



# New horror film wraps shoot at Graves County manor

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MAYFIELD — While movie productions are often associated with exotic locales, the classic Southern scenery of the Purchase Region was well-suited for “Debutantes.” The new horror thriller, which started shooting in Paducah and Calvert City in early July, made its final stop in Graves County to utilize the historic Whippoorwill Manor.

The Whippoorwill Manor property launched operations as an event venue in January 2025, offering visitors a romantic getaway in the traditional antebellum style. “Debutantes” wrapped shooting there Wednesday evening after a five-day stint.

Stephen Meier, the producer, writer and director of "Debutantes," said it was the

authenticity of locations like Whippoorwill that drew him to the area, along with Kentucky's tax incentives. Though financiers suggested filming on a constructed set in Europe to reduce costs, Meier felt the story was inseparable from its deep roots in the American South.

The independent film follows a group of debutantes participating in the pageantry of a Southern gala — but when an act of violence is committed against one of their own, they hunt down a group of men to exact revenge.

"Kentucky probably has the best tax incentive in the country right now. These days, you can't get a film done unless you have a good tax credit," Meier said. "On top of that, our story is a Southern Gothic story, so we wanted to actually film in the South. I think that will really shine on screen."

Meier said it was important for the actors to “be in their element” during the moment of filming, but the script itself for “Debutantes” originated roughly 15 years ago.

Meier began his career in Hollywood as a writer; he then directed his first feature film earlier this decade. Even as "Debutantes" granted him the opportunity to helm a movie of considerably larger scale, he said what emboldened him to write the screenplay is still the driving force over a decade later.

"I wrote this film when an ex-girlfriend was raped by a very powerful person, and she went through the justice system and got no justice," Meier said. "That enraged me. I had to write something to get that rage out of me."

Meier said elevated genres like horror and thriller have the power to grip an audience, and

their provocative nature can shed light on difficult subjects like sexual assault and complicity.

"We're really hoping to punch people in the face to take notice of such a serious crime," Meier said. "Hopefully, we can get a conversation going in a stylistic way, but it also makes you leave the theater thinking about it."

Meier also said he aims for “Debutantes” to be an empathetic story of sisterhood. After a shift in the culture and recent successes of some popular movies, he said the industry is more willing to support projects with themes of feminism and women empowerment.

"It started coming up at the time around the #MeToo movement, which sadly I think came and went, but now is still the right time to do it," Meier said. "Fifteen years ago, we probably couldn't have made this film."

Meier reiterated that “Debutantes” is a true independent film, meaning it was made outside the dominant system of major studios. He said this type of production poses struggles in financing but allows more freedom to tell a bold, original story.

"The hardest thing is getting investors to believe in the idea of a movie to finance it. The studio side is caught up with established [intellectual property] and big stars," Meier said. He described the trade-off with studios is that a production can receive their sum of resources upon meeting their demands.

"Whereas in an indie film, you're grinding. This was a 22-day shoot, which is a short time to film a movie, so that's 22 sleepless nights. We have a bunch of extras, so that's 150 people I'm responsible for. And I'm responsible for the vision, every little iota," Meier said. "But now is

also the time for indie films. 'Obsession' just did crazy numbers. It shows that audiences want something original, something with a little bit of an edge."

Meier said the creative process has been fulfilling despite challenges, and he expressed gratitude to the Purchase Region for helping him “get this 15-year journey in the can.”

While the film industry has become increasingly globalized, he said the production of "Debutantes" affirms that the best place to make movies can often be in your own backyard.

"I've been in Kentucky now for two months. I don't know if there's any friendlier people in the world, like just genuine people wanting to help," Meier said. "That's what makes me proud to stay and film in America because I don't know if you get this hospitality anywhere else other than the South."

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