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In 'The Giant Mechanical Man,' Jenna Fischer tries role as movie producer

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Jenna Fischer and Chris Messina get to know one another in "The Giant Mechanical Man." Messina plays the title character, a silver-painted street performer, who enjoys performing near Detroit's People Mover stations. / Tribeca Film Festival photos



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When "The Giant Mechanical Man" was shot in metro Detroit, the fates -- or, specifically, the fickle Michigan weather -- smiled down on this sweetly melancholy independent film.

The cast and crew had just three consecutive days to film at the Detroit Zoo. They were greeted by a different sort of weather each day, from sunny to overcast to snowy, a perfect assortment for conveying the passage of time in the movie.

And when "The Office" star Jenna Fischer and actor Chris Messina ("Julie & Julia") were walking outside for a scene where their characters are having a somewhat romantic conversation, the climate behaved as if on cue.

"This beautiful snow starts to fall, these big flakes start to fall down and float from the sky," says Fischer, who's best known for playing the lovably sane Pam on the NBC workplace sitcom. "If we had scripted that and if we had paid for that, that would have been hundreds of thousands of dollars to make that snow."

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Fischer produced the independent film and got it made. It was shot in metro Detroit in December 2010. / Tribeca Film Festival photos

The coincidental timing was much appreciated by the modestly budgeted project that filmed here in December 2010 and is a team effort by Fischer (the producer and lead actress) and her husband, Lee Kirk (director and writer). It opens Friday at the Birmingham 8 theater.

Fischer plays Janice, a temp agency worker who loses her job and has to move in with her meddling sister and brother-in-law (Malin Akerman of "Watchmen" and Rich Sommer of "Mad Men"). They try to fix her up with a self-absorbed self-help author (Topher Grace). But after finding a job as a beverage-cart clerk at a zoo, Janice becomes interested in a coworker, Tim (Messina), a janitor who also has a career as a silver-painted street performer, hence the title.

A romance with humor, the movie also broods wistfully on the theme of searching for a place in the world that feels right. It doesn't exactly fit neatly into the broad categories favored by Hollywood. "It has a little bit of a fantasy element, with the mechanical man. It has some comedy. It has some drama. And it's played all very realistically," Fischer says by phone. "It's those movies in the middle ground that are sometimes harder to get made, but they also happen to be my favorite movies."

Fischer's journey with the movie began when, wanting to produce a film from the ground up, she met with a number of screenwriters, including Kirk, to hear story pitches. She loved the idea of "The Giant Mechanical Man" and started what turned out to be a years-long effort to bring it to the screen.

"He would write and I would try to get the film off the ground. Through that process, we fell in love and got married. Six months later, the movie got made," Fischer says. The couple has a son, Weston, who was born in September.

Fischer and Kirk were able to attract a cast of prominent young actors with his script, which has a bittersweet tone that balances the love story element with the character studies of people down on their luck financially and romantically.

"Chris (Messina) was the first one to contact us and say, 'Hey, we've got to make this film. We should make it, it doesn't matter what the price. Lee should direct it. I'll hold the boom mike if I have to. Let's just make this film,' " Kirk says. "That went a long way, that sort of creative energy and passion for it really kick-started the project."

First-time director Kirk says he didn't expect to helm the movie at first, not when the budget was originally estimated at around \$5 million. But with the economy in a recession, the movie wound up being made for just under \$1 million. "I knew I could get someone to trust me to direct it for that amount of money," he says.

The Motor City played a big role in getting the film completed. "We could not have made this movie if we had made it anywhere other than Detroit. We couldn't have afforded to," Fischer notes, praising

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both the state's film incentive program that's reduced and revamped now, and the talent pool of local crew members.

One of the executive producers of the movie is Mike Ilitch Jr. of the pizza-sports-entertainment empire family.

Kirk employed a flexible strategy to keep the movie heading in the right direction. When he couldn't afford to shoot inside the Detroit Institute of Arts, for instance, he opted to film the exterior and used the Park West Gallery in Southfield as a double for a museum interior.

"I didn't allow myself ever to think about the stakes involved," Kirk says of his directing debut. "I tried to just solve one problem at a time."

Using a palette that emphasizes muted grays, an echo of the mechanical man's costume, the movie offers ample -- and subtly beautiful -- shots of downtown Detroit, where People Mover stations are one of the street performer's favorite spots.

The Detroit Zoo, which plays the fictitious Fillmore Park Zoo, is a major location too, and provides some of the most enchanting moments, from the penguins marching in the Penguinarium to a polar bear taking a swim in the Arctic Ring of Life.

Working together on the set went well for Fischer and Kirk, even with the brisk 19-day shooting schedule. "We are very collaborative. We spend a lot of time together. We don't fight in our relationship," Fischer says. "I was hoping that those same qualities would spill over when we were on the set and they did."

"(When) Topher Grace showed up, we were already into shooting, and he said, 'Man, I was worried this would be a train wreck, with a husband and wife and a first-time director,' " Kirk says with a laugh. "But it went really smoothly. I felt like that us being at ease and us having fun just filtered down and put everybody else at ease."

"The Giant Mechanical Man" had its world premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival and opened in New York last week. Kirk is set to be in metro Detroit for Friday's opening at the Birmingham 8 and plans to participate in question-and-answer sessions after that evening's showings.

The film is available on several on-demand platforms.

Although Fischer is preoccupied with her new film -- "I basically have the whole movie memorized at this point," she quips -- she is looking forward to returning to "The Office," despite online buzz painting the show's future as uncertain.

"The rumors on the Internet, they freak me out too, but everything I know is that we're going to be back next year," she says. "We're all planning to come back next year. Obviously it's not up to us, but it's our intention."

Fischer notes that an executive producer talked to them about some really cool story lines.

"They're telling me it would be a big year for Jim and Pam next

year, so that has me excited," she says. "My schedule is cleared. I'm holding the time. I'm ready to go back and I hope that we do."

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More Details: 'The Giant Mechanical Man'

Rated PG-13; some sexual content and brief strong language

Opens Friday

Birmingham 8 theater

Director-writer Lee Kirk will appear at Q-and-A sessions after Friday's evening screenings.

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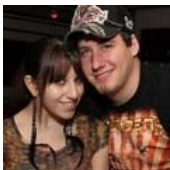
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