

Dead On

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By [Rick Koster](#)

Published on 10/26/2007 in [Home](#) » [Features](#) » [Features Main Photo](#)

IT'S not exactly how Ben Affleck and Matt Damon got started. Or, for that matter, George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. Instead, G. Randy Johnson was selling mortgages. Gordon Videll, an attorney, attended the closings of some of those transactions as part of his job. They became friends who would occasionally meet for a beer at Hanafin's Public House — conveniently located downstairs from Videll's downtown New London office — to discuss all matter of odd topics.

One day, Johnson, who lives in Groton, broached a subject he'd read about: diamonds being created as memorials from the carbon in the ashes of cremated loved ones. And he said to Videll, "You know what would make a great horror movie? What if the diamonds talked to you through the spirits of their dead people?"

Videll, a New London resident, wasn't particularly interested in horror movies, but the core idea of the actual ashes-to-gems process intrigued him as the basis of a film plot. In fact, a frequent insomniac, the 41-year-old Videll stayed up all that night and, the next day, brought Johnson a complete outline for a movie that would emphasize the darkly comic elements of the procedure.

Johnson, 31, loved the outline and, for the fun of it, they began to flesh it into a feature-length screenplay — and also to discuss the financial and production aspects of actually making a film. Quite without any serious research, the pair decided they could pull it off.

"It all seems a bit surreal, looking back on it," Videll says. "Two guys deciding to make a movie. How many poor fools in a bar have said that before? But it's weird because that's exactly what we did."

The 97-minute film, called "Inclusions," premieres in an advance screening at 8 p.m. Friday, Nov. 2 at the Garde Arts Center in New London. All proceeds will benefit the Make a Wish Foundation and the Leukemia Lymphoma Society.

"Inclusions" has also been accepted by the Northampton Independent Film Festival and will be shown there at 7:30 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 9.

In the meantime, Videll is submitting the film to a variety of other festivals in the hopes of gaining distribution for "Inclusions."

The dream may not be so far-fetched, as is indicated by the film's prestigious Northampton screening slot — which coincides with the premiere of "Honeydripper," the newest John Sayles movie starring Danny Glover, Mary Steenburgen and Stacy Keach.

The plot of "Inclusions" explores the opposite moral journeys of two best friends, Tom, an alcoholic mortician, and James, a jeweler who is increasingly involved in gambling and prostitution. James gains access to the technology that can process cremated human remains into diamonds and persuades Tom to secure corpses for the scheme.

But though they begin to make money, the diamonds always emerge slightly flawed and James increasingly wants a perfect gem. At the same time, Tom begins to believe the quality of the diamond is dictated by the purity of the dead person's soul and he starts to experience guilt over his participation. Tom is also falling in love with a young widow, Lauren, even as James attempts to coerce her into a job in a high-class house of prostitution. Whether James can indeed fashion a flawless diamond and Tom can extricate himself from his own disappointments are issues that don't necessarily make for a happy ending.

"The funny thing is, until the day we started talking about the diamonds, I don't think we'd ever so much as discussed making a film," Johnson says. "But after that, when he came back with an outline, the idea sank in. Gordon had a friend who'd written a screenplay; we read it and said, 'Hey, we can do that,' and we just got completely into it."

Johnson has somewhat of a background in the industry. A graduate of the acting program at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, he acted extensively on stage, in independent films, and was a featured character on "Trackers," a short-lived sitcom on Oprah Winfrey's Oxygen network. But until the project with Videll materialized, he'd basically given up the business.

"I think I was on the borderline of maybe a nice career as an actor when the Oxygen network job didn't work out, and I just stopped," Johnson says. "I'm not really sure even why. And this is what it took to get me back in it. I look back and think I threw away a lot of opportunity for no reason, and Gordon was instrumental in getting me interested again. So I think it worked out the way it was supposed to."

For his part, Videll had no experience in the entertainment industry or in raising capital or even a particularly abiding interest in film. But once the idea of "Inclusions" took hold, he was committed.

"I'm one of those guys who went to law school because people said I couldn't," Videll says. "We were at the time reading about how Utopia and Screen Gems were going to come into the area and create a niche in the entertainment business, so our original plan was to form a company, make the movie, then sell the company to one of the giants."

He laughs. "Then (Utopia and Screen Gems) didn't happen, so we had to rethink the idea."

They formed their own company, Flawless Films, researched technology and contacted various friends for connections, and figured out the cheapest way to get equipment. And though the project nearly collapsed halfway through filming when they realized they'd made some major casting errors and had to start over, they never considered quitting. The original director and sound editors didn't work out, either, which is when Johnson stepped in to direct and 22-year-old Chris Lavigne worked as sound editor, director of photography, film editor and assistant director.

"Looking back, I have no idea how we pulled this off, but it couldn't have happened without Chris," Johnson says. "We got lucky in so many ways — and that includes pulling the plug on the first version of the film and starting over. It would probably never work again with what we knew and what we had. But this one time, it happened."

Johnson estimates that, even with the false start, they brought the whole film in for less than \$100,000 and both men credit the cast and crew — many of whom worked for little or no money. Too, local business owners were kind about letting the crew shoot locally, and area moviegoers will recognize such sites as Hanafin's, the Byles Memorial funeral home, the Thames Club and so on.

"Experts told us we'd need half a million dollars," Videll says. "We just said, 'Screw you guys,' we'll make it work our way."

The quality of the acting, the production work, and the music all work in concert with a compelling story to make "Inclusions," as Videll says, "probably better than we had any right to expect."

Local actor John Wenc, 41, who went to elementary school with Videll, lives in Waterford and teaches in the New London school district, plays Tom superbly, with despair and capitulation never quite drowning his heart. And Old Saybrook resident Jimmy Driscoll, 44, is part fox and part snake as the smooth but calculating James.

Wenc also studied at the O'Neill Theater Center and acted professionally in Los Angeles and London. Driscoll majored in theater at Boston University and Deane College and has acted in several stage productions and independent films.

New York actress Mary Amy, a veteran of indie film and soap opera work, is vulnerable and lovely as Lauren.

The remaining members of the cast and crew are largely amateur in status, geographically local and, in finest independent film fashion, often wore more than one metaphorical hat. And through Lavigne's network of friends and classmates from his days at the Park School of Communication, they were able to round out the technical crew and cast with professionally inexperienced but astoundingly competent folks. In the end, though the entire project took over two years from start to finish, the actual shooting budget was about 20 days.

It remains to be seen what happens for "Inclusions" on the festival circuit, but Johnson and Videll are optimistic.

"This is a small, small film, but you know what? It looks like a real movie," Johnson says. "At the same time, it's cool for us to slap ourselves on the back and say, 'Look what we did with a small budget or whatever,' but the bottom line is what will people in theaters in California or Iowa think if they see it? They don't care about our budget; they want to see a good movie."

Videll thinks the Northampton festival is a good sign. "It's exciting that they accepted us. It's a quality festival and it's exciting that we're in the same time slot with a John Sayles movie. That's pretty good company."

In the meantime, Johnson has been busy writing more scripts while Videll is tending to his law practice. They'll take a wait-and-see approach, but remain hopeful they'll work together again.

"Of course Gordon and I would do this again," Johnson says. "Our goal is to have enough success with this film to get financing for a new project — and then get to work with the same actors and crew that we did this time. Just move it to the next level."

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• **From left**, actors Jon Wenc and Jimmy Driscoll, co-writer / director G. Randy Johnson and co-writer / executive producer Gordon Videll at Byles Memorial Home in New London. Photo by **DANA JENSEN** / The Day