam documentaries to 35mm feature films. His latest film, the UKFC/Film Four feature *BETTER THINGS*, directed by Duane Hopkins, premiered in Critic's Week at Cannes and will be released in the UK this summer.

Crawley was awarded the Cinematography Award at Sundance '08 for *BALLAST*, his first feature as a cinematographer.

ANDREW ADAMSON – Executive Producer

Andrew Adamson comes to *Ballast* from the very different world of Narnia. He is the director of the hugely successful *THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE* and *THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: PRINCE CASPIAN*.

The New Zealand native made his directorial debut on 2001's *SHREK*, which won the first Academy Award for Best Animated Feature. He followed up with the sequel *SHREK 2*, the highest earning animated film in Hollywood history. *SHREK 2* earned Oscar nominations as Best Animated Feature and for Best Original Song. He recently served as executive producer on *SHREK THE THIRD*.

Adamson began his career in New Zealand over twenty years ago as a computer animator with animation company The Mouse That Roared and later moved on to the post of design director/senior animator at Video Images Ltd.

In 1991 he joined PDI (Pacific Data Images, now PDI/DreamWorks) as a visual effects supervisor on such films as *ANGELS IN THE OUTFIELD* and *DOUBLE DRAGON*. He has also worked on the visual effects on *TRUE LIES*, *HEART AND SOULS* and Barry Levinson's *TOYS*, and served as a key member of PDI/DreamWorks' commercial division on numerous award-winning spots. Apart from PDI/DreamWorks, his work as a visual effects supervisor includes *BATMAN*

FOREVER, A TIME TO KILL and BATMAN & ROBIN.

Adamson's other awards and nominations include the 'Annie' (the honor recognizing achievements in animation) for SHREK and a pair of nominations (for directing and writing) for SHREK 2.

MARK JOHNSON – Executive Producer

Mark Johnson won the Best Picture Academy Award for Barry Levinson's 1988 drama RAIN MAN, starring Dustin Hoffman (Best Actor Oscar) and Tom Cruise. The movie (winner of four Oscars) also captured a Golden Globe as Best Picture.

Johnson is currently prepping the third film in the CHRONICLES OF NARNIA franchise, THE VOYAGE OF THE DAWN TREADER, and is in post-production on his second film with director Nick Cassavetes titled MY SISTER'S KEEPER, starring Cameron Diaz and Alec Baldwin.

His latest films include THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: THE LION, THE WITCH, AND THE WARDROBE and THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: PRINCE CASPIAN, both directed by Andrew Adamson; THE HUNTING PARTY, with Richard Gere and Terrence Howard and directed by Richard Shepard; THE NOTEBOOK, directed by Nick Cassavetes; THE WENDELL BAKER STORY, the directorial debut of Luke and Andrew Wilson; THE ALAMO AND THE ROOKIE, both directed by John Lee Hancock; director Bob Dolman's films THE BANGER SISTERS and HOW TO EAT FRIED WORMS; Brad Silberling's MOONLIGHT MILE; Tom Shadyac's DRAGONFLY; Barry Levinson's AN EVERLASTING PIECE; Robert Zemeckis' WHAT LIES BENEATH; GALAXY QUEST; and MY DOG SKIP, co-produced with John Lee Hancock.

Johnson produced all of writer-director Barry Levinson's films from 1982-1994. In addition to RAIN MAN, their diverse slate of features includes GOOD MORNING, VIETNAM, THE NATURAL, TIN MEN, TOYS, YOUNG SHERLOCK HOLMES, AVALON, DINER (their 1982 debut project, for which Levinson earned an Oscar nomination for his screenplay), and BUGSY, nominated for ten Academy Awards and winner of the Best Picture Golden Globe Award.

In 1994, Johnson established his own independent production company and produced A LITTLE PRINCESS, directed by Alfonso Cuarón, as well as HOME FRIES and DONNIE BRASCO. He also served as executive producer for CBS-TV's "L.A. Doctors," "Falcone," "The Guardian," and "Love Monkey."

Additionally, Johnson has either presented or executive produced Antoine Fuqua's SHOOTER, Luis Llosa's directorial debut SNIPER, Tim Robbins' directorial debut BOB ROBERTS, Steven Soderbergh's KAFKA, Robert Redford's Oscar-nominated QUIZ SHOW, and JOURNEY OF HOPE, winner of the 1990 Foreign Language Film Oscar. Johnson also serves as the Chair of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Foreign Language Film Award Committee and as a Governor for the Producers' Branch.

AIMEE SHIEH – Executive Producer

Aimee Shieh began her film career as a publicist with Miramax Films where she worked on such celebrated films as PULP FICTION, IL POSTINO and TRAINSPOTTING. She later coordinated the publicity and promotions for SECRETS AND LIES and BREAKING THE WAVES at October Films, before moving over to Paramount Pictures, where she helped strategize the campaigns for such blockbusters as THE TRUMAN SHOW and DEEP IMPACT.

Shieh worked as the Director of Development at Paramount Pictures, where she scouted literary material for the studio's executives and their producers on the lot, including Icon Productions, Scott Rudin Productions, Cruise/Wagner, and MTV Films. Upon leaving Paramount, she produced director Coleman Hough's short film A TALE OF TWO.

Shieh has since launched the Hong Kong-based production company, The Film Bund, which produced ONE LAST DANCE, (2006) a Chinese triad-mafia thriller. The film screened at numerous international film festivals, including Sundance and Cannes, and sold in over 30 territories worldwide.

Current projects on her slate include the Western LONG RIDE HOME, being executive produced by David Hayter; the thriller THE BATESON DEVICE, starring Bradley Cooper and Paul Bettany, with Dan Bush attached as the director; and Lance Hammer's psychological drama THE IMPERFECT CELL, executive produced by Andrew Adamson and co-produced by Mark Johnson.

Earlier last year Shieh returned to Paramount where she currently works in development.

CAST BIOGRAPHIES

MICHEAL J. SMITH, SR. (Lawrence)

Micheal J. Smith, Sr. was born in 1970 and lives with his wife and four children in Yazoo City, Mississippi where he works for the city's Public Service Commission. It was his wife who brought the audition notice for the film to his attention though he'd never in fact acted before. Mike says of the experience, "I wasn't sure if those things were inside of me at first – those aspects of Lawrence that Lance said he saw in me. But playing this other person pulled it out. I became aware of those things that exist in me but I'm reluctant to express."

JIMMYRON ROSS (James)

JimMyron Ross was twelve years old when BALLAST was filmed in 2006 and is now fourteen. He lives with his mother, Sicki, in Canton, Mississippi and attends the ninth grade where he plays free safety on his school's varsity football team. JimMyron heard about the auditions for *Ballast* at the Local Boys and Girls Club and signed up on a whim. When asked what he gained from the experience, JimMyron remarked, "I gained confidence making the movie. Now when something challenging comes along I say to myself, 'I can do this'. Before the movie, I would sit and think about it. 'What if I mess up?' 'What if they don't like me?' Now I think, 'This is something I can do.'"

TARRA RIGGS (Marlee)

Tarra Riggs was born in Crystal Springs, Mississippi but raised by her mother just outside of Chicago. After returning to Mississippi to attend college, she lived briefly in Atlanta before returning to her home state where she now lives in Jackson with her husband and two children. She was homeschooling her children and working part time when her husband encouraged her to try acting, something she'd always longed to do. It was through an introductory acting class that Tarra heard about auditions for BALLAST. Of the experience Tarra says: "Next to the birth of my kids, it was the most beautiful experience of my life. It was like I was being cleansed inside; I felt blessed every day. The unpredictability of working without a script was the most exciting thing about it." Tarra has acted in several feature films since Ballast. She will next be seen in AMERICAN INQUISITION with Alfre Woodard.

JOHNNY MCPHAIL (John)

Johnny McPhail was born in 1941 and grew up on a farm in northern Mississippi. He attended Mississippi State University before eventually moving to the city of Oxford where he still resides. Married with five grown children, Johnny embarked on an acting career before he chose to sideline it in order to devote himself to raising an autistic daughter and working as an advocate for autistic children. With his daughter now grown and thriving, Johnny has been pursuing acting enthusiastically which has led to parts in local stage and film productions. In addition to BALLAST, he has just completed a role in the feature film CHASING THE WHITE DRAGON. He describes working on BALLAST thusly: "I really learned how to act for film through this experience. I trusted Lance's instincts when he told me to 'not act'. Auditioning for the film was hard but acting was easy."

