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Jesse James Miller's
diary on the making of
Becoming Redwood
and **The Good Son**

Martin Cummins'
Hell in a Handbag

SEED

Force Four Entertainment's
comedy starring **Adam Korson**
gets serious in competition
for Rockie Award



2013 NETWORK GUIDE
Who's buying in Canadian TV

JESSE JAMES MILLER on set of *Becoming Redwood*

Seeing Double

Jesse James Miller's diary on making two films in less than two years

Vancouver filmmaker Jesse James Miller has had a whirlwind couple of years, making two movies back-to-back. The coming of age comedy *Becoming Redwood* is based on Miller's own life, and tells the story of a boy who witnesses his parent's separation and believes if he beats the world's greatest golfer he can bring his family back together. *The Good Son* is a documentary about the life and career of boxing icon Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini. Miller shot both films in 2011 and went back and forth editing them through to completion in 2012. And now the blood, sweat and tears are paying off. *Becoming Redwood* has picked up numerous awards and recently completed a Canadian theatrical run and *The Good Son* will be released this summer in US theatres and is gaining attention as a 2014 Oscar contender. Both films are also nominated for the B.C. film industry's Leo Awards.

Diary by
Jesse James Miller

1982 Ray Mancini wins the title for his father against Arturo Frias in Vegas. It is one of the greatest one round fights ever and I remember Ray being a big star at the time. I was 12.

1998 I finished my first draft of *Becoming Redwood* and then moved to Los Angeles with my wife Jennifer Copping.

2009 Fast forward nine years. I've now directed a couple features and gone through a few producers for *Becoming Redwood*. The model I'm trying to use in Canada for this film isn't normal -- do it privately. This is mostly because I've never gotten a grant (I shoulda used my Jewish last name - Kaufman). However the other reason is I feel the script is far too progressed to go into development with

Telefilm and that's what being pushed on me by every producer. Every one. The script however is ready for one more re-write that I've planned out, but I've dug my heels in and won't do it until it's optioned and I'm finally paid. After all, it's only been 11 years and the script is in shooting form.

DECEMBER 2010 I turn 40. I wrote *Becoming Redwood* when I was 28.... Then I get a call that floors me. They want me to come in to meet about directing a feature length documentary on the life of Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini. "You know who he was"?... EVERYONE KNEW RAY if you were a boxing fan back then. So I go in, hear the pitch and agree to terms. I wait for the call to go meet with Ray. It's surreal. **JANUARY 2011** I fly to L.A and shoot the first interview with Ray. We hit it off right away. The interview goes amazingly well. Financier and producers watch as he cries about his father during our interview. I wrap it early so Ray can go to his son's ball game. "Jesse, wanna come"? What? So I hop in Ray's car and we go to Santa Monica high and hang out. I go have dinner with his family after and share a bottle of wine. Ray is just so honest and open. In documentary speak, this is a dream. I know we can push areas a bit more, as long as he trusts me, we're good. This day I'll never forget.

MAY 2011 Me and a small crew of 3 (DP Ian Kerr, Gaffer and sound guy Simon Doucet, and line producer Adam Scorgie) set off for South Korea. I'm going to interview Deuk-Koo's son. The son that the world never knew about. When Deuk-koo died after the 1982 fight against Ray, his fiance, Young-Mi was 3 months pregnant. She had the baby and kept it from the public. She also didn't tell her own son who his father was....until he found out himself at seven. I'll be the first to ever interview them. South Korea is fantastic and the shoot goes better than planned. I interview not only Jiwan and Young-Mi, but Deuk-Koo's trainer and his best friend. I also take Jiwan and his mother to Deuk-Koo's grave site. We get back and I feel we have a shot at a great film.

JUNE 2011 Whirlwind shoot. I go to Youngstown for a 3 day shoot, then we go to Los Angeles for 2 days. Before that leg, however I'm in New York and get a call from the *Redwood* producers saying we are green-lit to go. It's a lot to take in, but a dream comes

true. I'll be able to finally create my film *Becoming Redwood*. I don't think about how I'm going to pull it all off, I just go. We go hard in Youngstown (4 interview days in 4 different locations) and then film a very emotional meeting in Los Angeles where Jiwan Kim (Deuk-koo's son) and Young-Mi meet Ray. It's an overwhelming experience and there's massive pressure because Ray will only give me one take at the meeting. We lose a camera guy at the last moment, then miraculously Simon Doucet calls his brother in L.A who knows a guy. He turns out to be a very experienced operator who saves the day. I would've taken over Bcam, but it would've hurt. One-take with the meeting goes amazing. I film a

dinner after they meet at Ray's house and I feel like I'm in a Cassavettes film. It's surreal, brutally honest, emotional and joyous all in one. I'll never forget that night. The next day we fly back to Vancouver. I start casting *Redwood* the next morning. Shifting gears into a script that I've worked (at this point) 12 years to get off the ground. Coming of Age, family dramedy. I hit the ground running. No break, no problem, I'm casting *Redwood*.

JULY 2011 Pre-production is a tug of war. One day I think we are going to camera, the next is a dive-bomb mission that Jonathan Livingston Seagull would have been proud of. Every push and pull turns out to be worth it as I find Ryan Grantham to play Redwood

and the rest of the casting goes amazing. If this thing goes, it'll work. One last dive-bomb as we need more days, more money, more stress, but the producers come up with enough to get us to camera and off we go.

JULY-AUGUST 2011 We start production late July and it's a dream, except for the first day and a half that we lose to a technical difficulty. I cry that night. Yep. However the next morning I re-group on the long drive to set. I remember the sun and I remember hearing a Doug Paisley tune...whatever it was, we never looked back during production. Everyone is well cast, well prepared. Camera department is great, sound guys are great, our design team is





Deuk-Koo Kim's best friend, SANG BONG



RAY "BOOM BOOM" MANCINI on the set of *The Good Son*



Deuk-Koo Kim's fiancée, YOUNG-MI, went into seclusion with her child following Kim's death

amazing, wardrobe, make-up, every-one. The set is very relaxed, dailies are looking great and the performances more importantly are on the mark. Ryan is putting on a great performance. Everyone has bought into what I'm trying to make - a coming of age family dramedy. It's not a golf film.

SEPTEMBER 2011 We wrap *Becoming Redwood* late August and I'm supposed to start writing *The Good Son*, but haven't gotten the transcripts. Things are being delayed and I can't figure out why. At the same time I'm supposed to be writing, I start cutting *Redwood* in my studio with my editor Charlie Renfrew. We work really well together. It's peaceful. No distractions, just back to *Redwood* and his journey. I love this part of filmmaking. The creation becomes alive - piecing things together.

OCTOBER 2011 *The Good Son* gets pushed until January. Not sure why, but it doesn't seem to be urgent. The film isn't due until September of 2012, so I continue forward with *Becoming Redwood*. I deliver my directors cut mid-month. It's well received and the dance begins. My ratio ended up being 3 to 1.

DECEMBER 2012 *Becoming Redwood* is locked on the 11th (officially not until January). The locked cut is almost exactly like my directors cut, so of course, I'm happy. At the same time this is going down, I still don't have my transcripts for *The Good Son*. There's been very little communication with the producers on that film and I'm becoming worried.

FEBRUARY 2012 The great Shaun Tozer starts working on *Becoming Redwood* and the equally talented sound designer Jon Ritchie is on the job. We are in good hands as we've worked together for years now. All prepared together. I feel I have my creative companions back now after 5 months of editing purgatory... Charlie doesn't speak much.... **FINALLY** I get my transcripts for *The Good Son* that same month. I write a paper edit in 3 weeks and send it off. It's green-lit and I start cutting in my studio again with, you guessed it, Charlie Renfrew.

MARCH 2012 I start colour correcting *Becoming Redwood* with Andrea Chelebak at Central. Andrea brings so much to the project. We did tests together (I cut a trailer before the rough cut to get the movie sold and also test colour tones/looks with An-

drea) that are paying off. The movie looks amazing and most of my RED worries are gone. *The Good Son* cut is also progressing. There's an emotional underbelly that is very deep.

MAY 2012 Schuan has done it again. His score for *Redwood* floors me. On top of that, all the needle drop music I selected looks like we've got rights to use. Things are sounding great on *Redwood*. At the same time I design 6 sets with Chad Krowchuck (production designer on *Redwood*) and his gang for *The Good Son*. We shoot in his studio with my good friend Ken Johns and Bruce Borland. This is a dimension of *The Good Son* that I feel will help connect all the stylistic and story principles I've set out on that project to do. The dailies look great. Charlie cuts them into the rough cut. I fly to Los Angeles with the cut and show it to the financier. We are at the Four Seasons in his room. I'm about to have a heart attack when the film is over because there's absolute silence. He turns to me and he's crying...I also take a copy over to Ray's house. This is probably the most nervous I've ever been. He watches it in his living room while I shoot broll in his front hallway!!!! (I decided to shoot all the stills in camera...just to make it

easier!). Again, I hear the last cue and it's silent. I walk in and Ray stands up. I kinda feel like he might tap my chin, but instead he says "You made a great movie Jesse." The champ and I hug. You hear that? The 1982 lightweight champion of the world and I hug it out in his living room....Superchannel then buys the rough cut for Canadian broadcast. Good start.

JULY 2012 I lock *The Good Son*. Schuan is writing another amazing score. I'm telling you, the guy's incredible. We work on the mix at Jon's studio on Bowen. It sounds amazing. I go back to Central and Colour Correct with Andrea again. Five days of bliss. I basically re-enact the process of *Redwood* with *The Good Son*.

"The champ and I hug. You hear that? The 1982 lightweight champion of the world and I hug it out in his living room."

AUGUST 2012 We lay back *Becoming Redwood*. Watching it go to tape at Finale was a beautiful experience. All alone, after 14 years, I'm done. The tech doesn't see me crying in the small room. *The Good Son* mix is done as well. We lay that back later that month. Now I'm numb and can't slow down. My body and mind have been working constantly for 18 months on two different films. The ups and downs of both films have taken a bit of a toll on me physically and mentally. My family has stuck by me and we are about to have another child. Ya, why not!? Jen and I have Cian, who's now 6. Our next is due early October. But now I wait. I wait for my new family member and

also to see what my two films will do when they are grown up, when they are thrust into the world.

SEPTEMBER 2012 *Becoming Redwood* is the gala film at the Edmonton Film Festival. It's a great time and we win the Jury prize for best Canadian film. *The Good Son* opens 5 days later at the Hampton's Film Festival. I don't attend because Jen is about to burst.

OCTOBER 2012 Keen Indigo Miller is born on October 6th. *Becoming Redwood* premieres at VIFF October 11th and Jen (who put on an incredible performance as the female lead Jade), Cian, Keen and myself attend. It's a family affair. We win most popu-

Continued on page 23

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Jesse James Miller *cont. from page 21*

lar film. My work is done and there's nothing else I can do. It's an uncomfortable feeling, letting go, but one I'm familiar with. The kids have flown the coop, and they are growing up.

MAY 2013 Both *Becoming Redwood* and *The Good Son* get theatrical runs. *Redwood* is in Canada and *The Good Son* will be released this summer in the U.S. Ray and I have become good friends and are working on a script together that we hope to shoot in Youngstown this summer. Time has passed and I feel closure now on

both films. *Becoming Redwood* was a learning experience. I'll most likely never make a film that close to me again. People told me it was a bold move and as I look back, it was. I'm not saying I'll never make anything that open — I will, that's who I am, but I'll just base it on someone else's life! Both films still have lots of chutzpha left though! *Redwood* is still opening across Canada and *The Good Son: the life of Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini* will be shown to millions on a major American TV network in November and it's garnering Oscar worthy buzz. Stay tuned! ■