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Promised Land

Directed by Gus Van Sant
Screenplay by John Krasinski & Matt Damon

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BERLIN
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MATT DAMON JOHN KRASINSKI FRANCES McDORMAND

PROMISED LAND

EN FILM AF GUS VAN SANT ('GOOD WILL HUNTING')

FOCUS FEATURES PRESENTS A JOINT PRODUCTION WITH PARTICIPANT MEDIA AND IMAGE NATION ABU DHABI & SUNDAY NIGHT PEARL STREET MEDIA FARM PRODUCTION
A GUS VAN SANT FILM MATT DAMON JOHN KRASINSKI FRANCES McDORMAND 'PROMISED LAND' ROSEMARIE DEWITT AND PAUL HELLERUD. MUSIC BY FRANCOISE YVES. COSTUME DESIGNER BRIAN REITZEL. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS DANIEL FELMAN, HELEN JULIET POLCSA, ANDREW DANIEL B. CLAWNSY
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS LINUS SANDGREN. PRODUCED BY GUS VAN SANT, RON SCHMIDT, JEFF SKOLL, JONATHAN KING. WRITTEN BY MATT DAMON, JOHN KRASINSKI, CHRIS MOORE. DIRECTED BY GUS VAN SANT.

ANGEL IMAGE NATION AND DHABI participant MEDIA PromisedLandTheFilm.com FOCUS FEATURES INTERNATIONAL

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Promised Land

Dansk synopsis

Steve Butler (Matt Damon) arbejder for et selskab, der udvinder naturgas. Han ankommer til en lille flække med sin forhandler, Sue Thomason (Frances McDormand). Selskabet ønsker at udnytte de ressourcer, der ligger i jorden til gasudvinding. Den lille by er ramt af den økonomiske krise, og tilbuddet fra de to fremmede virker yderst tillokkende.

Men byens pensionerede og højt respekterede professor (Hal Holbrook) stiller sig kritisk overfor projektet, og da den charmerende miljøforkæmper, Dustin (John Krasinski), sætter sine skyts ind for at forhindre udvindingen, bliver et "let" job pludselig meget komplekst. Så komplekst, at selv Steves overbevisning om, hvad der er rigtigt og forkert, udfordres.

Synopsis

In *Promised Land*, Matt Damon stars as Steve Butler, a corporate salesman whose journey from farm boy to big-time player takes an unexpected detour when he lands in a small town, where he grapples with a surprising array of both open hearts and closed doors. Gus Van Sant helms the film from an original screenplay written by John Krasinski & Matt Damon, from a story by Dave Eggers.

Steve has been dispatched to the rural town of McKinley with his sales partner, Sue Thomason (Academy Award winner Frances McDormand). The town has been hit hard by the economic decline of recent years, and the two consummate sales executives see McKinley's citizens as likely to accept their company's offer – for drilling rights to their properties – as much-needed relief. What seems like an easy job and a short stay for the duo becomes complicated – professionally by calls for community-wide consideration of the offer by respected schoolteacher Frank Yates (Academy Award nominee Hal Holbrook) and personally by Steve's encounter with Alice (Rosemarie DeWitt). When Dustin Noble (John Krasinski), a slick environmental activist, arrives, suddenly the stakes, both personal and professional, rise to the boiling point.

Promised Land

About the Production

Promised Land is, says actor and screenwriter Matt Damon, "a relatable story with characters we all can recognize as people we know."

"It's an emotional story about what happens when real people and real money collide, and the surprising ways people respond when momentous decisions come their way," comments actor and screenwriter John Krasinski.

Producer Chris Moore adds, “*Promised Land* is a very intimate portrait of some genuine characters, but it also grapples with the big issues we’re all dealing with now: what are our values, what’s important to us, how do we deal with genuine conflicts in our communities?”

Director Gus Van Sant remarks, “America is a big place and we are all part of it, so it’s hard to really get a grasp on our identity sometimes. What I loved about John and Matt’s screenplay is that they tackled big issues but with a lot of humor and humility. It’s a story about real people, with all their foibles as well as their greatness.”

“My character, Steve Butler, is a contemporary Everyman,” says Damon. “He left the farming community where he grew up because that town was dying. He migrated to the big city, as so many people do, in search of more opportunities. He has a good job and he’s making good money.”

Krasinski notes, “Steve is a corporate guy who thinks what he’s doing is right and doesn’t feel bad about trying to get ahead. He’s been on the road as a salesman, and now has a chance to reach the executive level.”

Moore adds, “When Steve shows up in McKinley with his partner Sue Thomason and their agenda to help save the town from financial decline and outright decay while simultaneously boosting his company’s coffers, he figures all will be well because he comes from the heartland and he’s able to speak the language of these people.

“That, it turns out, is both his strength and his weakness. Ultimately, he has to take stock of his whole existence and what he wants his life to be.”

“I see Steve’s evolution in this story as a metaphor for our country,” muses actress Rosemarie DeWitt, cast as Alice, a McKinley grade school teacher.

Academy Award nominee Hal Holbrook, who portrays McKinley high school science teacher Frank Yates, says, “I’m 87 years old, and I think we’re living at an extraordinarily critical time. The whole idea of democracy is dependent upon people working together, and without compromise there can be no democracy.”

Academy Award winner Frances McDormand, who plays Sue, offers, “Until we question everything that we possibly can, we’re not going to have any possibility of a future that’s within our control.”

“The stakes are as high as they’ve ever been for all of us,” agrees Damon. “How would our parents or grandparents have handled what we face in our day and age? How are our grandchildren going to fare? Those are tough questions for anyone to deal with.”

Promised Land keenly distills questions of how American values have evolved. These explorations come in part through a small town’s decisions when a natural gas company seeks to extract gas from shale rock formations through the process known as hydraulic fracturing, or “fracking.”

Damon explains, “The plot follows Steve and Sue as they try to persuade the McKinley community to lease the drilling rights of their farmland to Global Crosspower Solutions, which Steve and Sue work for, and which – valued at \$9 billion – is one of the largest energy corporations in the country.

“The townspeople have divergent opinions about whether this is a good thing or not. In a lot of cases, these leases are the only thing keeping a family farm from foreclosure.”

DeWitt adds, “The people of McKinley are concerned about feeding their kids and improving their school systems.”

“This is a complex issue that’s dividing a lot of communities right now,” says Damon. “What better setting for us as storytellers to ask questions about who we are as Americans?”

“Steve believes in what he’s doing, getting people to lease their land for potential gas wells, because he wants to keep communities afloat.”

Krasinski comments, “Natural gas drilling is a contemporary issue that serves as a perfect backdrop to our story, which we set out to write as an exploration of modern-day American identity. It’s an issue where, like high-stakes poker, the potential gains and the potential losses are enormous. For an individual faced with the opportunity, there’s a complex decision to be made.”

Scot McNairy, cast as farmer Jeff Dennon, remarks, “I felt this was an important story to tell because it’s not anti-something or pro-something; there are different perspectives, and nobody likes a belief forced on them.”

“Energy is a big thing that people are debating,” observes Moore. “Right away, that imparts a tension to our movie, and creates a dialogue.”

“I feel that John and Matt’s script explores this dialogue in a genuine way. We don’t live in a black or white world,” says DeWitt.

Damon notes that “communities in America are quite aware of the natural gas drilling question. A friend of mine does what Steve does – he’s a ‘land man’ – and he told me that when he drives up to a farm, people are waiting and ready because they are hip to what’s been going on.”

“That’s the case with my character, Jeff,” adds McNairy. “He’s a farmer who has pride in his country and pride in his land, which has been in his family for generations. Steve’s arrival strikes a nerve in Jeff.”

Krasinski says, “Audience members will make their own decisions regarding the issue, but our goal is to affect moviegoers – with emotion and humor – in dramatizing these characters making *their* decisions and facing up to challenges both internal and external.

“When my character, Dustin Noble, shows up, he becomes an instant foil for Steve. The way they react to each other is not too far removed from school days; what’s funny is how a much greater concern just becomes, for them, who’s going to get the bigger stick in the playground.”

He elaborates, “Through these characters, I also wanted to explore the power of community in America. I remembered tales that my father told me about growing up in a small town. There was a belief in each other that I think was paramount. What happens to that kind of town today, facing huge change amidst economic turmoil, and facing the question of how to act on issues together?”

“I brought the original concept to [novelist/screenwriter] Dave Eggers, for whom these concerns are close to heart. He and I hashed out ideas, and a story took shape.”

The initial draft was titled *Gold Mist*, an ironic reference to the color of a luxury car purchased by a down-on-his-luck farmer, and the mode of speculation in that draft was wind energy.

Damon and Krasinski had met through the latter’s wife, actress Emily Blunt, with whom the former had starred in *The Adjustment Bureau*. When Krasinski mentioned the script over dinner one night, Damon became interested and soon began working on it with him. “It was a blast,” remembers Krasinski. “We got along so well from the beginning. We were becoming friends and collaborators.”

“John has got this incredibly fast brain,” marvels Damon. “So the writing would come quickly and we would laugh together. It reminded me of writing with Ben Affleck, a very similar feeling and above all else a lot of fun – I’d forgotten just how much.”

Moore joined the duo in producing the movie, as he was drawn to “the characters, first of all; I think audiences will be able to see parts of themselves in more than one of the roles. Also interesting to me was the concept of how someone in corporate America would wrestle with what his company is doing versus what his own job is – or might be.

“To me, this script had the potential to become an interesting movie like ones that you would see in the 1970s. It’s harder to get those made now, but like on *Good Will Hunting* we wanted to try. Like that movie, there’s definitely humor in *Promised Land* as well.”

As Damon and Krasinski scouted towns in upstate New York, they encountered a setback. Moore notes, “From that and their research, they realized that way the windmill business really functions wouldn’t work for the movie, dramatically speaking.”

Damon remembers their having to accept the fact that “we had built this story on something that wasn’t quite true. It was a tough moment in the life of this project.”

Moore reflects, “We wanted to move the project forward, but this became a hill to get it up and over.”

Krasinski and Damon spoke about transposing the story to a different setting with another issue as a backdrop while exploring the same themes and character studies. Coal mining, oil drilling, and salmon harvesting in Alaska were all considered. While Damon was away working on another movie, Krasinski came upon a natural gas drilling story and began a fresh round of research. He remarks, “It was the perfect contemporary lens through which to examine our questions of community and integrity.

“I wanted to establish an authentic foundation for those examinations.” Accordingly, researching the relatively new chapter in energy exploration meant that Krasinski logged hours watching video accounts of whole towns and individual neighbors debating the issue, as well as reading voluminous reportage.

Before long, a new draft was underway. “John took it in his teeth and ran with it. Through this path, it became a better movie. The story remained basically intact,” says Damon. “There were all these characters we’d grown to care about and could now further explore.”

For nine months, work on screenplay drafts continued. Moore marvels, “Matt and John have a very strong work ethic; they would make time to get together and refine the script, whether it was in Mexico City, Vancouver, or New York City. These two guys are very secure in being able to tell each other when an idea is bad – which I think is the most important thing in a partnership – and are truly supportive when an idea is good.”

Closest to home on the West Coast, the writing partners convened “every weekend while Matt was shooting *We Bought a Zoo*,” recalls Krasinski. “We’d write all day Saturday and all day Sunday with his kids and our wives all around. It could get chaotic.”

Damon says, “During the week, John and I would go back to our jobs and pore over what we’d written during our downtimes, scribbling notes and ideas before reconvening on the weekend to revise and revise and revise.

“My wife said to me, ‘You had such a great time that even if it never gets made, it was worth it because you remembered how much you love writing and you had this incredible creative experience with John.’”

The scenario of the movie not getting made again nearly came to pass. Damon had intended to direct the feature, but when other movies that he was also committed to as an actor changed schedules, he realized that he would be unable to helm *Promised Land*. “This wasn’t an enjoyable phone call I had to make to John,” he remembers.

Krasinski reflects, “That was a hard night for us all. Matt looked at his schedule and realized there was no way he could do everything he was planning. He takes his work quite seriously, and so he didn’t want his opportunity to direct to be compromised.”

The morning after he spoke with Krasinski, Damon set out with his family for holiday travel. While they were all sitting in the plane on the runway, he e-mailed one of the directors he has collaborated with extensively, Gus Van Sant, and told Van Sant about

his dilemma. Within moments, recalls Damon, “Before they told us to turn off our phones, Gus wrote back, ‘I’d love to read what you’re writing.’”

Van Sant reveals, “I was on the lookout for that script before Matt checked in with me that morning; I knew he had a project in the works. When I heard from him, I figured they needed my help.”

Damon marvels, “I sent him the whole document while we were still on the runway, and turned off my phone. When we landed a couple hours later, I had a message from Gus saying he wanted to direct the movie.

“I e-mailed John, ‘We have a director, and not just any director – we have the best!’”

Unbeknownst even to Damon, Van Sant was Krasinski’s favorite director “by far.” When Damon’s e-mail came through, Krasinski reports, “I was thrilled. I think I threw up and passed out. Being from Massachusetts, I think *Good Will Hunting* is tattooed on me somewhere...”

Van Sant reflects, “In reading the script, I noticed how it resembled other things that Matt had worked on as a writer, and I felt that he and John had turned out something so good together. It was very easy for me to say ‘Yes.’”

The production was not only back on schedule but was accelerating – and filming began less than four months later.

Frances McDormand was part and parcel of the project because, as Damon notes, “We had sent Fran the earliest draft of the script, when it was still a windmill movie, and she committed to it then. Aside from John and me, she’s been with the project the longest.”

Moore adds, “Through all of the ups and downs, she remained loyal to us. In playing the role, Fran brings great comic timing and conveys Sue’s practicality.”

Damon says, “Her performance as Sue is so layered and nuanced. The character is a single mother who is on the road a lot. After several years together as a team, she and Steve relate to each other like siblings; there’s a competitive element there, but you also see the affection and the fondness.

“Many times, I would be playing a scene with Fran and sense something strong happening. Then, watching the dailies, I could take the opportunity to see the distinctions in every single take she did.”

Krasinski concurs, noting that “in those dailies, something’s different each time as she’s bringing a purity and intensity to the role. If I were as good as she is, I’d point at myself and say so, yet she’s self-deprecating and shrugs off compliments. But, Fran shines.”

McDormand comments, “Writing a screenplay is a craft, like writing a short story or a poem, and John and Matt know the craft of screenwriting. I was impressed by their

intelligence. They are also self-aware enough that they don't try to make everybody come along with their opinion."

As with many of the members of the creative team, McDormand could relate all too well to the challenges facing McKinley and the people who live in and visit it in the story. She explains, "I went to high school in a steel town in Pennsylvania. Now the town is suffering a lot, although I have friends that are still living there happily because it's their community and they belong to important church communities there."

In *Promised Land*, community necessities weigh heavily on Frank Yates, who lives a harmonious existence on his family farm and who well understands Steve's conflicting interests.

Damon notes, "As an older man, Frank has a sense of stewardship. He's a believer in industry, a retired Boeing engineer who now teaches high-school science because he wants to educate the next generation in his community. He is conscious of his place in the town, and in the world. He challenges Steve so that other people will ask questions and then go through the healthy process of making a decision all together, as a community.

"For Frank, it's about making time for education. For us, it was about making time for Hal Holbrook to play him."

Chris Moore elaborates, "We had to work Hal's shooting dates around his Mark Twain [one-man show] performance schedule, but there was no question that we were going to. We knew Hal would just embody Frank as the conscience of the community."

The veteran actor met with the filmmakers and agreed to be part of "a movie which had some meaning to it beyond just pure entertainment. The material, the script, is what's important. That Matt was going to be in it was a big plus, because I admire him; he's maturing as an actor, and he's not a showy actor.

"My heart was in this role because this man is pointing out, 'We can't make a fast decision. We need to think it all through.'"

Rosemarie DeWitt marvels, "As an actor, Hal Holbrook embodies this incredible sturdiness and vulnerability at exactly the same time, which is perfect for this story. I would get goosebumps watching him. Also, he never blows a line – we all would, but he'd be letter-perfect every time!

"I think every actor looks out for scripts like this – beautiful, well-executed, and about something important. Yet it's not an 'issue movie.'"

There was no shortage of actresses interested in the role of Alice, which was the last key one to be cast. The character becomes a touchstone to Damon's Steve. Damon praises DeWitt as being "what we wrote Alice to be, only better."

The actress assesses the character as “someone who grew up in the small town and then went to grad school in the big city. She has had her own series of life lessons and loss.”

Moore offers, “Alice represents the future; she’s someone who has made the choice to return home to make a difference, which is an important element in our story. She is someone the age of a lot of people today who might say, ‘Well, this is my life, can’t change now.’”

“Rosemarie’s charm, savvy, and charisma brings the role to life – and also allow her to inhabit with aplomb the space in between the conflict of Steve and Dustin, given that they’re both attracted to her.”

DeWitt “had worked with me before,” says Krasinski. “I loved acting opposite her, and so had my wife on another project. When Rosemarie came in to read for the role, it was like, ‘Well, this makes sense!’ Plus, she has great chemistry with Matt.”

Further on-screen chemistry evolved between Damon and Krasinski. Damon remarks, “People are going to be surprised by John. He’s playing someone who has his own story to tell. I’d come away saying, ‘This guy is amazing,’ even though I already knew him.”

“15 years ago, on *Good Will Hunting*, Gus said to me, ‘Directing is 95% casting.’ On this, we got everybody we wanted. Then we turned them loose and they started doing great things we couldn’t even have anticipated.”

Moore found that with this ensemble, “there wasn’t a whole lot of bull about getting hair done. No time was wasted waiting on someone. This capable cast supported each other.”

McDormand says, “Making *Promised Land* was a collaborative effort in the best possible way.”

Titus Welliver, who plays the neighborly proprietor of Rob’s Guns, Groceries, Guitars and Gas, remarks, “John and Matt have done such a great job writing this script that they invite you into the process.”

Rehearsals were held with the actors, deepening their senses of place and character beyond the milieu they were on location in. Whether as actors or screenwriters, Damon and Krasinski were primed for the spontaneous moments that might occur.

DeWitt remembers, “It really seemed like Matt and John were occupying the same brain – with Gus! When they were not working on-camera, you would see them over with Gus rewriting or reconceiving a scene.”

“But when they were playing their characters in scenes, they were completely immersed as Dustin and Steve.”

It is never specified in the story in which state McKinley is located in; as Damon notes, “That’s on purpose, because it’s meant to be Anywhereville, USA.”

Krasinski notes, “It’s a movie about the state of our country, so it made sense to go out in the country and film where things are actually happening.” Accordingly, *Promised Land* was shot entirely on real locations in western Pennsylvania’s farm country.

“It’s so pristine and perfect and unspoiled there,” marvels Holbrook. “I was struck by the sight of green hills rolling against the sky. It’s what we came from, this country.”

“Working in Pennsylvania was helpful for understanding my character,” says DeWitt. “There would be conversations about what had gone on over the years in the area. You could immerse yourself in local culture.”

Krasinski, whose father grew up in the state, notes that “there’s something you can never capture without coming here, a supportive energy and sweetness.”

Production designer Daniel Clancy, whose family ties are to Illinois, offers the perspective that “when you go on [a sound] stage, you lose a sense of reality. You’ve got to get the real texture, the real grit of what a place is. Gus is highly visually oriented, so he and I were on the same page.”

Affording a producing perspective, Moore reports that “being there makes the movie better from a visual standpoint, as everyone in front of and behind the camera picks up on things. The impact will be felt in the script, in the costume design, in the performances, in the look of the film, and so forth.

“There are three deciding factors in choosing a location. The first is purely creative: does it look the way you want your movie to look? The second is the empowering feeling it gives: if you put actors and crew in something like the actual place where the story is happening, and surround them with locals from the area in small roles and on the crew, then that’s all to the better. The third reason is financial. States have implemented incentives that will encourage you to shoot your movie there, although you will want to go work in a place that truly values people who make movies. It’s not just about the tax benefit; it’s about, will the citizens let you come into a local church to film? On *Promised Land*, all three factors came together harmoniously.”

Deciding on the state cued an even more detailed set of locale requirements, and locations manager John Adkins took the lead in the search for the desired settings. After conversations with Gus Van Sant going over specifics, Adkins mapped out a radius surrounding downtown Pittsburgh and scouted numerous farms. He then consulted with Clancy, paring down the options.

When it came time for Van Sant to go to Pittsburgh, the gateway destination was Slate Lick Road in Worthington, PA, about 40 miles northeast of Pittsburgh in Armstrong County.

Adkins recalls, “In looking for stunning pastoral farmlands, I remembered Slate Lick Road from scouting other films. When Gus flew into town, I picked him up at the airport and we went out to the Worthington/Slate Lick area, driving along that distinctive road.”

“I had never been there before,” notes the director. “When John drove me around the country area outside Pittsburgh, it seemed perfect.”

“That was it,” says Adkins. “Our movie was coming to the region, which became as big a star of *Promised Land* as anyone else.”

The farms around Slate Lick Road that were used in the film were chosen because of their beauty, warmth, and naturalism. There is also a real-life history that hews to the story’s themes; the Rhea Farm, which serves as the Yates Farm on-screen, has been in the Rhea family for four generations, and the farmhouse itself is over one hundred years old and was built two generations ago. Currently, goats, emus, and cattle are raised on the property and hay is cultivated.

Other farmhouses “were all but destroyed,” reports Clancy. “We cleaned them up and added our own touches to them while staying true to the core of what they are.

“A lot of people today don’t know what rural America is. You can be living in a city and not aware of what is happening just an hour away from where you live. That’s why this is an important story to tell.”

To find the right locations making up the town of McKinley, Adkins was given a mandate to “look for a town that has clearly gone through some economic hardship, but that still has a pulse – and, crucially, a heart.”

After scouting some 60-plus towns “where the conversations that happen in our story were ongoing,” Adkins was joined by Clancy to narrow the field(s). “Dan and I hit it off from the outset – which was a good thing, since we spent hours and hours together in my Jeep – and he and I were like-minded in how we envisioned things for the movie, for the aesthetic Gus wanted.”

Clancy muses, “Farms are harder to find these days, yet the town was the toughest location for the whole picture. It couldn’t be too big, but it couldn’t be too small. It had to have a certain decayed look yet be far from destroyed. It had to be able to tell our story.”

Avonmore, PA, in Westmoreland County, settled in the early 18th century, filled the bill. Its profile has progressed from farming community to industrial town, with coal mining now second to steel mills among local vocations. Numerous residents commute to Pittsburgh for their daily jobs, but make their homes in Avonmore amidst a diverse community numbering over 1,000.

Indiana Avenue in Avonmore evolved into McKinley’s Main Street, with varying colors and architectural styles that reveal a once-booming past through frayed edges as well as pride and a tenacious hope for the future. Van Sant responded strongly to the setting, from which Clancy’s team elicited something “a little like Norman Rockwell’s imagery, and a little bittersweet.”

When the production moved in, it crafted complete façades and signage for McKinley storefronts on Indiana Avenue: a bakery, a general store, a VFW outpost, a post

office, and more. Rob's Guns, Groceries, Guitars and Gas was created out of an empty space.

Clancy says that the ideal was to "detail the lifeblood of McKinley, the why and the how of people living in this small town – and what would drive them to save it."

"When we were in Avonmore, there was a lot of natural gas business being conducted, similar to what's in our movie," muses Van Sant.

Avonmore's bar My Buddy's Place was slightly altered to become the film's bar Buddy's Place. Welliver laughs, "Watching those scenes, you'll be able to smell the peanuts and the beer."

Adkins enthuses, "It gifted us with three different settings under one roof – the pool table area, the bands-and-karaoke area, and the bar itself where hundreds and hundreds of names have been carved into it.

"Most importantly, the place was big enough to fit in cast and crew and equipment. The owner, Gerri Bumbaugh, was accommodating; she developed a quick friendship with Gus, and you can catch her tending bar in the scenes in the movie."

As on previous movies, Van Sant sought to integrate into his cast locals who were not professional actors. On *Promised Land*, this enhanced the verisimilitude of scenes calling for dozens of community members as well as made for invigorating on-camera interactions with the main actors.

Multiple open calls were held, each attracting hundreds who auditioned. Ultimately, some 500 people were employed by the production as extras. The production also drew from the region's talent pools of professional actors, including working child actors who were cast as several of the youngest characters.

Whether getting on-camera or not, the townspeople welcomed the movie people with open arms. Penny Dunmire, a lifetime resident of Avonmore and secretary of the Avonmore Community Association, says, "Our newest industry is tourism, with kayaking and canoeing on the river, and here was something bringing a lot of people into town for the first time – people who were so wonderful to us.

"It's a source of pride for us that this movie was made in Avonmore. You could not believe the excitement. Everybody was enthralled by the filmmaking process."

For *Promised Land*, Van Sant's process with cinematographer Linus Sandgren was to keep the look subdued, with little bursts of color here and there as the story progresses. The director says, "I have a policy of having no palette at all, but I know that the crew might find it easier to organize with one."

The color scheme – or, lack of same – was hewed to by costume designer Juliet Polcsa and her department, coordinating with Clancy and his. She offers, "I live in a small town in upstate New York, so the script rang very true to me.

“We went with what I called a ‘comfortable palette.’ The clothes being worn by the residents of McKinley couldn’t look too new, bright, or crisp.”

The costume designer’s department, in trying to convey current economic realities, bumped up against current fashion realities. Polcsa comments, “Current trends of bright color were all wrong for the look of this movie.

“I went to a lot of thrift stores, but they weren’t always selling apparel that looked well-worn and ripped and so forth. You have to be careful with ‘aging’ clothing on-screen, or flecking it with dirt; that can easily look fake.”

Polcsa took inspiration closer to home – literally: Frank Yates’ signature vest “belonged to my husband,” she confides. “It was a win/win situation for me, because I got something truly worn-in for a character *and* I got to clean out my husband’s closet. He thinks he’s getting it back, but...he’s not.”

Taking a cue from extras, principal cast members’ personal wardrobe was also pressed into service. Polcsa remembers, “Gus had the idea of having actors wear their own clothes. When you’re comfortable in something of your own, it makes you a little bit more comfortable in your character.” She spoke with actors to find out what they owned that might work – and that they would be willing to use – for the movie.

It was the veteran actor in the cast who set the tone. Polcsa remembers, “My husband’s vest turned out to be one of the few things for Frank Yates to wear that didn’t already belong to Hal Holbrook. He told me that he had this old pair of jeans and this rundown shirt that he wasn’t quite ready to throw out, so he had been using them for chores and gardening.

“He sent them over to me, and I got them ready to incorporate into Frank’s look. Gus came to Hal’s fitting, and he put on his jeans and shirt and I put the vest on him – and the character emerged pretty quickly.”

To hone his characterization of Steve Butler, Matt Damon hewed to his longstanding process of incorporating elements that would inform the authenticity of his portrayal without being necessarily evident to the audience. He availed himself of Polcsa’s research, given that Steve is first seen in corporate settings before settling into McKinley. “We discussed ‘corporate casual’ as well as ‘casual Friday,’” notes Polcsa. “Steve’s clothing evolution had to be more of a quick change, reflecting his sales instincts.”

The script called for Steve to be clad in high-end new cowboy boots. A pair was readied, yet Polcsa and Damon were concerned that they weren’t quite right for the character to be wearing in and around McKinley. The script was modified, and so Polcsa picked up a pair of work boots.

But, a few days before filming, Polcsa “looked inside and found they were made in Bangladesh. The revised script reference was to them being made in America. So now I needed something vintage-looking and made in America. I bought a pair of Red Wing boots on eBay, crossed my fingers that we got them on time – which we did – and Matt literally stepped into them right before filming.

“They couldn’t have been better if I had designed and aged them. They’re a part of who Steve is; you don’t design a character and cut him off at the knees.”

Clancy’s department stayed consistent with Polcsa’s “comfortable palette” on vehicles, furniture, and sets both interior and exterior. He notes, “It’s like an Andrew Wyeth painting; the yellows, browns, and greens are muted, to show a kind of decay. The colors that pop in are mostly red, white, and blue – marking a subtle theme.

“Gus wanted a realistic look with evident age, nothing over-stylized. We used a lot of paneling – what was at hand – to keep it authentic, nothing too pretty.”

An element that is more overtly worked into the film is water, a precious life-sustaining resource that can no longer be taken for granted, including in a small town itself trying to stay afloat. Clancy remarks, “We put water in wherever we could. You see ponds on the farms, kids playing with hoses, Steve splashing water on his face, and him and Sue always carrying bottled water. There’s also outboard motors in fields. The motel – the interiors of which are an Avonmore boarding house that we redressed and for which the owners now want to keep our modifications – is named the Miller Falls Motel.”

Furthermore, while many directors would have seen the rain which dogged the shoot as a disruption, Van Sant welcomed it as enhancing the pervasive motif.

Overall, Van Sant “is one of those directors that don’t open their mouth until they have something to say – and when they do, people listen,” states Frances McDormand.

The director will let actors and crew run with their talents before stepping in to tweak the specifics. This engenders a tremendous collaborative spirit on his films.

Moore reflects, “After several movies together, Gus and Matt have a great relationship and they’re both laid-back. As director and star, they set the tempo and the pace.

“But people come back to work for Gus over and over again whether they are actors or crew members. He possesses a quiet humility at the same time that he exhibits strong convictions. He is supportive and kind and funny. He propagates trust.”

Damon says, “I trust the guy implicitly. He has empathy to spare. With him, as an actor, you’re always in such great hands. You need only to look at the performances in his movies to see that.”

Moore remarks, “His movies capture place, time, and character. I’d say he is a student of humanity.”

Damon adds, “He doesn’t favor artifice. The first day I came to the set, he said, ‘Are you wearing make-up?’ I said, ‘Well, yeah, they put a little bit on.’ He made me take it off.”

“Gus is incredibly confident,” observes Krasinski. “He’s soft-spoken and quiet because the process is happening in his head while he is expecting people to be doing their jobs.”

Holbrook comments, “He doesn’t seem to have his mind all made up in advance about how it should be. He does seem to be ready and open to whatever you come up with.”

DeWitt elaborates, “The actors and crew are empowered. Gus is attuned to whatever dynamic is happening. Everything informs a scene for him, making it more true. He sits right next to the camera.”

Sandgren remembers, “We would block the scenes and then discuss ideas and instincts. The motivation for what the camera was going to do in a scene came from the actors. It’s something that Gus pointed out to me from [director Bernardo] Bertolucci and [cinematographer Vittorio] Storaro’s 1970s films.

“Gus doesn’t want to watch a movie; he wants to watch the real thing.”

McNairy adds, “Gus is looking at you, not at a monitor. My first question on the set to him was ‘Where’s video village?’ ‘There’s no video village here.’ ‘Really?’

“It’s a great atmosphere to work in, giving you more ability to explore, because you don’t have people hovering around a monitor and spending time on playback.”

The movie was made on a brisk 30-day shooting schedule. Moore notes, “As a producer, I’ve noticed how Gus understands both the production process and the creative process.

“My first big movie was *Good Will Hunting*, and I’ve wanted every shoot since to be more like a Gus Van Sant shoot. Gus will make decisions with the crew in mind, and will not waste time shooting stuff he doesn’t need.”

On his most recent films, Van Sant has been applying a technique that he credits to director Terrence Malick: silent takes. This entails shooting scenes with the actors in which no dialogue is spoken, letting the actors run through all their lines internally and expressing their emotions through their faces. “Terry uses them in perhaps a different way, but they have become very valuable to me,” says Van Sant.

DeWitt elaborates, “This is something that’s done after Gus feels like we’ve found the scene and are about to move on to another scene. He will then do the silent take. It’s wordless, but it’s not pantomime. It means we have to be thinking the characters’ thoughts or feeling their feelings. You have to engage with another actor doing the same thing. I found it really fun to do.”

McDormand offers, “The larger idea is, since you don’t have the exposition, you can get at a larger framework for the scene.”

“I think the silent takes have made me a better actor,” states Titus Welliver. “Playing a scene without dialogue, you have to find the subtlety without the ability to use language. You have to listen on an emotional level because nothing’s being said.

“As an actor, it’s a big leap of faith. But once I did it, I found it to be something I’d like to do again.”

Film editor Billy Rich reports, “In editing, this gives Gus the opportunity to use someone’s reaction off another actor from a spoken version of the scene because people are performing differently in the silent takes. It adds to an audience’s understanding of what’s going on for the characters and in the story.”

Cinematographer Linus Sandgren found that “it was amazing how something else would come out of the actors. When it came time for a silent take, I would get excited.”

Promised Land was Sandgren’s first collaboration with Van Sant, whom he cites as “an inspiration for me ever since I saw *Drugstore Cowboy*.” Sandgren conferred with the director well before filming began to work out the desired look of the new movie, which was shot on 35mm film.

Sandgren notes, “We started our process by discussing the characters. Then we looked at a lot of old reportage from the 1970s and 1980s, images from photographers like Steve McCurry and Stephen Shore.

“The idea was to recall the vintage look of America from a few decades back, referencing images photographed with Leica cameras using natural light on Kodachrome slide film. Everyone recalls Super 8 film, but we were thinking more about Kodachrome’s use in portraits from the 1980s. To try to recreate that, shooting on film allowed us to be naturalistic and yielded greater resolution. We felt that this look could best capture the texture of the environments and locations of the movie.”

Van Sant says, “Linus and I always took time to relate to the locations. We would make some things up as we went along, reacting to how or where scenes were playing out.”

Krasinski remarks, “The movie looks so beautiful. What Linus shot for Gus tells the story as much as the script that we wrote.”

“Gus wanted to light the movie using as much natural light as possible, using negative fill for contrast to create a more organic look,” notes Sandgren. “In developing the film, we ran it through ‘pulp processing.’

“That entailed, instead of the normal developing procedure, pulling the film during the processings. Pulling is the opposite of pushing; the highlights are maintained and it’s a little less grainy. It’s that much more detailed, and it helped to give our movie a distinct look – one in line with the authenticity of its characters and setting.”

In line with that authenticity, says Damon, “*Promised Land* is meant to catalyze conversation and reflection – and not to give out answers, though I do believe that there are hopeful ones out there.

“I’m hopeful that people will love these characters as much as we do, and that they will be entertained by our story.”

Krasinski says, “The movie is about an ideal of America, and how that is still attainable here and now.

“Matt and I are positive people, and at the heart of our movie is the belief that not only will things get better but that the only way towards that is to be all in this together. Luckily, the decisions are still in our hands.”

Promised Land

Credits

CAST

in order of appearance

Steve Butler	Matt Damon
Attendant	Benjamin Sheeler
David Churchill	Terry Kinney
Waitress	Carla Bianco
Michael Downey	Joe Coyle
Frank Yates	Hal Holbrook
Arlene	Dorothy Silver
Sue Thomason	Frances McDormand
Rob	Titus Welliver
Drew’s Girl	Lexi Cowan
Drew Scott	Tim Guinee
Claire Allen	Sara Lindsey
Coach	Frank Conforti
Basketball Player	Garrett Ashbaugh
Jericho	Jerico Morgan
Carson Allen	Max Schuler
5 th Grader	August G. Siciliano
Gerry Richards	Ken Strunk
Lynn	Karen Baum
Jesse the Bartender	Gerri Bumbaugh
Alice	Rosemarie DeWitt
Donny	Johnny Cicco
Buddy’s Waitress	Erin Baldwin
Gwen	Kristin Slaysman
Dustin Noble	John Krasinski
6-Year-Old Boy	Andrew Kuebel
Drummer	Matthew Ferrante
Guitar #1	Justin Cook
Bass	Steven Craven
Guitar #2	Bruce Craven
Keyboard	Gene Williams
Large Man	Dan Anders
Paul Geary	Lucas Black

Paul's Girlfriend	Sandy Medred
Jeff Dennon	Scot McNairy
Colin	Carrington E. Vaughn
Danny Thomason	Cain Alexander
Motel Receptionist	Joy de la Paz
Lemonade Girl at Gym	Lennon Wynn Kuzniar
Lemonade Girl at Fair	Payton Godfrey
Stunt	Jason Silvis
Helicopter Pilot	Cherokee Walker

CREW

Directed by	Gus Van Sant
Screenplay by	John Krasinski & Matt Damon
Story by	Dave Eggers
Produced by	Matt Damon
	John Krasinski
	Chris Moore
Executive Producers	Gus Van Sant
	Ron Schmidt
Executive Producers	Jeff Skoll
	Jonathan King
Co-Producers	Mike Sablone
	Drew Vinton
Director of Photography	Linus Sandgren, FSF
Editor	Billy Rich
Production Designer	Daniel B. Clancy
Costume Designer	Juliet Polsa
Music by	Danny Elfman
Music Supervisor	Brian Reitzell
Casting by	Francine Maisler, CSA

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