Cinematographer Dies on Set

INCIDENT

Sarah Jones had the following credits:

- member of the International Cinematographers Build (IATSE Local 600)
- assistant camerawoman on The Vampire Diaries.
- cinematographer on The Public of Pete

She will never receive another production credit.

Just 27 years old, Jones was killed by an oncoming train on a movie set outside of Doctoryown, Georgia. She was working on the camera crew for Midnight Rider, a biographical film about rock singer Gregg Allman, starring William Hurt. Randall Miller is the director of the film; his production company, Unclaimed Freight, was managing the project.

Jones was killed and other crew members were injured while shooting a dream sequence on a train trestle crossing the Altamaha River in rural Wayne County. A metal frame bed and other scenery were in place when a CSX freight train came hurtling down the track at 60 miles an hour. The cast and crew had just 60 seconds to move scenery, cameras, equipment – and themselves – out of danger.

It was not enough time.

The Hollywood Reporter published a detailed account of the February 20, 2014 tragedy. It includes this description of the fatal event, as related by hairstylist Joyce Gilliard, who barely survived:

Jones had tried to find shelter on the gangplank. But when the train hit the bed and mattress, it sent debris flying. Something may have hit Jones, possibly propelling her into the train’s path. In the melee, Miller also fell on the tracks. A still photographer nearby managed to pull him away just in time. He was sobbing,

Gilliard says, trying to cope with the disaster. Hurt also survived unscathed. The traumatized crew helped collect Jones' body.

NEED TO KNOW

Legendary rock n' roll icon Gregg Allman was to be portrayed in a biographical film in "MIDNIGHT RIDER". A train arrived but with tragic consequences.

BUSINESS / REGULATIONS

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation, says The Hollywood Reporter, is "treating the investigation into Jones' death as a negligent homicide." Federal OSHA and the National Transportation Board also have investigations underway.

A CSX employee told Sgt. Ben Robertson of the Wayne County Sheriff's office that the production company had asked for permission to shoot on the train tracks – and had been denied. But a member of the crew, says The Hollywood Reporter, "when asked whether permission was granted, replied, 'It's complicated.'"

"It's not complicated," retorted Lee Danielson, who was a friend of Sarah Jones and an official of IATSE in Georgia. "You either have permission or you don't." In the aftermath of the incident crew members also noted that no railroad personnel were present on the set, although a film shoot on a train track would typically involve a number of safety personnel from the railroad. According to Joyce Gilliard, there was no safety meeting of any kind on the set on February 20th.

Jones death did not go unnoticed. She worked with many industry veterans during her short career, and is remembered with great affection by friends and colleagues. Given the prominence of the film industry, her death is probably one of the most widely-reported industrial fatalities in recent years. She was recognized during the Oscar telecast, and hundreds marched to remember her in Atlanta and in Los Angeles.

Sarah's father encouraged mourners to advocate for safety on film

sets following a candlelit walk in Los Angeles on March 7/2014 where more than 500 gathered to walk.

Richard Jones said “Thank you for this beautiful tribute,” he said. “Do not have a reason for another father to stand up here. No one’s daughter and no one’s son should ever die again making a film. Never.”

“No workers should ever be afraid of speaking up or refusing to participate when they feel they are in an unsafe situation,” said IATSE Vice President Mike Miller, who also spoke at the event.

STATISTICS

Though statistics are sparse as the New York Times reports there are issues of safety in film projects. According to the Bureau of Labor statistics (B.L.S) seven workers died in the motion picture and sound recording industries in 2012.

PREVENTION

Are proper precautions being implemented and enforced in the film industry? Particularly, in law-budget and independent productions.

The New York Times report opined further on safety issues in this industry.

A frequent safety complaint among film crews working on both studio and independent productions centers on a common practice of demanding long work days of fourteen or more hours. The filmmaker Haskell Wexler described the hazards of long days in his 2006 documentary Who Needs Sleep? Among other things, he recounted how lack of sleep led to the driving death of an assistant camera operator in 1997.