'A Very Covid Christmas'

Local filmmakers craft holiday tale fitting for times

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This is an example of how "A Very Covid Christmas" blended the remote scenes of Alex Manalo with the in-person scenes of Sé Marie. Cranberry Township native Ally Mazzoni wrote and produced the movie, a take on classic holiday movies in the time of the coronavirus.

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CRANBERRY TWP — For many in 2020, it hasn't been a wonderful life.

The COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns, losses, financial worries, social distancing and masks have soured the Christmas spirit for many this year.

But two women filmmakers are trying to find the magic through their web series, "A Very Covid Christmas."

Ally Mazzoni of Cranberry Township joined with Sé Marie of Pittsburgh to form the AS/IF Filmmaking Co. and try to rekindle the magic of Christmas in a new age of restrictions and isolation.

"I wrote it, produced it and she starred in it," said Mazzoni, who used to be an electrical engineer at Westinghouse before switching careers to filmmaking.

"We were really bored (because) there's not a lot going on in the film industry right now," she said. "We were watching cheesy Christmas movies when we said, 'Let's do our own cheesy Christmas movie.'"
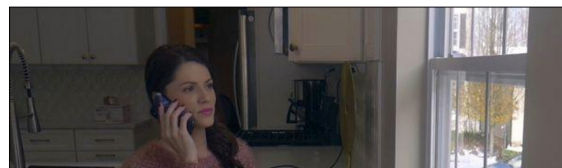
Mazzoni cautioned that "A Very Covid Christmas" is not a parody of TV Christmas movies.

"We loved watching them, so we wanted to do one of our own," Mazzoni said as a tribute filled with rom-com banter, heartwarming messages and touching moments.

"Our goal was basically to make something that a lot of people can relate to and also prove that the holidays can still be special and meaningful even with all of the restrictions going on right now," said Marie, the co-creator and actor who plays the protagonist, Molly, in the Web series.

Marie said her character is an office worker stuck working at home for a year who wants to be a baker.

Se Marie as Molly filmed a socially distanced scene in a Cranberry Township home.
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She FaceTimes and Zooms with her friends and family and especially her best friend, an ER nurse named Rhaena who is played by Alex Manalo.

Then, a new next-door neighbor played by Darrin Mosely Jr. moves in.

"It's like a Victorian era sparking romance," said Marie. "They have to stay 6 feet away from each other. It's funny how it plays out."

Mazzoni and Marie said life mirrored art because the pandemic limited how many people could be involved in the production.

"Alex was a real trooper," said Mazzoni. "We dropped off camera and lighting on her porch the night before. She would Zoom us to set up each shot."

For Marie and Mazzoni, a limited cast and locations made for a lean production. They were able to tackle the entire process from script to release in one month while having the entire series filmed in two days on Dec. 2 and 3 at the home of Mazzoni's parents, Connie and Bruce Mazzoni.

Another day was spent filming and compiling the remote calls from actors portraying Molly's parents, friends and coworkers.

"From writing, filming, casting, editing, marketing and more, it was a lot of hats to wear, but worth it to make something safe. Especially given that I had COVID already and was hospitalized," said Marie. "Also, our main actor has cystic fibrosis, so is very immune compromised.

Darrin Mosley Jr. is shown filming an outdoor scene in Cranberry Township. The filmmakers said nature cooperated with a timely snowfall during filming.
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"The three of us were rapid tested the night before filming, and we filmed all of his scenes in only one day. My solo scenes were then filmed the next day, again, all in one day. This was necessary to maintain our COVID bubble," said Marie.

"A Very Covid Christmas" is comprised of seven-minute episodes, the first two of which premiered at noon Dec. 19 through AS/IF's Instagram and YouTube channel.

The final installment will be released at noon Christmas Eve.

Mazzoni said the movie was a learning experience.

"We just wanted to make stuff. You see things along the way and you think, 'What if we did this or could we do this better?'" she said. "It was a great learning experience, a hands-on learning experience."

"I hope people can see this as a source of inspiration," said Marie. "You can come out of this better than before if you are creative."

"Hopefully, I learned to put out an interesting story that people would want to watch, "said Mazzoni.

All episodes of "A Very Covid Christmas" are available at the AS/IF YouTube channel at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCRPYXvK96x2hztfWaZp0Qig.

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Eric was born in Butler and grew up in Winfield Township. He graduated from Knoch High School and later Indiana University of Pa. with a degree in Journalism. After working as a reporter and editor with the Kittanning Leader-Times, he moved to Bloomington, Illinois, where he worked at The Pantagraph newspaper as a copy editor, page designer, reporter and business editor. Freehling later worked at the Houston Chronicle as senior copy editor and the Chicago Tribune as a copy editor on the business desk. He moved back to Pennsylvania in 2010 and joined the Butler Eagle as Community Editor in January 2011.

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