

ARTS

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Painting his way out of tent city

Living in the encampment was 'terrible' for Douglas McLean, who found solace in making art at My Place

PREVIEW

What: Transitionz Art Exhibition
When: Tonight from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., Saturday from noon to 6 p.m.
Where: 512 Yates St.
Admission: By donation

ADRIAN CHAMBERLAIN
Times Colonist

A former tent-city resident will display his Jackson Pollock-like art in a downtown gallery. Douglas Patrick McLean, a.k.a. Poet M, has painted about two dozen canvases for the Transitionz Art Exhibition. His work and those of two other formerly homeless men can be seen tonight and Saturday at 512 Yates St., a makeshift gallery that was formerly Matisse restaurant.

"I paint because it's fun," McLean said Thursday. "This [art show] has just blown me away."

The other artists are John B., who makes carvings and sculptures, and Jordan D., who does charcoal drawings. All the works will sell for \$50 to \$400, with the artists donating 25 per cent to My Place Transitional Home.

McLean employs a splatter-paint technique similar to that of Pollock, a major figure in the abstract expressionist movement. He'd never painted before taking an art program offered by My Place, a temporary housing facility on upper Yates Street overseen by Our Place. Before My Place, McLean lived for a year at the tent-city encampment beside the Victoria courthouse.

"That was f---ing terrible," he said, noting that fellow campers sometimes stole his belongings.

Last week, he moved from My Place to the former Super 8 hotel on Douglas Street, which provides social housing.

McLean is happy with his new home. However, unlike at My Place, there is no dedicated art room. So, to avoid making a mess,



Tent city artist Douglas Patrick McLean, a.k.a. "Poet M," with his paintings, which will be on display along with the work of two other formerly homeless men tonight and Saturday as part of the Transitionz Art Exhibition at 512 Yates St. DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST

he uses his bathroom as a studio.

This isn't the first time McLean's artwork has been publicly shown. At her request, two of his paintings are on display at Victoria Mayor Lisa Helps' office.

Interviewed at the Yates Street gallery, McLean appeared excited about his upcoming art show, but spoke and moved in a jerky manner. He explained he was "wasted" on speed.

Grant McKenzie, communications director for Our Place, said McLean is still an active drug

user. The Vancouver-based PHS Community Services Society, which oversees the former Super 8 facility, has a "low-barrier" policy that allows residents who might be still using. The notion, said McKenzie, is that getting off the streets is a first step toward rehabilitation.

The use of the gallery space was donated by Casa Di Coltellaro Development. My Place team leaders Mike Manhas and Hollie Boe came up with idea of the Transitionz Art Show.

While many residents participated in the art program, the pair noticed that McLean, John B. and Jordan D. excelled. "I think the essential thing for this art show is to have all three artists feel good about themselves," said Manhas, who successfully went through drug and alcohol rehabilitation 3½ years ago.

He took art classes as part of the recovery process and found it helpful.

"I didn't have the talent that Poet [McLean] has, but I did some

collages and some painting," he said.

Originally from Toronto, McLean also writes poetry and plays the guitar. He started painting at My Place simply to find solace in the quiet of the art room. The first time someone told McLean he had a natural talent for colours and shapes, he didn't believe it.

"I thought he was blowing air up my a-- , right?" he said. "But now I think it's true." achamberlain@timescolonist.com

Life echoes art for director making movie about the theatre business



MICHAEL D. REID
Big Picture

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Carl Bessai is aware of the irony behind his motivation to cast some familiar faces in *Rehearsal* to improve his film's commercial prospects.

His experience mirrors the theme of his comedy, which features a cast headlined by Bruce Greenwood, a Quebec-born actor who works consistently in Hollywood.

Greenwood, whose roles include playing JFK in *Thirteen Days* and Capt. Pike in J.J. Abrams's *Star Trek* reboot, plays Turner Horatio Longfellow, a curmudgeonly gay British actor and theatre director. In a desperate bid to save his financially ailing London theatre, the alcoholic stage veteran reluctantly agrees

to cast a Hollywood action star, Blaise Remington (*Glee*'s Dean Geyer), in his production of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*.

Other recognizable faces include David Cubitt as Longfellow's lover and producer, Rob Morrow (*Billions*) as Remington's agent and Victoria-raised Deborah Kara Unger as a legendary theatre star.

"I think this is always a big struggle," says Bessai, who filmed in London, Los Angeles and Vancouver. "You need stars to get money, but you have to make compromises along the way."

While Bessai admits he has made a few economic concessions during his career, his reputation as an uncompromising, albeit collaborative, filmmaker remains intact. Highlights include his breakout drama *Lola* (2001), and his family trilogy — *Mothers & Daughters* (2009), *Fathers & Sons* (2010) and *Sisters & Brothers* (2011).

Bessai has made three of his films in Victoria, starting with *Emile*, his 2003 drama starring Sir Ian McKellen as an elderly British academic and Unger as his estranged niece. He returned to make *Severed* (2005), a cautionary tale in the guise of a zombie flick featuring loggers and environmentalists; and *Normal*, his 2007

ensemble drama starring Carrie-Ann Moss and Kevin Zegers as characters coping with a tragedy.

It seems fitting that Bessai is returning to a city he adores to discuss his improvisational directing style at a CineVic workshop on April 2, and to present *Rehearsal* at Movie Monday the following night. "I'm focusing on doing projects that speak to me personally," the Vancouver-based filmmaker says. "I channel people like John Cassavetes who just stay focused on the creative process."

In *Rehearsal*, which chronicles the clash of egos and backstage drama that ensues during the creative standoff between Longfellow and Remington, Bessai unleashes his viewpoint with lacerating wit. Combined with impressive performances and visual style, Bessai's humour compensates for some contrivances and stereotypes that populate a familiar scenario.

In one sequence, a bearded, white-haired Greenwood, apparently channelling McKellen, can barely suppress his contempt for Remington, the shallow celebrity he has been saddled with.

"I think it's dialogue-heavy," says Remington, seemingly modelled on Jesse Metcalfe and Vin Diesel. "There are places we can



Carl Bessai, right, with star Bruce Greenwood, left. RAVEN WEST FILMS

make some cuts ... to keep the pace going."

When an incredulous Longfellow retorts "Cuts to Chekhov?" his pampered star doubles down, also suggesting the Chekhovian characters' names are confusing and should be changed.

"Perhaps we should use name tags," deadpans Longfellow.

Bessai also pokes fun at neophyte arts reporters who ask inane questions, and a dim Hollywood starlet who asks her buff boyfriend why he's doing "a *Star Trek* play."

"It's not Chekov from *Star Trek*," he corrects her. "It's a Russian play from the 1800s." Another highlight is Vince

Mai's catchy jazz score, giving *Rehearsal* the feel of a Woody Allen film.

Rehearsal is one of a series of projects Bessai is doing that are inspired by stage classics he loves. "I saw *The Seagull* on stage many years ago, and I was struck by how completely connected the material was to the contemporary movie business, with issues around fame, celebrity, vanity, age," he said. "It all seemed so ahead of its time."

His Chekhov homage will be followed by *The Lears*, a love letter to *King Lear* starring Bruce Dern, and *Kreuzberg*, a Romeo and Juliet-inspired film he's shooting in Berlin this summer.

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