

Interviews: Grace McPhillips, Steve Scholz on Chicago Acting in Film Meetup's 'Holiday Hurrah'

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CHICAGO – Every year, HollywoodChicago.com explores the state of the Chicago film actor through Grace McPhillips and Steve Scholz, the Board President and Vice President of the Chicago Acting in Film Meetup Group NFP (CAFM). The group's 2014 "Holiday Hurrah" will be at the Bottom Lounge in Chicago on Monday, December 15th.

CAFM is a group that was founded by Grace McPhillips in 2007, and has grown to encompass the actors that work in features, independent films and television in the Windy City. With seminars, programs, networking and connections created for actors with agencies and productions, CAFM has become a vital link in the Chicago acting community. The December 15th Holiday Hurrah is also open to the public.



The CAFM 'Holiday Hurrah' is December 15th, 2014

Photo credit: Ben Gonzalez of Gopho Collective for the CAFM

Also, in an exclusive announcement to HollywoodChicago.com, Grace McPhillips and Steve Scholz are announcing that they are stepping down as top officers of CAFM. Their contributions as executives were in close proximity, but they made the decision together. At the event, they will announce the details of their transition from the organization, and the future of CAFM.

The two CAFM officers are veteran actors and performers in Chicago. Scholz has a theater and Chicago improv background, including The Second City Conservatory, Annoyance Theater and iO Chicago. McPhillips is from Alabama, and moved to Chicago specifically to pursue a career in independent film, TV, voiceover and stage. She spent a year steering and promoting her latest film, "The Other One," which was picked up by the Chicago International Film Festival this year and for distribution.

HollywoodChicago.com talked to the two actors, about their life in CAFM and their acting careers.

HollywoodChicago.com: The easiest question to begin with for both of you...what have been the biggest accomplishment of the Chicago Acting in Film Meetup Group this year?

Grace McPhillips: We did 'General Auditions' again, and this year we brought in Jen Inguilli, an agent who casts shows in the Southeast, like 'Under the Dome.' She had been one of the four casting directors we worked with last year, and had given us feedback on the General Auditions we sent her last year. This year she actually came in for a weekend, and we had a brunch for all the local agents in town, to build those working relationships. We had 60 actors do the auditions, and created a booklet, and that is available to the industry and the public on our website.

Steve Scholz: What came to mind for me was our partnership with CIMMfest [The Chicago International Movies and Music Festival]. We found kindred spirits in their staff, and we're both non profits. They allowed us to sponsor four diverse panels. It was cool to see a bunch of people from the categories in the industry, sit down to have discussions, in an environment where they don't normally get together. That was fascinating to watch, and it was led, created and produced by the acting community.

HollywoodChicago.com: You began this event in a modest Irish pub on the Northwest side, and morphed it into a downtown event in the last couple of years...what have you learned in that transition, and where do you see the evolution in taking it to the Bottom Lounge in the West Loop?

McPhillips: We're meeting in the middle between those elements. It's still going to be classy and cocktails, but we're reducing our costs, because in the end it's a fundraiser.

HollywoodChicago.com: You have a major announcement coming up at the CAFM event, having to do with changes in your executive board. What can people anticipate regarding that transition?

McPhillips: We decided to step down from our executive positions, both individually and jointly. We wanted to step away together because we wanted to make sure that one of us wouldn't have to step up, and it's important for the health of an organization if the leadership changes. You either grow or you die.

Scholz: As we came to an independent decision, we also felt it was nice to leave some room for more people to come in. We don't fear a vacuum in leadership.

McPhillips: We created a list of potentially 40 people to bring into leadership roles, and most of them said yes. It was so gratifying.

HollywoodChicago.com: In your opinions, what is the state of production and again, evolution for the Chicago film actor, as far as production and infrastructure in 2014?

Scholz: It's been cool to see the continuation and growth of television, with the new show 'Empire' about to launch, which has brought in a different selection of actors to the city. I was talking to a member of our group, who jokingly said he heard a casting director say, 'it stinks to be a white male actor.' [laughs] There is more diversity in roles here now, which is fun and exciting.

McPhillips: What I'll say is that the independent film world is in a challenging place right now; there needs to be a real major shake up. There is one director in town who is teaching a class in 'Rocking the Independent Film Audition,' just so he can get his fellow directors to see the talent here. The directors tend to stay in their cages, and getting them to come out is part of the shake up.

Scholz: And one of the things that has been nice about our events and parties, like the Holiday Hurrah, is that we work to connect those people in the industry.



Grace McPhillips in 'The Other One'

Photo credit: The Other One

HollywoodChicago.com: There are indications that Los Angeles is not necessarily the only destination for film actors in the United States, with Chicago, North Carolina and Georgia stepping up. What factors have driven these relocations in the last five years?

McPhillips: Money. I would love to think it had to do with talent or location. [laughs] I was in Atlanta recently, and found out they did five billion in production revenue, about seven times what was done here – there are 29 shows being done there. People were saying, 'I guess they've discovered Atlanta.' I thought, no, they discovered your tax incentives. The state and city did a good job.

HollywoodChicago.com: 'Chicago Fire,' and now 'Chicago P.D.', are becoming symbolic for the revival of production in the city. Are they still using too much of a source from the West Coast in employing actors, or do you observe a viable use of Chicago actors, beyond extra work and a knock off line?

McPhillips: There are larger opportunities beginning to happen, which comes with time. 'Chicago Fire' is doing more local casting, because they've become an established hit.

Scholz: And besides just casting 'the victim of the week,' there seems to be opportunities to get recurring roles on those shows. And now there are crossovers between 'Fire' and 'P.D.'

HollywoodChicago.com: Has the union presence in Chicago improved since the merger of SAG-AFTRA, and is it easier now to become part of it than when you began as actors?

Scholz: The costs are a bit more, because of the merger, but it can be just as easy to get in, but we do need more education of members once they get in. What is happened with the TV shows, is that more people are getting an opportunity to join. And through the Chicago office of SAG-AFTRA, there is a program called 'Piece of the Pie,' where actors can learn about the benefits of having that union membership.

McPhillips: There are always politics involved. The Chicago office has always tended to be under the control of Los Angeles and New York City, so the area often becomes a bargaining chip. I also wonder when the offices were separate here if they had more independence. It's now more of a corporate entity, and getting things done takes a bit longer.

Scholz: I don't necessarily agree with the term 'under the control.' Post-merger, the impression that I'm getting, is that there is a period of adjustment. It also means more of a review of what the Chicago branch does, but it is a slower process, simply because there are more people involved. I don't think it diminishes the strength of the union here, but it is an adjustment.



Steve Scholz and Amy Dorris in 'Foreclosure Solider'
Photo credit: Steve Scholz

HollywoodChicago.com: What are your opinions regarding the characteristics of what a casting agent – from outside the city – thinks when they look at a resume and see that an actor has worked primarily in Chicago?

McPhillips: They always look for the theater background from here, because we're known as a notable theater town. And the second thing is improvisation, either at The Second City, or iO, or Annoyance. They've all grown and made names for themselves. But they don't think of us for film necessarily, and I would like it to be more like New York City actors, who are thought of for theater and independent film.

HollywoodChicago.com: Grace, you've had a whirlwind year with your film "The Other One," culminating in a premiere showing at the 50th Chicago International Film Festival. What has this year taught you about the business of filmmaking, the marketing of a film, and the marketing of your name as a brand?

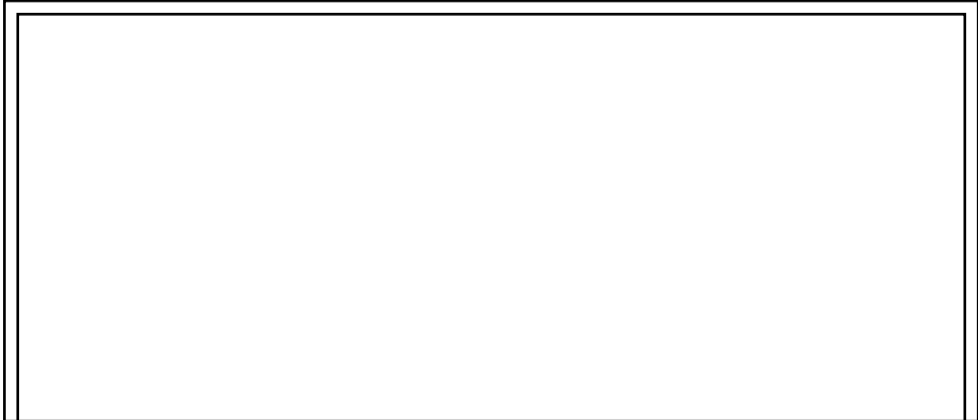
McPhillips: You asked me a similar question last year, I wish I could read what I said. [laughs] Last year, it was about making the film and finishing it. This year was about an amazing learning process, good and bad. Good, as in its totally possible, I'm signing the distribution agreement now. We are making DVDs and are premiering on VOD this upcoming spring.

What is bad, sadly, is that the business model is broken and is in flux. I saw grown men in Cannes wetting themselves over that fact, and are now opening television divisions. The film world is on this interesting precipice, where there is more opportunity than ever to make a film because of technology, but also it's stuck in an old-dog mentality that you have to have an established celebrity attached, it has to have action and nudity – even though these old rules that are not applicable any more. As far as independent film today, it remains a rich white person's game.

HollywoodChicago.com: Steve, your most notable acting credit in the last year was 'Foreclosure Soldier.' What is your opinion of how your 'type' is viewed, both in the body of your work and in the casting community?

Scholz: I still struggle with what my 'type' is – there are a lot of different things, but they're not in a general category. I've done comedy, but I can also talk about dramatic things I've been cast in. Being a type helps for marketing purposes, because if the casting people know that type, they know I can deliver what they need. Typing will get people in the door, because if you're getting typecast, you are getting cast. It can get you to something else, and can open a door. It's a step in the process, but it doesn't define the process.

The way to be seen, as you want to be seen, is of course to produce your own content. As I do things for myself, I don't have to wait for others to cast me, and I create an impression of the strength of what I can do.





Steve Scholz and Grace McPhillips of CAFM
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: Both of you are sitting at a magical casting room and can portray any film, stage or television role in history. Which one would it be and why?

McPhillips: Since we recently lost director Mike Nichols, I'm going to go with the Elizabeth Taylor portrayal of Martha in 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolfe?' I performed the 'Daddy' monologue in college, and even though I was too young for it, the feedback was that it is in me.

Scholz: I would like to try the Peter Sellers role of Chauncey Gardner in 'Being There.' It occurred to me because it's a very subtle character exploration, and I like the presence that role has in the film. It would be fun to play something that has an intellectual quality to it, but is seen in the outside world as 'we have to take care of this man.'

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, what defines 2014 through the filter of the state of the Chicago actor?

McPhillips: We had a lot of unexpected death in the Chicago acting community. It began with Molly Glynn, through a bike accident. During the same storm, Bernie Yvon passed in a separate car accident. It was all very sudden and unexpected. I feel like I have gained a greater perspective through this loss, we should acknowledge it and not waste our time.

Scholz: Because of the passings this year, there was a discussion about reconnecting with people, that this acting community shouldn't lose it's sense of togetherness. What I love about CAFM is our community, and how we collectively mentor each other. If there is a struggle, we know we're not alone. I would love see our community come together to share and connect, because that's how we make the change.

The 6th Annual Chicago Acting in Film Meetup (CAFM) "Holiday Hurrah" Event will be at the Bottom Lounge, 1375 W. Lake Street in Chicago, on December 15th, 2014, starting at 7pm. [Click here](#) [17] for more information and to purchase tickets to the event.



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