

## Jam Session

**Despite numerous setbacks, first-time filmmaker Craig Serling shepherded his indie feature all the way to Showtime**

**IT'S DAY 14** of a 15-day shoot. You're up in the Hollywood Hills, and it's almost 120 degrees. You've got one tiny, impossibly inadequate air conditioner. An actor doesn't show. It's looking like the production could fall apart, and Laurence Fishburne wants to know what you're going to do.

Not an ideal situation — but it happened to writer-director-producer Craig Serling while shooting *Jam*, his first feature, which began airing on Showtime in March.

Missing one actor, Serling had to rewrite an entire sequence on the fly — with Fishburne (who was on the set visiting wife Gina Torres) waiting.

It was at Fishburne's suggestion that Serling solved the problem by folding three characters into two. "It actually works better," Serling says.

That experience typifies what Serling calls the "organic" origin of *Jam*, about strangers thrown together in the wake of a car accident. A relative of the late screenwriter Rod Serling, Craig Serling had been a film and television editor for many years before teaming up with *Jam* co-scripter Nicole Lonner. While the two were at a retreat in upstate New York, Nicole got caught in traffic, and the idea for *Jam* was born.

Passionate about the story, Serling cobbled together the ensemble cast by every means at his disposal, including bribery — sort of.

Having seen Marianne Jean-Baptiste in 2000's *The Cell*, he felt she was perfect for the role of Lorraine, a musician, so he got a meeting with her and offered her something he thought she would want.

"In doing some research, I discovered that she was a classically trained musician

who, in fact, composed several tracks for Mike Leigh," Serling recalls. "So when I met with her, I promised her that if she agreed to do it, I would get her trained in cello, and we fulfilled our end of the deal."

One by one, the cast fell into place, including William Forsythe, Tess Harper, Jonathan Silverman and Jeffrey Dean Morgan.


"[Morgan] was the last person cast, as the father of the two young children," Lonner says. "His career has just skyrocketed (with recent credits on ABC's *Grey's Anatomy* and Showtime's *Weeds*), and it's getting *Jam* a lot of attention."

But it's been a tough journey. Budgeted at under \$1 million, the film was financed with private equity, and at one point, Serling recalls, "We ran out of money.... I had no way to get the film finished. I just literally — because of my experience in post — was able to cut my way out, so to speak, which is exactly what we did."

Serling and Lonner also made some difficult choices, like eliminating a lot of curse words and eschewing gratuitous violence, even though some suggested that the film needed "a bigger payoff," Serling says.

The payoff came later, however. "Getting rid of those F-bombs (at Nicole's suggestion) — that got me a TV-14 rating, which opened up the doors on the Showtime and Starz deals," Serling says. (Starz Media is releasing the film on DVD.)

Ultimately, Serling and Lonner agree, their success with *Jam* comes down to hard work and determination.

"Everybody's an expert (when you're making a movie)," Serling says, "and the only expert that really counts is yourself, and if you're passionate and you feel good about it. It takes work. It really takes work." 



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