

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY GILLIAN MCKERCHER



CIRCLE OF STEEL





A feature length dark comedy about personal ethics in the face of corporate interest. What does it really mean to work in Canada's most controversial industry: oil and gas production?

SYNOPSIS

Amidst Alberta's oil and gas crash of 2015, chemical engineer Wendy Fong (Chantelle Han) is new to Paloma North and unsure of the future she worked so hard for. As rumors of layoffs begin to circulate in her small, isolated team, her monotonous routine crumbles, giving way to ambivalence. Long days in the field and long nights alone begin to take their toll. With support, and often-questionable guidance from her coworkers, Wendy must navigate personal ethics and corporate interest within Canada's most controversial industry.

LINKS

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DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Circle of Steel is inspired by the time when I worked as a field engineer for the world's largest upstream oil and gas company. The first-hand experiences of myself, my friends, and my colleagues are all mixed into *Circle of Steel's* narrative. Although not everything in the film happened to me, everything is based on true events.

In *Circle of Steel*, I committed to expressing field life in its fullest form: the loneliness and boredom, but also the camaraderie, humour, and compassion that its workers express. My main inspiration is the widespread practice of non-compliant engineering. In the Iron Ring Ceremony, Canada's professional engineering initiation, engineers chant a pledge written by Rudyard Kipling that obliges them to Good Workmanship and the Honour of their Soul. In terms of Good Workmanship, I believe engineers are generally compliant; in terms of Honouring the Soul, I believe engineers are apathetic by necessity. It's the only way to come to terms with the purpose of their work. This conflict between moral and physical action is of deep interest to me as a filmmaker. *Circle of Steel* is my response to this environment of existential crisis.



TEAM

GILLIAN MCKERCHER



DIRECTOR

Gillian is a Calgary-based filmmaker and an Alberta Foundation For the Arts Young Artist Prize winner. She completed a BSc in Chemical Engineering at the University of Calgary while she practiced filmmaking at the Calgary Society of Independent Filmmakers. After she worked concurrently in film and engineering, she decided to focus on cinema. She notably directed the two-season web series *The Calgary Collection*, the short documentary *Where the Sage Brush Grows*, and music videos for folk-roots artist Amy Nelson. Her experimental film work on Super 8 and 16mm film is often incorporated into her projects, and heavily informs her aesthetic. *Circle of Steel* is her first feature film as director.

GUILLAUME CARLIER



PRODUCER

Guillaume was born in Montreal and raised in Calgary. At an early age, he discovered film by working at The Uptown Theater and Casablanca Video. His DIY sensibility is combined with commercial campaigns like Alberta Treasury Branch's *A Seat at our Table* and Unis TV's *Histoire de Chars*. Guillaume's work includes music videos, short narrative and documentary films, and his forthcoming feature film debut *Everybody Altogether Now*. Most recently he shot Radio Canada's biopic on Formula 1 legend, Gilles Villeneuve.

ROBYN HO



PRODUCER

Robyn is a Calgary-based producer with a wide range of experience in short films, advertising, and television. Her work with agencies such as Critical Mass and Joe Media includes the Travel Alberta campaign, the award winning short film *No Face*, and advertisements for BMW. In 2017, she was the interim Programming Director for the Calgary Society of Independent Filmmakers, and oversaw that year's \$100 Film Festival. *Circle of Steel* is Robyn's first feature film.

AVI FEDERGREEN



EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

With over 20 years and over 50 films as a producer in the Canadian film industry, Avi Federgreen's career features many highlights. His producing credits include *Kiss and Cry*, *Prisoner X*, *Still Mine*, *Score: A Hockey Musical*, *I'm Yours*, *Hungry Hills*, *One Week*, and *High Life* to name a few. Federgreen also is the creator of the Indiecan10K & Indiecan20K First Feature Initiatives that have now helped eight first features get made in Canada. His projects have received widespread recognition at international film festivals, including the Toronto International Film Festival, and nominations for a Gemini and the Directors Guild of Canada awards.

GARY BURNS



EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Gary Burns is a Canadian writer and director whose feature film credits include *A Problem with Fear* (2003), *waydowntown* (2000), *The Suburbanators* (1997), *Kitchen Party* (1997), and the feature documentaries *Radiant City* (2006) and *The Future is Now!* (2011). He has won numerous awards for his films including Best Canadian Feature Film at the Toronto International Film Festival for *waydowntown*. *Radiant City*, which he co-directed with CBC journalist Jim Brown, won a Genie for Best Documentary in 2008.

CAST

CHANTELLE HAN



WENDY FONG

Born and raised in Calgary, Chantelle is an actor now based in Toronto. She trained at Mount Royal University and has worked steadily in film, television, theatre and voice-over. Recent on-screen credits: *Everybody All Together Now*; *Heartland*; *Hell on Wheels* as well as national and international commercial campaigns for Travel Alberta, Kleenex and McDonald's. On stage: Chantelle is best known for her turn as Janet in Souleppper's national tour of the hit play, *Kim's Convenience*.

DUNCAN OLLRENSHAW



PRODUCER

Duncan Ollrenshaw is a Canadian actor based in Calgary. He has been a member of several established theatre companies, including the Shaw Festival Ensemble (Niagara on the Lake), Stratford Festival Young Company, Necessary Angel Theatre Company (Toronto) and Theatre Junction ensemble (Calgary). He has been nominated for two Dora Mavor Moore awards, two Betty Mitchell Awards, and is a two-time recipient of a Tyrone Guthrie Award (Stratford). Duncan has appeared in several television series including *Prison Break*, *Van Helsing*, and *Strange Empire*. In 2012 and 2013, Duncan received an AMPIA award for his role on the AMC series *Hell on Wheels*.

TINA LAMEMAN



KIKI

Tina Lameman is from the Beaver Lake Cree Nation in Alberta and still currently resides there. She has been acting since she graduated from the Grant MacEwan Theatre Arts Program in 1989. Her film and television roles include *Road to Saddle River* (1994), *Fear Itself* (2009) and *Heartland* (2009). In 2005, Tina received an AMPIA award for Best Actress for her role in the APTN TV series *Mixed Blessings* (2007-10). Tina has a passion for acting and comedy; one of her favourite sayings is "laughter is healing".

SOUNDTRACK

All the songs featured in *Circle of Steel* are by Canadian artists, and most are Albertan. McKercher blends the monotony of rural Albertan winters with the soul and depth of some of Canada's most talented musicians. "It was important that the sonic palette represent the landscape of the film," says McKercher. "I'm fortunate that Alberta has an amazing music scene and could source almost all of our songs from homegrown talent. It also maintained the feeling of community in the film. All the musicians were open and enthusiastic about being involved, which made me even more proud to be part of the Alberta arts community."

FIVER (SIMONE SCHMIDT)

Toronto musician Simone Schmidt is known for her role as the front person and songwriter for country act One Hundred Dollars, psych rock unit The Highest Order, and from her solo work as Fiver. Schmidt has six LP's to her writing credit, along with a range of singles, collaborations with artists as wide ranging as hardcore punk phenomenon Fucked Up, to the inimitable USGirls, and Old Time and Bluegrass veteran Chris Coole.

Schmidt, as Fiver, wrote the original song "Show Me the Mark" for *Circle of Steel*, embodying the prairie sensibilities in the film. "Simone understands how to embody a voice and a point of view other than her own lived experience, and I have always trusted her vision," says McKercher.

Even though she isn't an engineer, she writes professional disillusionment in a poetic and accessible way. We spoke a lot about inheriting the "sins of the father", the challenges to break an outdated cycle, the pull of the mainstream against personal

reservations. Sonically, we went for modern and plugged in: "Show Me the Mark" could absolutely play in an Operator's truck. Simone actually delivered to us a final mix of "Show Me The Mark" before we finished production. I thought it was critical to receive a song in its final form while we finished production. "Show Me The Mark" really guided me on the film's attitude and point of view, and its inclusion is much more balanced. My directorial choices were informed by "Show Me The Mark," and her songwriting was informed by my original vision of the film.

AMY NELSON

In a disorienting dream, Wendy finds herself performing "The Mountain Song" at the Silver Point Pub with a perfect country twang. "Today would be a good day to die," she croons – fitting for Wendy as she sleeps off a night of debauchery in rural Alberta.

The song's writer, Amy Nelson, is an old-time banjoist, guitar player and songwriter based in Calgary. McKercher has worked with Nelson on several projects, including The Calgary Collection web series about Albertan folk musicians, and has directed two of her music videos, *How Long Blues* and *Educated Woman*.

FAITH HEALER

Two songs by Faith Healer are featured in *Circle of Steel*: "Sufferin' Creature" and "Might as Well"

Based in Edmonton, Faith Healer has been a collaborative project between lyricist and songwriter Jessica Jalbert and producer/multi-instrumentalist Renny Wilson since 2015. Represented by Vancouver's Mint Records, the psych-pop duo have released two critically praised full length albums.

DEXTRESS

Featured in several bar scenes, Dextress is a heavy hitting hair band based in Calgary. Drawing inspiration from the 80's, specifically Van Halen, Guns N' Roses, and Mötley Crüe, their sound is a raw juxtaposition to the country crooners typical to rural Alberta.

CARTER FELKER

Carter Felker has lived his entire life in Alberta, from the plains of the southeast, to the mountains of the far west and the dank muskeg of the north. After picking up the guitar at seventeen, he was introduced to folk and alternative country music by a co-worker and began to write his own songs. Carter believes a life spent in Alberta has shaped him into the songwriter he is today. Two of Felker's songs are featured in *Circle of Steel*, perfectly illustrating the bleakness of Wendy's time in the field.

THE SCORE: REBECCA BRUTON

Rebecca Bruton has a diverse background in folk and avant-garde composition, and McKercher wanted to use both elements in the score. Bruton enlisted the help of folk musician Katie Streibel for the guitar, who helped to find the tone and balance between playfulness and melancholy. McKercher and Bruton were directly inspired by Bill Friesel's *Disfarmer* album. "We rounded out the score with an amazing roster of performers who leaned in to Rebecca's fusion," says McKercher. "We also had the opportunity to work with interns at the Banff Centre, who recorded our score. This was one of the most rewarding elements of the film's creation. Everything felt collaborative and inclusive and I hope to work with Rebecca again."

A CONVERSATION WITH DIRECTOR, GILLIAN MCKERCHER

You used to work in Alberta's oil and gas industry. What was your experience like?

I grew up in oil and gas. When I was in my early teens, my mom was a contract geologist and I would help her with menial tasks. After summer jobs doing data entry for multiple petroleum companies, I got a 16 month student engineering internship for ConocoPhillips which ended in a full-time job.

On one hand, the best professional experience of my life was in oil and gas – the most impactful mentorship I've received is from a Project Engineer named Greg Welland, who was my boss for about 18 months. On the other hand, I've never felt so guilty and

replaceable. When I was doing rotation at Surmont, I read an article posted by the UN that said that the world could feasibly be off fossil fuels in 100 years, at least on an industrial level. I felt so dejected – why was I applying my degree and skills towards an antiquated system? I was laid off about two years later.

What motivated you to make a film about it?

I was frustrated. When layoffs first started happening in 2016, the atmosphere at work was horrible. One of many days of layoffs, I waited patiently at my desk for a few hours and assumed that our team was safe. I asked my co-worker, a super talented Project Engineer in her 40's, if she wanted to get coffee. She looked at me with a face full of tears and croaked that she got “called to an office” – I'd never seen my co-worker come even close

to a mile of an emotional crack. We both knew she was getting laid off. The ambiance of hopelessness, dread, and anticipation was a reality right up until I got laid off. I was frustrated that the rest of Canada seemed ambivalent, even sanctimonious, that brutal layoffs were happening. Perhaps we “deserved” to be laid off from the dirty and controversial petroleum industry.

I wanted to show that the people who work in resource industries deserve compassion and respect. I also wanted to show that amidst the loneliness and depression, there's also lots of camaraderie and humour.

How did you develop your characters? What makes them tick?

The characters are based off of archetypes that I met in the field. There's a great age

range in oil and gas where multiple generations work and clash together. There's a new female engineering stereotype that Wendy's based off: she's fashionable, unabashedly feminine, and self righteous in her skills. Kiki and Bobby come from a different generation than Wendy. Kiki is contemptuous of Wendy. To Kiki, everything's been handed to Wendy on a silver platter. For Bobby, Wendy is the daughter that he wishes he raised. I've met a lot of operators who adore their daughters, push them into white-collar jobs, and are vocally proud of their accomplishments. For all the sexism that does occur in the field, there are a lot of really great guys who I want to honour and celebrate.

What are some of the parallels between Wendy and yourself?

When I first began to write *Circle of Steel*, Wendy was undeniably based off of

my own experiences. As the story progressed, she became an amalgamation of many women whom I know in the industry. Wendy and I both come from families where a professional job in oil and gas is a given. Wendy's curiosity of a “what if” life outside of the petroleum industry is weaker than my own. Wendy is satisfied with a job that results in a paycheque. There's a comfort in no need to ask big questions. People are oftentimes disappointed by the answers to “why do I do this, what meaning do I derive from work?” Simply, I'm more misanthropic and more optimistic than Wendy.

How did you blend your stylistic background in experimental and independent film with a more traditional narrative?

My goal has always been to make narrative feature films. To get here, I've taken any opportunity to develop my

creative and directorial skills. A lot of those opportunities are experimentally specific – since I don't have a professional background in film, most of my education is DIY. I've done at least five one-eight challenges through the Calgary Society of Independent Filmmakers! At this point, my experimental background is part of my language. There's no other way that I could've told the prologue of *Circle of Steel*. I have more confidence in my ability to express myself via 16mm experiments than VFX. In pitching this project, people were prohibitively hesitant and uncertain about my desire to incorporate experimental analogue film. I'm proud that I stayed true to my roots.

This is a comedy, but can also be quite heavy and dark. How did you juggle the tone?

I juggled the tone through drafts and drafts of the script! I'd felt pressure to hit a mark politically and emotionally, but the stress didn't result in good writing. I wrote what was true to my experience. The entire oil and gas industry is absurd. We extract a heavily politicized resource from steel straws in the ground. That's funny and sad (at least to me)! This environment only brings out the extremes of people. In one second, people joke about gaining 15 lbs at Site and in the next they're crying about their 14-year-old daughter who's doped up.

How would you describe the look and feel of *Circle of Steel* in terms of the camera work?

Grant Cooper and I worked hard at developing a deterministic camera style. We wanted the camera to always be one step ahead of the action – it knows where the characters are going to turn, it knows where to capture the action. We didn't want a hand held look, and we also leaned into the unreal-ness of the film. *Circle of Steel* is meant to be representative of field life, not a true-to-life representation. For that reason, Grant and I felt free to push environments to be more evocative of moods and feelings than overt naturalism.

This is your first time making a feature film. What are some of your most memorable moments?

Ask me in a few years. This entire experience has been a blur of stress and heartache. Undeniably, I've never been more satisfied professionally, and my soul feels whole and healthy.

I'm sentimental that I made this film with the support of my family. No one on either side has ever worked in the arts. For *Circle of Steel*, my family fully assisted me. My mom was the caterer, our accountant, and voice-over actress. My dad allowed us to shoot in his office and also did voice-over. My brother and sister read and watched numerous drafts of the film. I won't forget that

in one of the most selfish endeavors of my life, my family was by my side. I'm thankful and would not be answering this question without them.

STILLS



SPECS

TITLE	Circle of Steel
RUNNING TIME	85 minutes
GENRE	Drama
FORMAT	DCP
ASPECT RATIO	2:1
LANGUAGE	English
SUBTITLES AVAILABLE	English and French
PRODUCTION COUNTRY	Canada

CAST

Chantelle Han	Wendy Fong
Duncan Ollrenshaw	Bobby
Tina Lameman	Kiki
Andréa Perry	Kristen
Cliff Liknes	Chris
Brent Zulyniak	Joe
Peter Skagen	Ian
Meg Farhall	Waitress
Bernard Starlight	Taxi Driver
Katey Doucette	Mother
Christian Goutsis	Phil
Dawn Van De Schoot	Lorna

CREW

DIRECTOR, WRITER	Gillian McKercher
PRODUCER	Robyn Ho, Guillaume Carlier, and Gillian McKercher
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS	Avi Federgreen & Gary Burns
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY	Grant Cooper
EDITOR	Erin St.Clair & Gillian McKercher
ORIGINAL MUSIC	Rebecca Bruton & Katie Streibel
ORIGINAL SONG	Simone Schmidt
COSTUME DESIGN	Caleigh Kansas
CASTING	Jason Long
FIRST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR	Emily Renner Wallace
ON-LOCATION SOUND	Alex Mitchell
HAIR & MAKEUP	Ana Georgina Ortiz

DISTRIBUTION CONTACT

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PRODUCTION COMPANY

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