

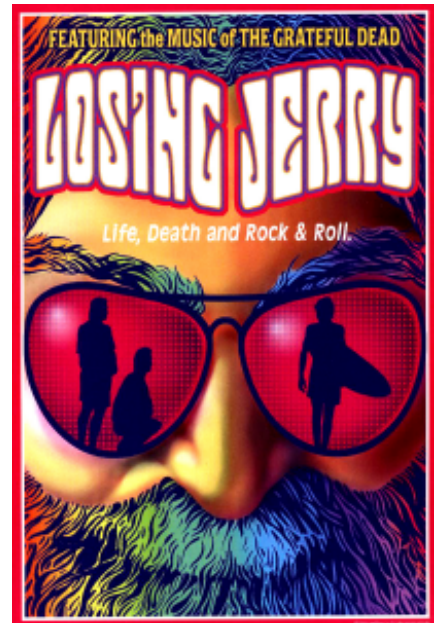
“Losing Jerry and finding angels”

by Erin Trahan

So you’re producing an ad for a Japanese company and you need a pine forest. If you grew up in Wolfeboro, like filmmaker Mitch Ganem, you think of New Hampshire. If you’ve written a film script that culminates at the Hampton Beach Casino Ballroom, and re-creates how thousands of Deadheads spontaneously congregated there to commemorate Jerry Garcia’s death, you insist on New Hampshire.

Ganem’s plan is to shoot “Losing Jerry,” the entire film, in his home state. Reasonable enough. But making a feature-length movie defies reason. It has to spring up and take hold despite its thousand moving parts.

“This is exactly the kind of film that usually goes to North Carolina,” says Ganem. “It has beaches, the weather cooperates.” But “Losing Jerry” is set in Hampton Beach, where the events historically happened and the weather is less predictable. And it’s Ganem’s New Hampshire roots that brought him to this story: his life-long friendships, his discovery of the Dead, his sense of community—which is why he’s doing whatever it takes to bring “Jerry” home.



Ganem is not alone. A host of home-court enthusiasts also want “Losing Jerry” and similar film projects to see New Hampshire as a viable option. According to Van McLeod, Commissioner of the state Department of Cultural Resources, which houses the Film and Television Office, supporting film production is “good for everyone.” Most overtly, film projects bring in revenue. McLeod reports that the production of television show “The Brotherhood of Poland” dropped between \$800,000 and \$900,000 during a month in Plymouth. Early figures for “The Sensation of Sight,” a feature starring David Strathairn filmed in Peterborough in the fall of 2005, estimate the town benefited to the tune of nearly \$500,000.

“We spend money like drunken sailors,” Ganem says of film crews. He lists off some expenses: food, lodging, lumber, art materials, gassing up a fleet of rental cars. But it’s not a free ride for the town, especially for communities that are not familiar with productions of this scale. “A film company is like an invading army,” says Ganem. “We show up with more stuff and more people than you can believe.”

Ganem and McLeod share the notion that developing key relationships early on can make the whole process run more smoothly. For that reason, McLeod has facilitated dialogues between Ganem and “Losing Jerry” producer Tracey Becker (an associate producer on “Finding Neverland”) and several Hampton Beach officials, including business owners, the Chamber of Commerce, local police and representatives from the state Division of Parks and Recreation. Ganem and Becker agree that the meetings have helped.

“The goodwill generated through Van and through (the Hampton Beach) community, it’s hard to put a price tag on that,” says Becker.

McLeod may be tending to “Losing Jerry” right now, but his sights are set on the future. To him, artists are independent businesses, of sorts. The more success they find in New Hampshire, the more local dollars they spend and the more potential that they’ll create jobs for other artists. McLeod points to “The Sensation of Sight” executive producer Buzz McLaughlin as an example. He owned a summer home outside of Keene for 12 years. “Then he picked up, he and his wife and family chose to move here,” says McLeod. He established either/or films and New Hampshire is now his permanent residence.

Tracking the number of filmmakers working in the state, the exact nature of their work and the revenue generated by their presence is a challenge, admits McLeod. He compares a New Hampshire artist to a farmer who might plow driveways in the winter, tap maples in the spring, and in the fall, set up the apple stand. “It takes a bunch of things to make it work,” he says. And yet the Legislature needs data to see the direct benefits, so one of the Film Office’s major objectives is to improve systems to measure economic impact.

“Anecdotally,” says McLeod, “I see the room being fuller and fuller.” He’s referring to events organized and sponsored by the Film Office, like November’s screenplay reading of “Losing Jerry” at the Wentworth-Coolidge Art Center in Portsmouth. It was part of a new series to showcase the work of New Hampshire screenwriters, which McLeod posits will lead to more stories set in New Hampshire and more productions shot here. McLeod personally invited community members he thought would be interested in “Losing Jerry” and whose relationships can add value to making the film happen.

Specifically, McLeod’s hope is to cultivate investors, not only for Ganem’s film but also for films in general. “I am trying to create an angel network,” he explains. He cites the many individuals who donate to local nonprofit arts organizations and how they do so out of concern for their communities. “The exact same people who have a philanthropic pocket often have an investment pocket. Whether they invest in stocks, bonds, or other enterprises, I want to get them to invest in film.” His reasoning is that, one, it has the potential to return money, and, two, “it can do a lot of good.”

While the idea is still just an idea, McLeod reports some interest and cites a few existing angel networks that would be open to seeing a filmmaker’s business plan. Would the Film Office act as a gatekeeper to funds? “To be determined,” says McLeod, and then reasserts the role of the Office as facilitator, resource hub and provider of technical assistance. In the immediate future, McLeod is planning a workshop to help filmmakers weigh the benefits of investors versus donors.

Los Angeles-based Becker, who is in the middle of figuring out income sources for “Losing Jerry,” is open to the idea of an angel network. “Any time anyone is bringing someone with money to the table, it’s worth paying attention to,” she says. “Every movie has its own life, it’s like starting a new business every time,” she says. The fact that no template is set in stone keeps each process fresh and fascinates her. How much she raises depends on the film’s budget, and the budget depends on which actors commit. If a certain star says yes, the budget can jump exponentially, though so can the film’s marketability. Of course, there is one bankable constant for this picture: Ganem and Becker already secured the rights to 25 Grateful Dead songs. The acceptance letter arrived on stationery with a skull and roses. “Once we had that in place we knew we were cooking,” says Becker.

For this project, Becker sees two possible streams of funding: either finding individual equity investors or partnering with a production company that has funds. “We’re exploring both,” she says, “but until we have a finalized budget, that will determine which way to go.” Becker reports that “Losing Jerry” is being budgeted right now by Seacoast-based Mark Constance, who is on the board of the Film Commission and also served as producer and production manager on “The Sensation of Sight.”

Constance is breaking down the screenplay, scene by scene, to figure out exactly what elements are needed—how many extras, what types of vehicles, era-specific props, etc. “It’s a really big art department movie since it spans from 1980-1995,” he says.

Becker and Ganem expect to have initial numbers in the next few weeks, and with that data they can work on solidifying the cast and financing. But again, they are dealing with moving parts. Celebrities and investors can be temperamental and even best laid plans suffer last-minute changes. For the moment, the plan for “Losing Jerry” is Hampton Beach, New Hampshire, in early fall, with six weeks of cloudless skies.