



Sarah Abbott

By Linnea Brown
Staff writer

JUPITER - Susannah North was a martyr for superstition: one of the Salem witches guilty of nothing, but stripped of everything.

Now, three centuries later, a 24-year-old Jupiter descendant honored her with "Susannah," a short film that will premiere April 25 at the "Voices of Local" showcase at the Palm Beach International Film Festival in West Palm Beach.

A suspense thriller, Sarah Abbott's 15-minute film is based on past-life regression. The movie's main character witnesses events connected with the death of Susannah North, a "witch" who was hung in 1692 during the infamous Salem witch trials of Salem, Mass.

"The main character is getting haunted by something, and she doesn't realize it's her past life," Ms. Abbott said. "It's supposed to be suspenseful, so hopefully, it turns out that way."

A lifelong film buff, Ms. Abbott grew up throughout Palm Beach County, spending the past several years in Jupiter.

"I've always been interested in film, ever since I was really little," she said.

After a brief stint at Full Sail, a film and media arts school in Orlando, Ms. Abbott moved back to Jupiter to enroll in the Palm Beach Film School, which provided a more hands-on approach to the film industry, she said.

"The film school did a lot to help me out, and they really do everything they can to support every student," she said. "They let everyone use the equipment, and it's a very intimate environment."

While in school, she directed two films: one about a summer romance and another about a pregnancy, which premiered at the festival last year as a student film.

However, as the sole writer, director and producer of "Susannah," it is her first project completed entirely on her own.

Based on proven family genealogy research from her mother's side of the family, Ms. Abbott based the story on her ancestor, Ms. North, a Salem witch who the government later exonerated, along with four others.

"(Susannah) was one of the last ones to get her name cleared, so I've always wanted to do something to honor her," she said. "She's not one of the most famous names to be hung, but she was one of the first, and I felt that (telling her story) was really important."

With a budget of \$2,000, Ms. Abbott brought in professional actors from New York and Miami, paying for their plane tickets and letting them stay at her house.

She filmed the movie on location in Stuart, Fort Pierce and Tequesta, on a set built inside her mother's business: Village Interiors.

Ms. Abbott spent hours researching costumes and props on the Internet, and watched movies such as "The Crucible," about the Salem witch trials, for additional ideas. Her mother, Nancy Sylvester Abbott, also helped create realistic period costumes, she said.

"Since my mom has the interior design business, she knows a lot about sewing and costumes and things like that," she said. "We spent a lot of time at Joanne Fabrics, and though the film was very low-budget, I don't think it looks that way. I'm proud of it."

Mrs. Abbott recalled pulling an "all-nighter" at her Tequesta studio during the making of the film, creating a set for one of the film's scenes.

"I told the kids, does this mean I get to put 'stage set designer' and 'costume designer' on my resume now?" her mother asked.

Ms. Abbott's greatest obstacle with the project was making sure the story was told correctly, she said.

"It was hard to just come up with a story, and I had to be careful to make sure it wasn't insulting to the whole history of the Salem witch trials," she said.

However, the joy of seeing the final product made all of the hard work worth it, she said.

"It finally saw it the other night, and it was great," she said. "My brother, Aaron, did the music (sound design), and it just gave me chills."

Though Ms. Abbott will be in Jupiter the week of her movie premiere, she has been living and working in Los Angeles for the past eight months.

Though she spent several months as an audience associate for the "Tyra Banks Show," she recently started working as a production assistant at Bold Films in Hollywood.

"At 'Tyra,' I was basically checking in the audience members, making sure they were dressed properly and making sure there weren't any obsessive people getting in," she said. "I was very lucky to get the job and it's a good thing for my resume, but I'm happy to be doing (something else) now."

Ms. Abbott said she also feels excited to be back in Florida, and hopes to

one day start her own production company in Miami.

"It's very different in Los Angeles. There's a lot of opportunity out here and it's beautiful, but the traffic is ridiculous and there are so many people," she said. "When I was working at 'Tyra,' it took me an hour to get to work - and it was only 8 miles away!"

Founded in 1996, the Palm Beach International Film Festival is a yearly event in West Palm Beach that celebrates both the future and history of the film industry with seven days of world premieres, special events, seminars, films and documentaries. It has been a competitive festival since 2003, drawing submissions from filmmakers across the world.

After missing the submission deadline for the international portion of the festival, Ms. Abbott sent in a DVD copy of her film for the local category, and felt honored to be selected "at the last minute," she said.

Ms. Abbott said she could not have created the film without encouragement from her family, who still live in Jupiter and will see the final cut of the movie for the first time during the film festival premiere.

"They all visited the set while we were shooting and are intrigued with the story of (our ancestor)," Ms. Abbott said.

Her mother agreed.

"I'm a proud mother, let's put it that way," Mrs. Abbott said. "Sarah has always had a fascination with the family ancestry, and it's interesting that she took our (ancestor) and created a story based on her. It's fun that there's a kindredship between the movie and the family."

"Susannah" will premiere at 7 p.m. on April 25 at the Voices of Local film event. Call (561) 362-0003, or see a preview at www.Screaming-souloud.com.