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Winter's Bone: The Little Movie that Could

The excitement was evident when 417-landers heard that a film version of West Plains author Daniel Woodrell's novel, *Winter's Bone*, was being filmed in southwest Missouri. Since then, the film has garnered praise and raked in prestigious awards. Will the film and its local talent have a run at an Oscar?

BY KIM SWAIN; PHOTOS BY SEBASTIAN MLYNARSKI

Who would have thought that this year's must-see film would be a 417-land creation? *Winter's Bone* is based on the novel of the same name by award-winning West Plains author, Daniel Woodrell. The movie was filmed entirely on location in Taney, Christian and Greene Counties and included more than 52 local musicians, actors and crew members.

Director Debra Granik's film adaptation of Woodrell's sixth novel has become this year's darling of the indie genre, winning the 2010 Grand Jury Award and Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award at the Sundance Film Festival as well as Best Ensemble Performance and Best Feature at the Gotham Independent Feature Awards in November. It is also nominated for seven Independent Spirit Awards, received

countless nominations and wins from smaller American and international contests, ranked No. 1 on New York magazine's list of the top 10 movies of 2010 and has received positive comments from big names like Ben Affleck and Woody Allen. In December, Jennifer Lawrence (who plays the lead role as 17-year-old Ree Dolly) was nominated for a Golden Globe. As one of the nominees for Best Performance by an Actress in a Motion Picture Drama, Lawrence is up against big names and seasoned actors: Halle Berry, Nicole Kidman, Natalie Portman and Michelle Williams. As of press time—which was before Oscar nominees were announced—there was definitely buzz of a possible Academy Award nod for the film.



Ashlee Thompson, Jennifer Lawrence and Isaiah Stone (right). Shelly, Ashlee and Isaiah are 417-landers.

Local Flavor

The film follows 17-year old Ree Dolly as she searches for her father, Jessup Dolly, a meth cook, whose court date is quickly approaching. If he misses it, Ree and the younger siblings and sick mother that she cares for will lose their home and property, which Jessup put up for his bail.

Overcoming unimaginable obstacles to protect her family's home, the teenager shows grit, self-reliance and the can-do, won't-take-no-for-an-answer attitude for which the Ozarks are famous. The mystery/tragedy, often called "country noir," reveals generational poverty and the life-or-death code of secrecy that can be part of the drug culture.



Actress Dale Dickey as Merab in the award-winning film *Winter's Bone*.

"The movie was very close to the novel, which makes me very happy," says Woodrell. "I saw Granik's first film before *Winter's Bone* was published and pushed for her to get the property because what I'd seen convinced me she'd be right for *Winter's Bone*." In the two years prior to filming, Granik and co-screenwriter Anne Rosellini came to southwest Missouri several times to scout out the region that is the backdrop of the story. Granik seemed to feel strongly about including the local flavor as part of the film. Woodrell personally showed them the area and introduced them to people of interest, including Marideth Sisco, a local musician who has been playing with other traditional Ozarks musicians in West Plains for more than 25 years. Sisco appears as a vocalist in the movie and is the voice in the ballads at the film's beginning and end. She also served as a consultant on the songs chosen for the movie and is frequently heard on the soundtrack.

Although locations in other states were considered, Granik ultimately decided that the story would best be told here. In an interview with National Public Radio's Michele Norris, Granik said, "There is no chance that this film would come to life in any way that would be close to the book—or close to any anthropological sense of precision—unless we did it there." So, the Layson family in Taney County, along with their neighbors and other local community members opened up their homes, property, ponds and yards to the filmmakers. There were no "sets." The indoor shots showed the décor of actual homes and the outdoor shots, including animals, machinery and vehicles, were truly on-location. To give the film an even more authentic feel, most clothing worn by cast members was either purchased at local thrift stores or actually taken from the residents' closets and traded out for new, according to Springfield's Ryan Piotrowski, the assistant costume designer. Piotrowski, along with many talented behind-the-scenes professionals involved in local independent films or Missouri State productions, were hired by the production company to flesh out their crew. He answered an ad on Craigs list for a production assistant but ended up helping with wardrobe.

"I shopped, made all the leather belts by hand, and was also responsible for wearing down some of the clothing with sanders and sand blasters," he says. "I found the Carhartt jacket worn by Teardrop [played by John Hawkes, of *Deadwood*] on a local road. It was all ripped and stained but was in perfect condition for the film."

Nathan Shelton, the film's special effects prosthetics designer, is active in the Springfield/Branson stage and film community as an award-winning writer, actor and director (and he was a member of 417 Magazine's 20 under 30 class in 2010). He had a call-back to read for an acting part and met Mark White, the film's art director. When White viewed Shelton's Facebook page and saw his professional work with special effects (think *Dracula at the Vandivort*), he was hired as part of the crew.

David Fleming, a Kickapoo graduate and friend of Piotrowski and Shelton, came on board to shoot still photography. "I had not worked professionally on a film before *Winter's Bone*," he says. "I made some great relationships and some of those

have lead to additional work." Fleming received credit as an additional sound recordist and camera intern.

Casting Winter's Bone

Local actors were sought for both cultural and accent authenticity. "If we were going to attempt this, we knew it had to be there, it had to have local people populating the film visually," Granik told NPR. So, only a handful of the film's cast was from California or New York. In 2007, Lauren Sweetster and Casey MacLaren, two students of local professional acting coach and Creative Actors Workshop founder Scott-Arthur Allen (who, prior to moving to Springfield, trained stars like Heather Locklear and Sela Ward), were chosen from more than 250 submissions to participate in a table read for the *Winter's Bone* script.



Award-winning actress Jennifer Lawrence as Ree Dolly in *Winter's Bone*.

A total of five students from the Creative Actors Workshop were chosen for speaking parts in the movie. Sweetster played Ree's friend Gail, and MacLaren was chosen to portray Megan Milton. "Originally, I read for the part of Ree," says MacLaren, a Nixa High School graduate. "But the production company wanted someone with more experience for the lead. I was happy for the opportunity to be Megan." Sweetster, who graduated last year from Missouri State with a degree in fine arts and now lives and works in Los Angeles, almost missed out on the opportunity to audition. The audition tape that she sent in was never received. Luckily, Granik remembered her from the table read and sought her out to audition. "I read four to five times before landing the part of Gail," says Sweetster. Since moving to California, Sweetster has starred in the short film *Scraps*, was a guest on the premiere of *Law & Order: Los Angeles* and has developed a strong friendship with her *Winter's Bone* co-star, Jennifer Lawrence. "We're like kindred spirits," she laughs.

Beth Doman, executive director of Springfield Little Theatre, also had a stand-out role in the film as one of Ree's less-than-friendly relatives.

The actors who play Ree's two younger siblings, Sonny and Ashlee, are both from Forsyth. Ashlee Thompson actually lives in one of the houses used for filming. And, even though the book originally called for two male siblings, when the director saw her playing and interacting with the cast, Ashlee was offered the part. "She wasn't really acting," remembers Shelly Waggoner, who played the part of Ree's neighbor, Sonya. "She was basically living her real life on screen—playing with her own toys and her own dogs." Waggoner is a Reeds Spring native who acted in Los Angeles for 15 years before moving back to Branson.

Isaiah Stone, who played Sonny, was discovered at the open casting call conducted at Forsyth High School in January 2009. More than 1,500 people from Missouri and Arkansas waited up to six hours for a chance to audition. He had no acting experience but went because his mom wanted him to audition. "I had a lot of fun," says the Forsyth freshman. Many of the other local actors, including Ronnie Hall (Thump Milton), Billy White (Blond Milton) and twins Andrew and Phillip Burnley (Baby Ned) were also chosen from the casting call.

417-Land Support

Winter's Bone was a financial shot in the arm to the area, with more than \$800,000 injected into the local economy during the 24 days of on-location shooting in and around Taney, Christian and Greene Counties. "The crew and actors stayed at the Hilton Promenade on Branson Landing and spent their free time frequenting the local restaurants and shopping," says Bill Lennon, the chairman of the Missouri Film Commission. "It was a huge boost to Branson during our slow season."

The pre-production kickoff, which gave cast and crew an opportunity to meet each other as well as Daniel Woodrell, was held at Branson's Bleu Olive restaurant. "We aren't usually open on Mondays," says Yianni Papanikas, the general manager. "But we were honored that they chose to have their party here. It was a Hollywood party—Branson style."

Winter's Bone opened with a red carpet event at Springfield's Campbell 16 Cine last June and was shown locally, including at the Moxie Cinema, during most of the summer. The film is now available on DVD and could be back for a re-run if the soothsayers are correct in their prediction of an Oscar nod.

And the Award Goes To...

Read on, to see the extensive inventory of awards and nominations that Winter's Bone has earned since its summer 2010 release.

Golden Globe Awards (2011)*

- Best Performance by an Actress In A Motion Picture Drama (Jennifer Lawrence)—Nominee

Screen Actors Guild Awards (2011)*

- Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Leading Role (Jennifer Lawrence)—Nominee
- Outstanding Performance by a Male Actor in a Supporting Role (John Hawkes)—Nominee

Independent Spirit Awards (2011)*

- Best Feature—Nominee
- Best Director (Debra Granik)—Nominee
- Best Screenplay (Debra Granik, Anne Rosellini)—Nominee
- Best Female Lead (Jennifer Lawrence)—Nominee
- Best Supporting Female (Dale Dickey)—Nominee
- Best Supporting Male (John Hawkes)—Nominee
- Best Cinematography—Nominee

Gotham Independent Film Awards (2010)

- Best Feature—Winner
- Best Ensemble Performance—Winner
- Breakthrough Actor (Jennifer Lawrence)—Nominee
- Festival Genius Audience Award—Nominee

Sundance Film Festival (2010)

- Grand Jury Prize—Dramatic
- Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award

National Board of Review of Motion Pictures (2010)

- Best Breakthrough Performer (Jennifer Lawrence)—Winner

Humanitas Prize

- Sundance Feature Category

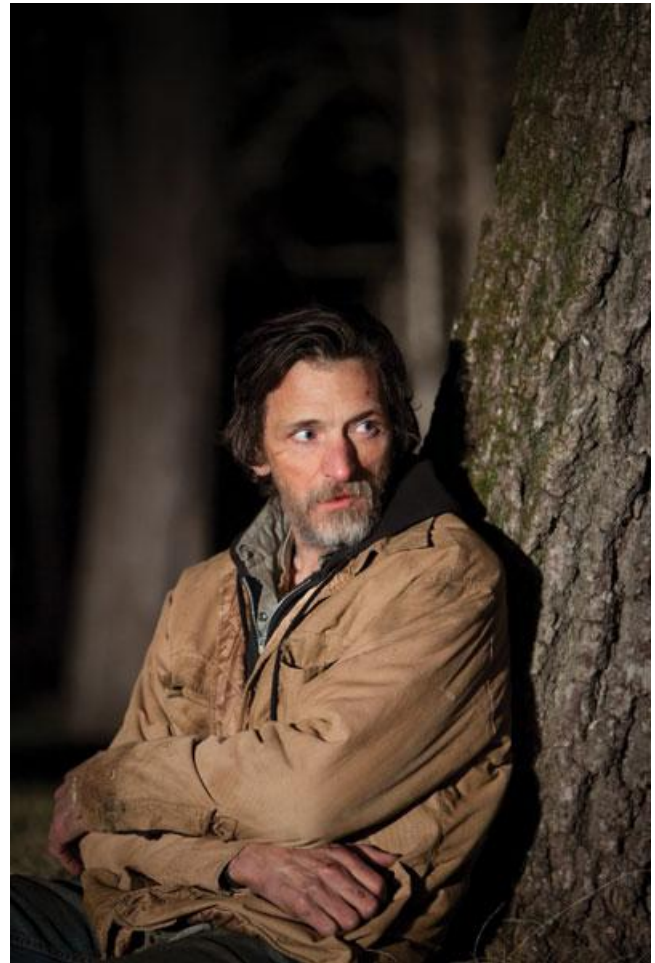
International Press Academy Satellite Awards (2010)

- Best Motion Picture, Drama—Nominee
- Best Director (Debra Granik)—Nominee
- Best Actress in a Motion Picture, Drama (Jennifer Lawrence)—Nominee
- Best Adapted Screenplay—Nominee

Hollywood Film Festival (2010)

- New Hollywood Award (Jennifer Lawrence)—Winner

Palm Springs International Film Festival (2011)



John Hawkes, who played Sol Star on the HBO series *Deadwood*, played the role of Teardrop in *Winter's Bone*.

- Rising Star Award (Jennifer Lawrence)—Winner

San Francisco International Film Festival Audience Awards (2010)

- Best Narrative Feature—Winner

Seattle International Film Festival Golden Space Needle Awards (2010)

- Best Director (Debra Granik)—Winner
- Best Actress (Jennifer Lawrence)—Winner

Independent Film Festival Boston (2010)

- Special Jury Prize, Narrative Feature—Winner
- Audience Award, Narrative Feature—Winner

Florida Film Festival (2010)

- Grand Jury Award for Best Narrative Feature—Winner

Sarasota Film Festival (2010)

- Narrative Feature Competition Special Jury Prize—Winner

Palm Beach International Film Festival (2010)

- Best Feature Film—Winner

Little Rock Film Festival Golden Rock Awards (2010)

- Best Narrative Feature Film—Winner

Washington, D.C. Area Film Critics Association Awards (2010)

- Best Actress (Jennifer Lawrence)—Winner
- Best Adapted Screenplay—Nominee
- Best Supporting Actor (John Hawkes)—Nominee

Detroit Film Critics Society (2010)

- Best Actress (Jennifer Lawrence)—Winner
- Best Ensemble—Winner
- Breakthrough Performance (Jennifer Lawrence)—Winner
- Best Film—Nominee
- Best Director (Debra Granik)—Nominee
- Best Supporting Actor (John Hawkes)—Nominee

Houston Area Film Critics

- Best Picture—Nominee
- Best Actress—Nominee
- Best Screenplay—Nominee

Berlin International Film Festival (2010)

- C.I.C.A.E. Award (Debra Granik)—Winner
- Tagesspiegel Readers' Prize ebra Granik)—Winner

Top 10-List Mentions

New York Magazine (David Edelstein) - #1

Chicago Sun-Times (Roger Ebert)

Los Angeles Times (Kenneth Turan)
Los Angeles Times (Betsy Sharkey)
The New York Times (Jeannette Catsoulis)
The New Yorker (David Denby)
The New Yorker (Anthony Lane)
Entertainment Weekly (Lisa Schwarzbaum)
Associated Press (David Germain) - #1
Associated Press (Christy Lemire)
Sight & Sound
National Board of Review
AFI
Film Comment
Rolling Stone (Peter Travers)
Time Out New York (David Fear) - #1
Newsweek (David Ansen)
The Christian Science Monitor (Peter Rainer)
Time Out New York (Joshua Rothkopf)
NPR (Ella Taylor)
Variety (Boyd van Hoeij)
San Francisco Bay Guardian (Cheryl Eddy)
Time Out Chicago (Ben Kenigsberg)
A.V. Club - #1
Thompson on Hollywood (Anne Thompson) - #1
A.V. Club (Keith Phipps) - #1
Chicago Reader (J.R. Jones)
The Observer (Philip French)
indieWIRE (Eric Kohn)
MSN Movies (Sean Axmaker)
MSN Movies (Jim Emerson)
MSN Movies (Richard T. Jameson)
MSN Movies (Don Kaye)
MSN Movies (Dave McCoy)
MSN Movies (Kat Murphy)
MSN Movies (James Rocchi)
MSN Movies (Glenn Whipp)
A.V. Club (Noel Murray)
A.V. Club (Tasha Robinson)
A.V. Club (Scott Tobias)
A.V. Club (Nathan Rabin)
The Arizona Republic (Bill Goodykoontz)
Slant Magazine (Ed Gonzalez)
Slant Magazine (Nick Schager)
IFC.com (Alison Willmore)
The Tufts Daily
Southeastern Film Critics Association
Light Sensitive (Patrick Z. McGavin)
GreenCine Daily (Aaron Hillis)
Fox 4 News (Shawn Edwards)
Las Vegas Film Critics Society
Dallas/Ft. Worth Film Critics Association
Movie City Indie (Ray Pride)

Tikkun (David Sterritt)
CNN.com (Tom Charity)
Creative Loafing (Matt Brunson)
eddieonfilm (Edward Copeland) - #1
Anthony Kaufman
World Socialist Web Site (David Walsh)
Mike D'Angelo
Sarasota Film Festival (Tom Hall)
The Herald (Robert Horton)
The Star-Ledger (Stephen Whitty)
Pullquote (Amy Monaghan)
Film Comment (Laura Kern)
Sydney Film Critics
Encore Magazine (Miguel Gonzalez)
Sunday Telegraph (Nick Dent)
Drum Media (Ian Barr)
Trespass Magazine (Beth Wilson) - #1
DVD Bits (Richard Gray)
Pick of the Flicks (Giles Hardie)
Drum Media (Scott Henderson)
CinemBlend (Katey Rich)