

Jon Ralston, features editor,  
832-7189, @jonralston,  
jralston@ljworld.com

# KU grad goes from on-set medic to filmmaker

By Eric Melin  
Special to the Journal-World

Kasi Brown was working as an EMT on a set for a commercial in Los Angeles recently when a dangerous stunt went horribly wrong.

"This guy who was doing his first ramp jump had to jump over a tractor in downtown L.A.," she says. "He went up on the ramp 35 feet in the air, and his motorcycle chipped sideways and landed on top of him, narrowly missing the camera crew that was right below."

Brown not only had to treat the man and prepare him for his trip to the hospital but also manage the chaos that ensued. When an on-set accident happens, everyone from the stunt coordinator to the producer to the first assistant director wants to get involved — all with their own motives.

"I had a PA once stick a fork in a paper shredder, which jumped back and went through the webbing in his hand. A set painter cut his thumb off," Brown says. "And sometimes it's just Band-Aids and Advil. When it's Band-Aids and Advil, I can write my screenplay."

Luckily for Brown, a Kansas University theater and film graduate, her on-set experience managing chaos in Los Angeles, where she's lived since 1999, has uniquely prepared her for her biggest challenge: Making a fea-



**KASI BROWN**, a Lawrence High School and Kansas University graduate, is making her first film, "Gone Doggy Gone," along with co-director Brandon Walter, center. Also pictured is first assistant director Charles Bennett. "Gone Doggy Gone" is a comedy about a kidnapped dog and its owners, a couple who treat it like a baby.

ture film.

"Gone Doggy Gone" — which she is co-writing, co-directing and co-starring with creative partner Brandon Walter — has just completed principal photography and is now going through the lengthy process of cataloging shots and preparing them for editing.

The goal is to have the indie feature — a comedy about a kidnapped dog and its owners, a couple who treat it like a baby — ready for submission for January's Sundance Film Festival and the rest of the 2014 festival circuit.

**From EMT to filmmaker**

Downtime on the set may have given Brown some extra hours to touch up her script, but it also allowed her to visit other departments during filming. By talking to different crews and seeing firsthand how everything is put together on a film set, she prepared herself for the unpredictability of shooting "Gone Doggy Gone," which started right away during casting.

Originally, the movie was to be populated with members of their own sketch comedy troupe Mother Approved, whom

Brown and Walter had in mind for certain parts while writing the film.

Things changed dramatically, however, once the fundraising campaign on IndieGoGo.com was completed and casting had begun in earnest.

"We ended up casting just us from the [IndieGoGo] video," Walter says. "One actor didn't know if he wanted to act anymore, another actor moved away, and another actor just didn't see eye to eye with us anymore about the project."

"It wasn't us who weren't interested any-

more — it was their life circumstances that led them in all different directions," Brown says.

Instead, the pair combed the deep pool of unknown actors in L.A. and became extremely impressed by the actors who ended up in the film. When Shaina Vorspan walked into the room, they knew right away from her "hello" they had found the right person to play Jill, despite the 200 or so others they looked at.

Brown says that Jeff Sloniker, who plays a detective named Dan, is "the next John Belushi," and Dan's father is played by Richard Riehle — a true "that guy" character actor perhaps best known for his role as longtime Initech employee and "people person" Tom Smykowski in "Office Space."

**Kansas ties**

There's plenty of home-grown talent working on "Gone Doggy Gone" as well.

Actor Cameron DeVic-tor attended Lawrence High School with Brown, while she knows actress Jenny Nichols Kurpil from her time at KU. One of the film's producers is Adriane Zaudke from Wichita, and Marina Proctor from Kansas City (who worked on 2011 best picture nominee "Winter's Bone") served as head makeup artist.

The relationships Brown has built as an actress (she's appeared on TV's "ER" and "Monk")

and as an EMT also helped her make connections that were imperative in making a film for less money.

She and Walter (who co-starred in Jim Carrey's "The Yes Man") were able to get special deals on production equipment and locations, as well as finding investors and people to donate other valuable items to the project.

But what advice do the first-time writer/director/actors have for others hoping to do the same thing? Because they play the couple in the film and were often on camera together, it was a challenge trying to stay focused on the production while acting, especially when it's 4 a.m.

"Exhaustion can make you make poor decisions," Brown says. "Even though you've got your shot list and your storyboards and everything, you have to make sacrifices during the day."

Finding a crew that was willing to go outside of their roles and take responsibility elsewhere was the key to a successful shoot.

"Looking through the footage, we're so amazed at how great everything turned out. We were able to talk through it together and with our crew members," Brown says. "That was the most important thing we learned: Communication. Especially when you're in a hard place."

"I second that," Walter says.

# When giant monsters fight giant robots, everybody wins

In the \$180 million Hollywood behemoth "Pacific Rim," "Kaiju" are giant monsters who come from the sea to wreak havoc and destroy entire cities.

It's a direct tribute to the Kaiju genre of Japanese monster movies (that began with "Godzilla") that director Guillermo del Toro has named these meticulously designed CGI creatures after the genre that inspired them, and that's just the beginning of the references and shout-outs on display in "Pacific Rim," which has enough bombast and vigor for 100 summer movies.

But it also has a firm grasp on what makes genre storytelling work, and it's del Toro's true love and respect for the Kaiju genre (and the tenets of a good action film) that holds "Pacific Rim" up, even in its most predictable moments.

The premise, as you may have already gathered from the film's marketing, is simple: Giant robots battling giant monsters for the future of the planet. But two concepts immediately make that simple conceit more interesting right off the bat.

First, "Pacific Rim" is not an origin story. In the 18-minute prologue — that's how long it was before the film's title appeared on screen — we are not only treated to a spectacularly mounted monster vs. robot fight scene with tragic consequences, but we get loads of background on this protracted war for Earth. The plot begins in earnest not with the ideation and construction of giant robots designed to save humanity, but with society's abandonment of them.

This positions the flawed human warriors who pilot these giant robots (called Jaegers; German for "hunter") not as worldwide heroes, but as underdogs fighting for our last chance

## SCENE STEALERS



**ERIC MELIN**  
eric@scene-stealers.com

at survival. The stoic, battle-hardened commander Stacker Pentecost (Idris Elba) is confident that he's fighting the good fight, even if the rest of the world views he and the Jaegers as relics. In this way, the Jaegers have the same "hero or menace" dilemma as most superheroes.

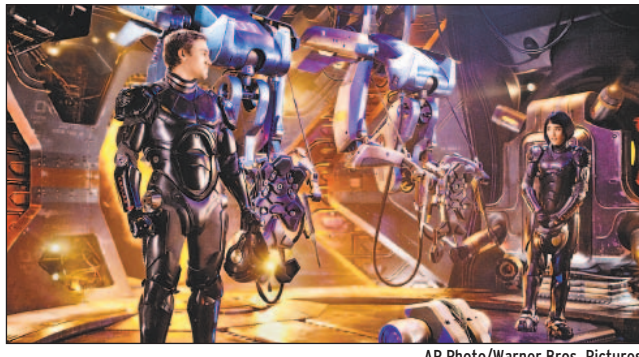
Co-writer/director del Toro gets so much exposition out of the way in the beginning that he allows the world of "Pacific Rim" to feel lived in, and the detailed production design and CGI work support that completely. It has the rain-soaked, near-fatalistic vibe of a film noir, with traces of the Asian-futuristic world of "Blade Runner" and mecha anime.

Secondly, the crux of the film is an emotional struggle. In order to pilot a Jaeger, two unique people must form a psychic bond through something

called "The Drift." Essentially, it's a two-way mind-meld that opens all of your thoughts and past experiences up to another person in the hopes that the two will become one and be able to power the giant robot.

The most affecting scenes in "Pacific Rim" are the ones where former Jaeger pilot Raleigh Becket (Charlie Hunnam) enters The Drift with an emotionally scarred Jaeger candidate named Mako Mori (Rinko Kikuchi). The visual representation of The Drift is as exciting as the emotional backstories of the characters involved, and that's not something you can say for every action movie.

On a micro level, this idea that two very different people can join together to defeat a common foe against all odds is a well-worn one. Put in the proper perspective by the right filmmaker, however, it's as good as gold. Super-size that sentiment on a global level with Russian, Chinese, Australian, Japanese and American pilots, scientists, and technicians all working together to save the world



**CHARLIE HUNNAM AS RALEIGH BECKET**, left, and Rinko Kikuchi as Mako Mori are pictured in a scene from "Pacific Rim."

and suddenly the corny becomes inspiring.

The climax is similar to some other recent blockbusters (see "The Avengers" and "The Dark Knight Rises"), but at least it's partially earned not just by beating the opponent to a pulp (see "Man of Steel"), but by a certain amount of cunning.

"Pacific Rim" also has a good amount of comic relief (unlike "Man of Steel"), in the form of nerdy scientists Charlie Day and Burn Gorman, whose lightning-quick delivery is in sharp and funny contrast to black-market Kaiju organ-dealer (yes, you read that right) Hannibal Chau,

played by genre stalwart Ron Perlman.

If big-budget summer movies are supposed to be entertaining, escapist fun, then "Pacific Rim" is a perfect example of that. I'll be darned if del Toro's silly, exuberant, dramatic Kaiju didn't give me that "rah-rah" feeling, amplified of course by the sight of giant monsters and robots bludgeoning each other while towering over our puny cities and coasts.

**Much ado about something**

Speaking of huge summer blockbusters, the least likely person you might think to direct an adapta-

tion of William Shakespeare's comedy "Much Ado About Nothing" would be the guy who directed "The Avengers" — the third highest-grossing film of all time.

Yet here it is, filmed by director Joss Whedon in 12 days during a break in production on "The Avengers," and now playing at Liberty Hall.

Before "The Avengers," Whedon was probably best known as the creator of brilliantly inventive genre-twisting cult TV hits like "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," "Angel," and "Firefly." The familiar Whedon repertory company of Nathan Fillion, Amy Acker, and Alexis Denisof are all present in this low-budget, black-and-white version of the Bard's classic, which is also set in contemporary times, using the play's original text.

— Eric is a longtime Lawrence.com/Journal-World entertainment writer. He's also the editor-in-chief of Scene-Stealers and on-air film critic for Kansas First News. He's a member of the Broadcast Film Critics Association, vice president of the Kansas City Film Critics Circle, and drummer for The Dead Girls and Ultimate Fakebook.

## JUMBLE

Answer :

TYRANT SHREWD SEWAGE  
AUBURN IMPEDE ORIOLE

The zombies' boat was —

DEAD IN  
THE WATER