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MICHAEL NARDELLI'S

INNER CIRCLE

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PHOTOS BY
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MICHAEL NARDELLI'S

BY KRISTAL LUSTER

Allow me to introduce Michael Nardelli, a talent in acting, producing, and directing. In his latest film "Circle" (available on Netflix), Michael plays Eric, one of 50 individuals who find themselves trapped in a twisted game of life and death. Learn more about Michael's views on "Circle" as well as who he is behind and in front of the camera.

What about "Circle" caught your attention and why?

The concept hooked me right away. 50 disparate people trapped in a room, battling it out for who deserves to live? I wanted to watch that. But then when I read it, I realized it sort checked all the boxes for what I want in a story: particularly a social relevancy. Why should this movie be made today? It's almost scary, but we watch "Circle" now and it's only gotten more topical since we made it. There's so much discussion about race, class, gender, politics, sexuality, etc. in the movie. With everything going on in the world today, it sometimes feels like all this pressure building up that's about to burst. "Circle" is very much a microcosm of what's going on in the world. And of course, it's all those ideas wrapped in a nice shiny sci-fi thriller reminiscent of "The Twilight Zone". So, I liked that it could hopefully entertain and enlighten, or educate.

How did you prepare for the role of Eric in "Circle"?

I took what was on the page and went backwards, which is what I normally do. This is what he's doing, how he's reacting...What in his past would make him that way? I decided Eric was kind of a chess prodigy when he was younger. I think a lot of gamers can relate. You can be a good, level headed person, but after the third hour of winning/losing in "Call of Duty", some of your other personality quirks might start coming out. Eric's a super smart, cerebral person. He's not a psychopath; he's just great at playing the game and the more he played and the more people competed against him, the more he wanted to win. And, I think he'll have survivor's guilt the rest of his life for what he did. It's not something he'd be glib about.

In what ways are you and Eric alike? In what ways are you different?

Eric can be quiet and withdrawn into his thoughts, which happens to me too. He'd definitely rather resolve a dispute without violence and I'm that way too. But, he has a better grip on his impulses than I. I don't know if I could keep my mouth shut in the "Circle" the way he did, especially when some of those characters started spouting really ignorant, stupid nonsense. He's probably calmer than I am too. I'd have a panic attack in that dang circle.

Do you believe you would be the last man standing in your own circle if such a thing were to happen in real life? Why or why not?

No way! I'd be gone in the first round. I'm not a good liar in those high stakes moments like what happens in "Circle". And, whenever I play "Mafia" with my friends, they always kill me first. I do like that the rules of "Circle" prohibit it from turning things into fistfights. These people all have to hear each other out, for better or worse.

By being involved with "Circle", have you changed your perceptions of people?

Well, I like to hope I've always been progressive as it pertains to people and being even minded and open to new ideas, cultures, etc. I mostly watch it now with audiences and think, "We kind of hit the nail on the head. This is the world we're living in right now. Everyone is on the defense. Everyone is scared and angry. Anything can happen at any moment. It's sad and scary, but that's what the best sci-fi does – shed a light on the world with a non-judgmental eye.

How would you see the film turning out differently if it were not for those prejudices influencing the character's choices?

It's hard to tell. How would our world be different if we didn't have those prejudices? Sometimes I think we always need a villain to exist, or a battle to conquer. The ending of "Circle" does suggest though that other circle's may have been more civilized. We see a lot more children and pregnant woman in the group of survivor's at the end which to me suggests other circle's had a lot more sacrifice. People giving up their lives without as much argument and volatility so new life would survive.

Was the intention of the film to bring awareness to how we see others, or to create shock value?

Not shock value at all. That's just the nature of being honest about conversations and archetypes that exist here on earth. Most movies skirt around that. The goal was always to create something entertaining that also talked about deeper issues. What's the value of a human life? Who really deserves to live? How do we resolve conflict? What does the concept of a "community" really mean in this day and age in the U.S.?

What is the message in "Circle"?

I don't think it's about hope or change. I think it's a cynical look in the sense of: this is what can happen in a high stakes scenario where lives are on the line if you're not careful. Little threads of conflict or disagreement can turn toxic real quick and destroy everything if you don't keep a level head. Things get personal really quickly too. It's more of a cautionary tale than a parable about the inherent goodness of human beings.

Did the directors seek out specific individuals for each main role? If so, why was it important to be specific?

A lot of the characters in "Circle" are archetypes. Some get the chance to develop into fully realized complex individuals, but some don't make it that far. And some just aren't that complex of human beings to begin with. Lindsay Chag (our casting director) did an amazing job of finding all these talented people who were really in it for the art and wanted to participate in something different that almost felt like theater at times with the whole company in the same room at one time hashing it out "onstage." Diversity was obviously a huge part of the script and a huge goal for us, so that was an important part. Making sure we were representing all walks of life.

Did any of the characters that died really deserve to be killed/sacrifice themselves?

Yikes, that's a tough one. Not my call to make either. I know audiences always want certain people to go. Usually the lawyer and the businessman (who both played their roles brilliantly). But, that's the whole conflict of the movie: what's the value of a human life. Is it because you have family? Make a lot of money? Are a "good" person? Have had a rough go of it? It's a good topic to discuss and I certainly do not have the answer!

Were there any films that inspired "Circle"?

"12 Angry Men", "Twilight Zone"....A lot of people say it's similar to "Cube", so that's in there somewhere. I know Mario and Aaron (the writer/directors) talk a lot about being inspired by Tarantino's dialogue heavy scenes that slow build to a big finish. "Children of Men" is another one Mario talks about a lot. Between those guys and my brother and I (who also produced), I think we're a walking film encyclopedia.

What were some of the highlighted prejudices from "12 Angry Men" used to create the overall theme in "Circle"? Do you think they were accurately portrayed?

"12 Angry Men" was a big influence on "Circle", more than anything else really. I think the stakes are even higher in "Circle" with everyone fighting for their right to live and only getting two minutes each round to do so. And I think "Circle" very accurately portrays prejudices like

“Michael Nardelli’s Inner Circle” cont.

racism, sexuality, gender, class warfare, ageism, etc. It takes place in LA (or, above LA, as it were J) and I think “Circle” very accurately portrays prejudices like racism, sexuality, gender, class warfare, ageism, etc. It takes place in LA (or, above LA, as it were J) and I think you find a lot of those same arguments happening here on earth everyday. The movie’s a bit cynical, but it does represent the conversations were all having today.

If all of your favorite superheroes and villains were put in “the circle”, who would be the one to leave?

Rorschach from “Watchmen” would survive. I wish I could see Captain America save the day, but the “Circle” is a perfect environment for Rorschach to manipulate and push people in the direction he wanted. He’d send them all into existential terror and come out the other side. Diabolical!

Was this an easy project to produce and act in? Which took most of your time?

Not easy at all, but very fun and rewarding and a great learning experience. Doing double duty is always a challenge. We only had ten days to film and most of it was standing in our circles and being terrified which takes quite a bit of energy. Eric was a challenge too because he needed to stand out, but not too much and he needed to appear scared and chivalrous but also have enough ambiguous moments built in that you buy the ending. That was real tricky and I hope I pulled it off. Post-production on the movie was a learning experience for me too as a filmmaker with all the effects and sound design. It took a lot of time and effort to get all of that just right on our tiny budget. And then just selling the movie to Netflix, getting to know them, and getting a better understanding of the way movies get seen in this day and age. The whole process was long, fun and enlightening.

Between producing films and acting in films, which would you say you are most passionate about?

Definitely acting. It is the most challenging and rewarding aspect of story telling for me.

Is it easier preparing for a television role or film role?

Sometimes, it is easier for film because you have a bit more time. Not always, but sometimes. With TV, if it is a show that is already on you can watch it to get a sense of the tone and the characters that already exist. So they both have their pros and cons.

How did you get involved with “FunnyorDie”?

I am friends with Mike Farah and some of the other writers there who I met through Groundlings. We have made some videos for them that they have promoted. It is always a fun, creative exercise and I definitely want to do more comedy.

How did your improv with “The Groundlings” inspire you to create an almost sinister Dennis Mitchell in your short film, “Dennis Doesn’t Live Here Anymore”? Why did he take such a drastic turn in his life?

I was doing a lot of innocent, precocious characters and exploring that kind of thing. In college, people said I looked like a grown up Dennis Mitchell. I kind of combined the two things and always had this dream of a short about Dennis grown up and in the middle of a quarter life crisis like myself and a lot of my peers went through once they got out of school and were in the real world. It’s sort of a dark thought, but I wondered what Dennis would be like now in a post-9/11, post-recession, post-everything world. It’s all satirical and tongue-in-cheek, but the Dennis in my short couldn’t really cope with being an adult, so he didn’t.

Would you say you tie a lot of your own interests; Sci-Fi, gaming, Comic Books, into the projects you produce, direct, and or act in?

I am definitely starting to! It can take a while to find your



creative voice and the things you want to talk about. I feel like that happened over the last few years. The two films I worked on this year as an actor and a filmmaker (“Circle” and “Dennis Doesn’t Live Here Anymore”) both sort of have all of the elements that interest me in story telling: complex characters, satire, social relevancy, etc. And, they’re both wrapped up in that kind of pulpy/genre box you’re talking about. I think we’ll keep making stuff that has those elements.

Is “The Giant Mechanical Man” based off any life experiences you’ve had?

Sort of like “Dennis...”, I think it appealed to the young adult in me. The lead characters: they don’t have it all figured out yet, and that’s ok. They know they have interests, they know they don’t love their day jobs. I thought it was the most realistic romantic comedy I’d ever read. Most “romcoms” glamorize everything: “The beautiful newscaster who has everything but is still miserable.” Mechanical Man felt real, but still hopeful. They don’t figure everything out by the end, but they figure out what makes them truly happy and they can go from there.

“The Collection” is twistedly brilliant but you can’t ignore the grim nature of the film’s storyline. Is it difficult to shed light on the darker aspects of the human mind?

Marcus Dunstan and Patrick Melton (the writers/filmmakers) are definitely the ones to do it! They’re awesomely brilliant, seem super stable, and have great senses of humor. I think because they have pretty normal lives and a great understanding of the genre they’re able to delve deeper into the dark recesses of the mind and also subvert some of your expectations as they pertain to horror.

Do you have a personal interest in psychology?

Totally! I love it. I’m always reading books about the brain and how it works. What makes people tick and all that stuff fascinates me. I’ve been seeing a therapist for almost a decade now too so that can’t help but rub off on my interests into psychology, people, relationships, etc.

Would you agree or disagree that nothing is truly original, but instead based loosely off our own experiences in some way?

Point of view can always be original, because everyone’s perspective on life and their experiences are different. That’s why we keep going back and watching the same stories, but they still excite us or enlighten us in different ways. I had a teacher tell me once, “The only thing you can be to perfection is yourself.” That stuck with me. If you’re telling a story that’s personal to you, even only slightly, then it has some originality to it. Because there’s only one you in all the world.

Last words? How can you be contacted?

Thank you so much for the great questions and the interest in my work! I look forward to bookmarking Twenty4Seven Magazine and reading more of your interviews with young entertainers, filmmakers, genre fans, and just plain all around cool people you talk to! I can be reached via Twitter: @thenardelli, Instagram: @thenardelli, Facebook: Michael Nardelli, and Website: Michaelnardelli.com.