

Captive audience

JOE BELANGER, The London Free Press
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Muscle Smith and his mother, Mary Smith, are featured in a documentary by London filmmaker Christy Garland at Toronto's HotDocs Film Festival.

Meet Muscle and Mary and Christy Garland.

The three share little in common, live in different countries in different hemispheres and come from vastly different backgrounds.

But fate brought their lives together and Garland captured it on film for a disturbing but beautiful documentary, *The Bastard Sings the Sweetest Song*, which is among the offerings at the 19th annual HotDocs Canadian International Documentary Film Festival in Toronto.

Garland, 43, is a filmmaker, daughter of retired but well-known London broadcaster Peter Garland and his ex-wife Sharon, and graduate of Central secondary school's 1987 class who went on to study filmmaking at Ryerson University.

"I had a very vague idea about making a film about captivity and I'd heard about these men in Guyana who meet for 'bird races,' " Garland recalled.

"It's very bizarre, all these tough guys in muscle shirts carrying these little bird cages and standing around listening for certain musical phrases from these birds and the first bird to get to 50 repetitions wins.

"It feels a lot like being at a cock fight but with the bloodsport replaced by the beauty of music in nature and, instead of violence, the charming love these men have for the birds."

It was at one of these races Garland met the ring leader, a man nicknamed Muscle who befriended Garland and took her to his home to meet his family, including his mother, Mary.

"He actually had his mother locked up," said Garland.

And a project that started out focused on caged birds took a 180-degree turn as Garland was invited into Muscle and Mary's world of bird racing, alcoholism and abuse.

As Garland discovered, Mary was often kept locked in a room to prevent her from leaving the house and walking up the road where she has a history of falling.

"I found her brilliant, witty, sharp and poetic, but she was a very, very heavy drinker and I found out why: Trying to forget her rough past with an abusive husband," said Garland in a recent interview.

In fact, as we learn in the film, Muscle is trying to lift his family out of poverty and abuse.

"He doesn't want his family to repeat the mistakes of the past," Garland said. "He doesn't want to see his mom get drunk and fall down in the road."

During the next three years, from October 2008 until 2010, Garland spent about 10 weeks filming in Georgetown, where domestic violence is rampant and "insanely violent."

Garland said her parents, Peter and Sharon, a long-divorced couple who remain friends, were inspirations to her.

"Both my parents, my stepmother Ann Hutchison and my sister Kelly are incredibly warm and open people who could make other people feel very comfortable and immediately disarm people," Garland said.

"And that's a key skill for a documentary filmmaker. You've got to make people feel comfortable around you so they open up and allow you (into their world.)"

Garland said it cost about \$350,000 to make the film with funding from federal, provincial and Toronto arts councils as well as from Denmark and Sweden.

Her other notable work includes the award-winning short film, *Dual Citizen* -- a 13-minute comedy about a Canadian Snowbird in Florida who gets into flag flap with his American neighbours -- and the documentary *Doormat*, that chronicles the lives of four people in India and the production path of a doormat. Garland said she's delighted her documentary was chosen from about 2,300 submissions to be one of the 189 films to be screened at HotDocs, the most prestigious and largest festival of its kind in the world. Her film is scheduled to be screened May 3 at 9:45 p.m. and May 6 at 7 p.m. at the Royal Cinema.

She urged Londoners to try and attend the festival, which can lead to distribution deals and more work for filmmakers.

"There are some really wonderful, important films in this festival," Garland said.

Despite the disturbing subject matter and the brutal honesty of his story, Garland described Muscle as "brave."

"Instead of sweeping that abusive past under the rug, he confronts it head-on and talks about it openly." Garland said. "Even though he's a flawed person, some might even call brutal for keeping his mother locked up, he's trying to stop the cycle of abuse and violence and you've got to hand it to him for trying."

"What I came to realize is both of them were trying to escape the past of a father and husband who was violently abusive, murderous and, in a way, both of them were trying to put an end to it. It's intense, stark, harrowing, but a very beautiful story."