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Down East Films
Los Angeles



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Thomas Hildreth

By Steven Hedlund

Hollywood often falls into the trap of stereotyping fishermen as detached and crusty. But Thomas Hildreth's new indie film "Islander," which he co-wrote, produced and starred in, is spot-on in its portrayal of Maine lobstermen and the dynamics of island life.

"Islander" premiered at the Landmark Kendall Square Cinema in Cambridge, Mass., on Friday, March 9, [call (617) 499-1996 for show times] and hits theaters in several cities nationwide, including Washington, D.C., Denver, Phoenix and Seattle, later this month.

Hildreth portrays Vinalhaven, Maine, lobsterman Eben Cole. While defending his island fishing territory from an encroaching mainland lobsterman, Cole's temper inadvertently results in the death of a teenage sternman. After serving five years in prison for manslaughter, Eben returns to Vinalhaven as an outcast. His estranged father has died. His ex-wife has moved in with his adversary and refuses to let him see their young daughter. The word "killer" is spray painted on his dilapidated home. But with the help of a salty lobstering friend, Cole gradually rebuilds his life.

The film, co-written and directed by Ian McCrudden, was shot exclusively in Vinalhaven and Rockland, Maine, in late spring-early summer 2005. It debuted on Vinalhaven and at the Maine International Film Festival last summer.

Film critics and Vinalhaven natives alike give "Islander" two thumbs up.

"There is a profound sense of place that underscores the breathtaking cinematography and literal plot line of 'Islander,'" writes Laurel Brauns of the Wire, a Portsmouth, N.H., weekly newspaper. "'Islander' is a lighthouse in the capricious sea of independent film: a distinctly American tale illustrated with ease and allure."

Hildreth, 42, is no stranger to the Pine Tree State. A Falmouth, Maine, native, Hildreth has summered with his family on Vinalhaven since he was a kid. He's the youngest of four brothers. His father, Horace Hildreth Jr., is chairman of Diversified Business Communications of Portland, Maine, publisher of *SeaFood Business*. His grandfather, Horace Hildreth Sr., the company's founder, was governor of Maine from 1945 to 1949.

I chatted with Hildreth from his Hollywood, Calif., home in late February.

HEDLUND: What's the film's premise?

HILDRETH: It's about a guy who gets into trouble by taking the law into his own hands and has to redeem himself in the community after he pays his dues by doing time. It's not based on any real event or real person. It's a compilation of ideas: [one is] territory wars and [another is]

redemption — returning to a small community, revealing yourself and humbling yourself.

What inspired you to co-write and produce a film about Vinalhaven, its people and lobstering?

I spent most of my summers [on Vinalhaven] as a kid with my family and grew up in Maine. They say,

"Write what you know about." I knew this area hadn't been overexposed on film by a long shot. If anything, it's pretty exotic to people. I know they hadn't seen it in movies in a way that is cut to the bone.

Critics describe the film as authentic and genuine. How important was it to shoot the film on location in Vinalhaven?

It was seriously important. We shot on location as much as possible. Ian has a philosophy: Shoot what is, as is. In other words, just shoot it. You can't improve upon it. You can put millions of dollars into the production-design budget and not improve upon it. But Hollywood will do that. We were very lucky. We had the good grace and acceptance of the people of Vinalhaven. They liked the script, and they knew us enough to trust us enough to know that we had the right intention. So they let us shoot realistically what was there on the island from their boats to their houses to their businesses to their wharfs. We had an open invitation to use the island as a giant movie lot. It's not easy to do. Even if a medium-sized production, let alone a big-budget picture, came to the island and threw money around, a lot of people would say, "No, you can't do that, you can't do that, you can't do that," and they would shut down the production in many ways. The fishermen on Vinalhaven were a huge part of our process. They were very involved. We got them to go over the script with us.

How does lobstering shape the film's characters and plot?

Lobstermen and fishermen as a whole are independent, strong-willed people. [These are] characteristics that motivate the [film's conflict] and the lead character. There's a sense of birthright and tradition and ownership that fishermen, who have territory passed from generation to generation, feel responsible to and possessive about, as a farmer in the Midwest would about his 500 acres of land.

American lobster is one of the world's most recognizable foods.

Do you think consumers really understand how it's harvested?

I think it's really interesting how exotic and sought-after lobster is as a food, yet it could be farmed for all [consumers] know. Red Lobster

and all kinds of chains sell [lobster], and the most exotic restaurants in the world sell it. Part of what we thought was original about what we were doing is that [lobstering] hadn't been explained or exposed or observed like this in film.

How did you prepare the actors to portray Mainers?

We weren't trying to get [all the actors] to hit [the accent] hard, because we felt that would detract [from] the story, if people were trying too hard to do a Maine accent. This is the trap that many Hollywood productions fall into. They make [the accent] ridiculous, in effect insulting the character. I think Maine people are made [by Hollywood] to look trite, quaint, cozy and cute, and it almost becomes comic.

What's your favorite line in the film?

When Eben addresses his community at [the teenage sternman's] memorial, he says, "They say you can pick your friends, but not your relatives. On an island, we're all related, whether we like to think so or not." What he's saying is that we have to learn to live together and protect our way of life. It makes for good drama, because on an island people get into each other's business. But at the end of day, they have to live together, so they have to learn to get along.

What about the film are you proudest of?

I'm proudest about the warm, genuine reception we got from the people of Vinalhaven, because it was so much about them. They totally validated it. The fishermen who worked on the movie and were in the movie said, "You got it." It was great to hear on an artistic level and a personal level. For example, one of the lobstermen on Vinalhaven, Walt Day (he's in the movie; he has a speaking part), was cheered thunderously when he left the theater at the premier on Vinalhaven; the whole island showed up to see the movie. He saw [McCrudden] the next day and said, "You know, I was out on the water and no one gave me a hard time about that movie." It was so dry. But it was a huge compliment. He was clearly expecting a ribbing from [fellow fishermen].

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