

AMANDA SCHULL

'The Blessing Bracelet'

By Joshua Maloni

Sometime this Sunday, after church, the Easter egg hunt and the ham dinner, take time to start a new holiday tradition by sitting down to watch "The Blessing Bracelet" with your family. Amanda Schull's new Hallmark movie is a perfect reminder of what this season is about: faith and guidance, community, rebirth and renewal following loss. Throw in some well-timed humor, an adorable dog and some fancy bling, and you'll find this film offers a basketful of reasons to feel good.

As "The Blessing Bracelet" begins, Dawn Spencer (Schull) is down and out – a single mother desperate to save her home and make a good life for her young son. With the bank at her back, she takes a second job, at a popular local eatery, and is told to offer customers a little something special to boost her tips – a coworker, for example, leaves candies and mints. She recalls a high school hobby wherein she made a "blessing bracelet." The four-pearl piece of costume jewelry is both an accessory and a reminder for one to recall the miracles in life. One is left with each check.

When the concept catches on with her community, the "blessing bracelet" brings new inspiration – and financial gain – to Dawn, right when she needs those things most.

Schull explained more in this edited Q&A.

Q: What appealed to you about this project?

Amanda Schull: Well, first of all, just anything Hallmark that comes my way, I get excited about; and it's always for the same reasons. And then, of course, I find different reasons with each script to get excited about.

But the same reasons are always just because it's refreshing. It's really nice to work on a project. Every single Hallmark film I've ever had the opportunity to do has been inspiring in one way or another. You know, the woman's story. My character's story always has something that people can relate to, and not just find an escape from reality, but maybe relate to and then be able to identify within their own mind, and feel inspiration from it.

I think this character, in particular, she's – to put it mildly – she's in a pretty unfortunate circumstance when we first meet her. Things have not been going well for her the last several months, and then, of course, a few years – and for circumstances that are not entirely of her own making.

Something that really drew me to her was just that she doesn't get down about it. She doesn't mope and feel sorry for herself. She knows that the only way out is through, and she does just that.



Amanda Schull stars in "The Blessing Bracelet." ©2023 Hallmark Media/photographer: Allister Foster

And it being a DaySpring presentation also had a lot of inspirational rebirths, if you will, throughout the film, and that was really exciting. And the presence of community. You know, I got teary when I read the script. And she walks into the church – I don't know if it's like their crafts room, or how you would describe it – and everyone's waiting to help her. The community is there for her, because she's part of them, and they identify with her struggles.

It made me emotional, just reading it in bed, that first night that I got the script. If you can get that feeling from a script, then it's a good sign of what's to come when you get on set.

Q: I like the fact that this character sort of starts as a "Debbie Downer," in her family's own words.

Amanda Schull: I mean, ish.

Q: Ish. Ish. Fair.

You know, we usually see you play characters – particularly in this type of movie – that have it all together. ... When they're not dead, of course. This character certainly doesn't have it all together. I'm wondering if that was appealing to you, to play a different type of character with a different type of struggle?

Amanda Schull: Always. It's always appealing to play something different. Yes. I mean, if you start just playing the same thing all the time, then where is the excitement from role to role?

It's always really fun to find something different with each person, and how to bring that to life and bring it off the page and everything.

I mean, she's only a "Debbie Downer" so much as she allows that 10% to go there. She can't, because of her son, you know? The very first scene with them, they're shopping for Easter bulbs, for bulbs to plant together. And if that isn't just like the perfect metaphor for rebirth, I don't

know what is. She's finding a way to connect with her son, even if it's not some lavish, afterschool kind of a hobby, or whatever it is.

It's just she knows how to see good, and she knows how to see optimism. And she doesn't lose sight of that. She doesn't wallow. And so, yes, while they even call her a "Debbie Downer," even that 10%, there's still 90% of her that's just kind of birthing to get out and take her down a different road.

Q: What makes it special to be able to put a little bit of kindness and hope out into this world through these projects?

Amanda Schull: Well, first of all, we could all use a little kindness and hope in our lives.

I think I told you this before when we've chatted, but the first project I ever did with Hallmark, which I think it was in 2018 that it came out, it was "Love, Once and Always." And I was taking ballet class at the time. And there were the same women who always stand at my ballet barre, older than I am, ranging from like 60s into early 80s. And they were so excited about me doing a Hallmark movie. And they called other people over from other ballet barres to tell them that I was doing a Hallmark movie. And then they started a text chain to discuss when it would be coming out, and to share it, and make sure that their friends knew about it. And then my aunt in Florida got excited about it, and got her Bible study group together to discuss it.

And it made me realize how passionately, but enthusiastically passionate, and hopeful, and happy these movies make people. And one of the women, who I was talking to at ballet, said, "You know, '12 Monkeys' was good. It was good. But these movies, they make me feel good. They make me forget what's going on in the world that brings me down. They make me feel really rejuvenated at the end of them."

It just really struck me that we all need that in our lives. Art is a reflection, in a lot of ways; but art can also be an escape. And if we can sit down and watch a movie and get carried away on the storyline – and, yes, we may identify with some of the things, and we may get teary or emotional – but if we can walk away from it afterward feeling a little bit lighter, that's a pretty special gift that I'm being given, to be able to do that in people's living rooms every once in a while.

"The Blessing Bracelet," a new DaySpring movie, premieres Sunday, April 9 (7 p.m. ET/PT), exclusively on Hallmark Movies & Mysteries.

•Read the full interview online at www.wnypapers.com.



Jesse Lee Soffer at work on the set of "Chicago P.D." (NBC photo)

JESSE LEE SOFFER

'Chicago P.D.'

By Joshua Maloni

When "Chicago P.D." recently revisited the Arturo Morales storyline, it was in an episode directed by longtime cast member Jesse Lee Soffer.

After playing Det. Jay Halstead for nine-plus seasons, Soffer opted to leave the show last fall. He recently returned to the set to make his directorial debut.

The NBC logline for the episode "Deadlocked" (now streaming on Peacock) states, "Following on a storyline that aired earlier this season ("The Ghost in You"), Voight (Jason Beghe) takes the stand for ASA Chapman (Sara Bues) in a high-stakes murder trial against notorious drug kingpin Arturo Morales (Robby Ramos). When it becomes clear that Morales and his henchmen have compromised a juror, Voight and the team work furiously to ensure justice prevails."

Soffer shared more in this edited Q&A.

Q: How was your experience directing relative to how you imagined it?

Jesse Lee Soffer: It was easier than I thought it was going to be. I was so nervous going into it. But I know "P.D." so well, and we're such a tight-knit family as that cast and crew, and it was really rewarding. Once we started rolling, and we got on set and started playing, it was just like any other episode.

Q: What appeals to you about directing?

Jesse Lee Soffer: I love that it's storytelling, but in a more macro way. Like, when you're prepping a script as an actor, you're looking at your point of view, and the relationships, and what's going on at any given moment; what you're thinking and feeling about; what's happening in the story. And when you're directing, you're doing that, but in a much more macro, broad-perspective way. You're trying to figure out what this whole story is about, and all the different puzzle pieces that go together and work together in that.

I just like that it's storytelling from a different perspective, because each lends itself to the other. Directing can make you a better actor, and a director trying to act would make you probably a better director. They go hand in hand.

Q: Where do you stand with returning to the series as a cast member at some point down the road?

Jesse Lee Soffer: I would say, "Never say never." I said this before: Halstead's always going to be in my blood, just because I spent 10 years playing him. I would be open to it. That's it. Yeah. Why not?

Q: When we chatted with fellow #OneChicago cast members last fall, they let it slip that Jay wasn't going to be killed off. That was certainly a relief for us. Was it a relief for you, also, having that opportunity, if you want, to return to this role?

Jesse Lee Soffer: That's an interesting question. I don't know. I hadn't really thought about it. You know, I kind of figured it's not up to me; you know, it's up to the writers. It's up to the producers; up to (showrunner) Gwen (Sigan). It's their responsibility to tell the story, and it's our responsibility to bring that story to life.

So, it's not something that I had thought about, but I guess it seemed fitting that Halstead go off and kind of do his own thing. I liked that aspect of it when we were doing that episode.

Q: Looking at the whole story and how everyone interacts, did you learn anything new about this cast, and what they're capable of doing, being the director?

Jesse Lee Soffer: Did I learn anything new? That's a great question. No. You know, it's interesting to change your perspective, though. And what occurred to me – which, I think, there's always an element of this – but it made more sense, was that we really love all these characters. Like, I love all these characters – and we know them so well.

So, even in the prep, something might, on the page, I might be going, "I think Burgess is going to want to do this in that scenario, and I'm going to have her do this." And you realize how much a part of this family you really are. It's like knowing your brothers and sisters, you know?

"Chicago P.D." airs at 10 p.m. Wednesdays on NBC.

•Read the full interview online at www.wnypapers.com.

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