

Cambridge's Federico Muchnik makes feature film debut

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CAMBRIDGE — When you're a movie director and your first name is Federico, as is Cambridge filmmaker Federico Muchnik, the obvious question is were you named after **Federico Fellini**, as if your parents would be prescient enough to know you would choose a career in cinema.

In fact, Muchnik is not only named after the famous Italian director, he's also named after **Federico Garcia Lorca**, the famous Spanish poet, and **Federico Valle**, the famous Argentinian documentarian.

"Those are awfully hard people to live up to," admits Muchnik. "I just sort of accepted it."

To continue the Fellini connection, Muchnik was also born in Italy. However, their paths diverge from there as Muchnik moved to America when he was 5 and settled in Waltham while his mother, Rita Arditti, taught at Brandeis University. When his mother landed a job at Harvard Medical School, he moved to Cambridge and has lived there off and on since then.

While at the Cambridge Pilot School, Muchnik would be introduced to Fellini by watching his films during frequent trips to the Orson Welles Cinema. This Cambridge institution for art-house films, since dearly departed, would become Muchnik's movie mecca. "I became addicted to movies," he says. "I stopped going to class and did enough just get through high school and into college." In addition to Fellini, Muchnik saw the films of Hitchcock, Capra, Chaplin, Truffaut, Kurosawa, Herzog, Wenders, the Marx Brothers and more.

This addiction led to a career in filmmaking and the results of his dogged cinematic pursuits can be seen in his debut feature film, "This Killing Business." The film, which Muchnik wrote, directed, edited and produced, receives its world premiere at the Boston International Film Festival on Friday, April 19 at 10 p.m. at AMC Loews Boston Common, 175 Tremont St., Boston.

The film follows a sociopath named Jim Collins, who turns to murder to advance his career. Talk about a tough economy. When complications set in, Jim decides not give a peace a chance.

For the film, Muchnik was inspired by the pulp crime fiction of Jim Thompson, an author who gave the genre some literary gravitas. Thompson novels made into movies include "The Grifters" and "The Getaway." "I was raised not to look at crime novels," says Muchnik. But Thompson's noirish tales appealed to Muchnik just as the noirish films of Cagney and Bogart did.

After going on a Thompson book buying and reading spree, Muchnik began the creative process that would turn into "This Killing Business." "One morning, I got up, opened my laptop and all of this stuff started coming out," he says. Less than a month later, Muchnik had a draft. He also had motivation. "I told myself I needed to make a film or I wasn't going to be able to live with myself," he says.

Muchnik, 52, is no stranger to the filmmaking process. He went to film school at New York University, graduating in 1982. He worked as a producer at WGBH-TV, became a freelance filmmaker and educator and ran the film program at the Boston University Center for Digital Imaging Arts in Waltham from 2005 to 2010. Multilingual, Muchnik made many language-based videos. He also made the documentary, "Touching History: Harvard Square, the Bank and the Tasty Diner."

His work has been screened at the Sundance, New York, Toronto, New England Film and Video, and Roxbury Film festivals. His 1982 short film, "You're Not Telling Me Everything, Mrs. Malloy," aired on HBO. He also co-wrote and played the male lead in Raul Ruiz's 1992 cult film comedy "The Golden Boat,"

which won the Audience Award at the Rotterdam Film Festival.

In addition, he runs his own production company, Mighty Visual Productions, in Brighton.

To say that Muchnik is into movies is like saying grass is into green. "I decided that movies were somehow always going to be a part of my life," he says. "I struggled for many years, making many bad movies, failing miserably. I still don't consider myself to be a very good filmmaker, but I can't help it. I just stubbornly don't see myself doing anything else."

To Muchnik, film offered "a way to escape reality... It was a fantasy world, a fabulous, imaginary world. I also loved the control I saw directors exerting on their movies, I started recognizing directors and their signatures. I saw the directors as father figures and mentors. And I developed a fascination with the craft. I wanted to understand how everything worked. The logistics of production fascinate me: how to organize a group of people, how to spend wisely."

For "This Killing Business," Muchnik had the script recorded as a radio play before he shot a single scene. "I wanted to get a sense of the cadence and rhythm of the dialogue," he says. "The key to making a first feature is not make any fatal mistakes and I don't think I made a fatal mistake, like when one of the big departments, such as acting, writing, editing, camera and lighting, fails," he says. "With my first feature, I think I acquitted myself as well as anybody. I didn't want to make a film where people would say, 'Jesus Christ, why did he get into this racket?'"

For the cast, Muchnik puts ads on Craigslist and relied on actors he had worked with on freelance projects and in the theater. The film's lead, Alexander Cook, answered the ad. "I told him, 'You're going to read for one of the thugs,' who has since been written out of the movie," Muchnik recalls. "But he read the part of the thug so well, I said, 'Could you stick around and read for the lead role?' I saw him go from morose to witty in a second. ... I then asked him, 'What do you know about sociopaths?'" It turns out Cook had researched sociopaths. He got the part. "I'm glad we made the decision to work together," says Muchnik.

Shooting for "This Killing Business" began in August 2011 and concluded in June 2012. The self-financed film cost around \$75,000.

"Sometimes I wonder, 'Why am I doing this?' but when I'm making a film and I'm working with a crew on a set and we're all collectively a team and we're marching toward the shot and the shot happens and it happens the way everybody has worked for it to happen, it's fantastic," says Muchnik. "I like the process: writing, directing, producing, editing. The editing part is really fantastic for me. Each line is coming to life. You're making a film three times: when you write it, when you make it and when you edit it. Having movies around in my life has actually turned out to be a very important part of my health and my sanity. Without movies, life is just too dull."

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