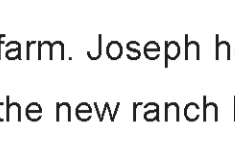
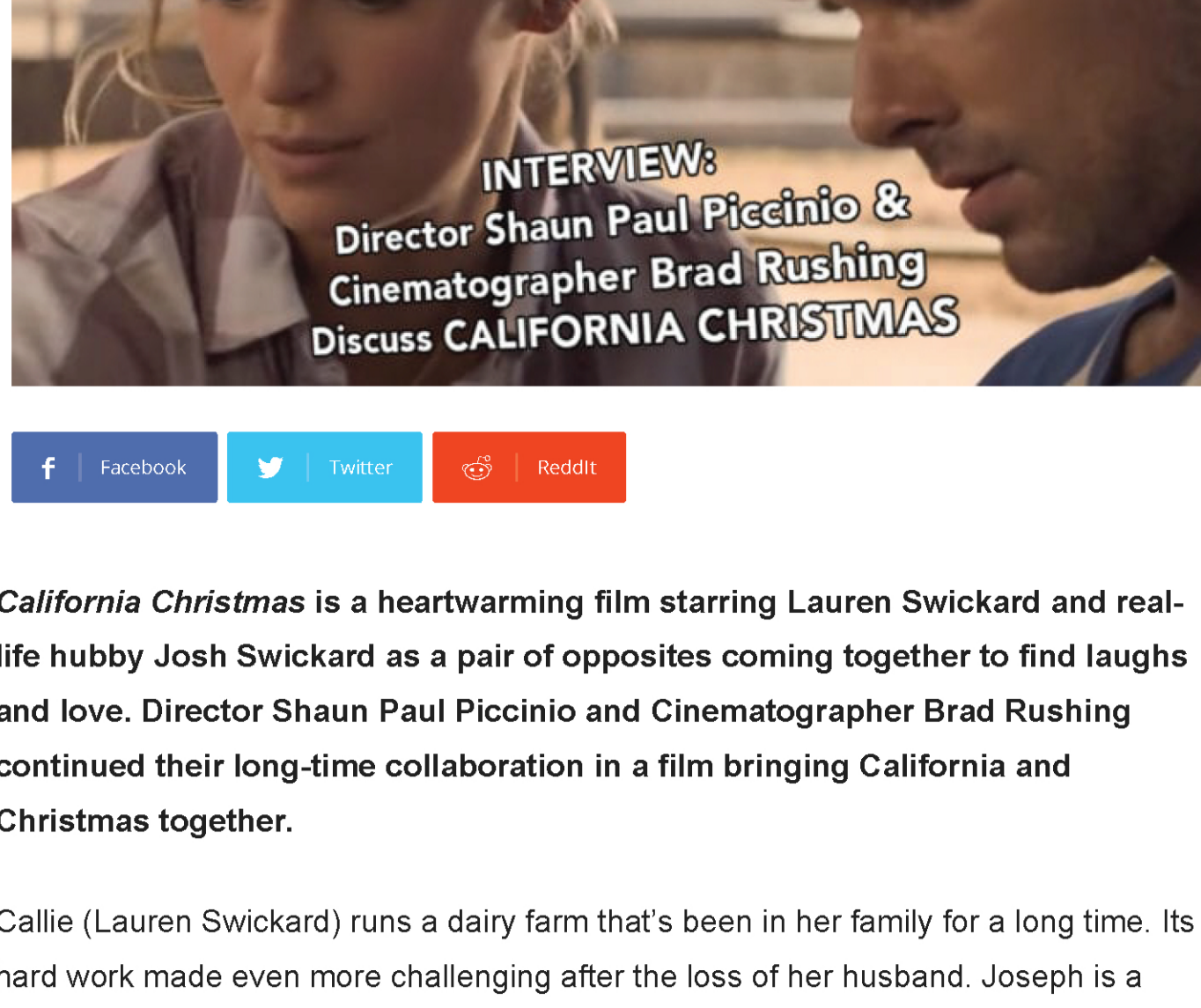


INTERVIEW: DIRECTOR SHAUN PAUL PICCINIO & CINEMATOGRAPHER BRAD RUSHING DISCUSS CALIFORNIA CHRISTMAS

By [Ruben Diaz](#) FEBRUARY 10, 2021



California Christmas is a heartwarming film starring Lauren Swickard and real-life hubby Josh Swickard as a pair of opposites coming together to find laughs and love. Director Shaun Paul Piccinio and Cinematographer Brad Rushing continued their long-time collaboration in a film bringing California and Christmas together.

Callie (Lauren Swickard) runs a dairy farm that's been in her family for a long time. Its hard work made even more challenging after the loss of her husband. Joseph is a businessman with orders from his boss and mother to close a deal acquiring Callie's farm. Joseph heads to the farm to get down to business when Callie mistakes him for the new ranch hand. It's then that Joseph learns that Callie has no plans to sell, and he hatches a new plan to get the deal done.

PopAxiom spoke with Shaun and Brad about their road to making movies and creating a Christmas movie for Netflix.

Do It All

Shaun and Brad both grew up with a focus on being creative professionals.

BRAD: "My background was fine art. Since I was a little kid, drawing's been a favorite thing. I'm also a musician, and I make a lot of music and write songs. I went to a fine arts high school called the High School for Performing and Visual Arts in Houston."

SHAUN: "I grew up in the theatre. My father was a drama professor, and he produced Shakespeare in the park and other shows for 35 years. My first play was at five-years-old with *Oliver Twist*. My mother also encouraged me to pursue the arts."

For both director and DP [Director of Photography or Cinematographer], their teenage years included deep dives into creativity.

BRAD: "We had a media department, and one of my friends came into the art department and asked if anyone wanted to draw some cells for an animated movie he was doing. I thought, 'That sounds different and fun.' I did it, I took it to 11, beyond his specifications because I threw myself into it. When I saw that and saw my art existing in the dimension of time with movement and change, a light went off."

SHAUN: "My parents bought me a video camera when I was 11-years-old and started doing stop-motion animation and doing music videos. At sixteen, I started directing commercials for local mom and pop shops around town. I would go in there and pitch them a wild idea, and one out of five would say yes. Before I left for college, I had directed about 30 commercials in my hometown. That's kind of how I cut my teeth. I was doing reel-to-reel editing."

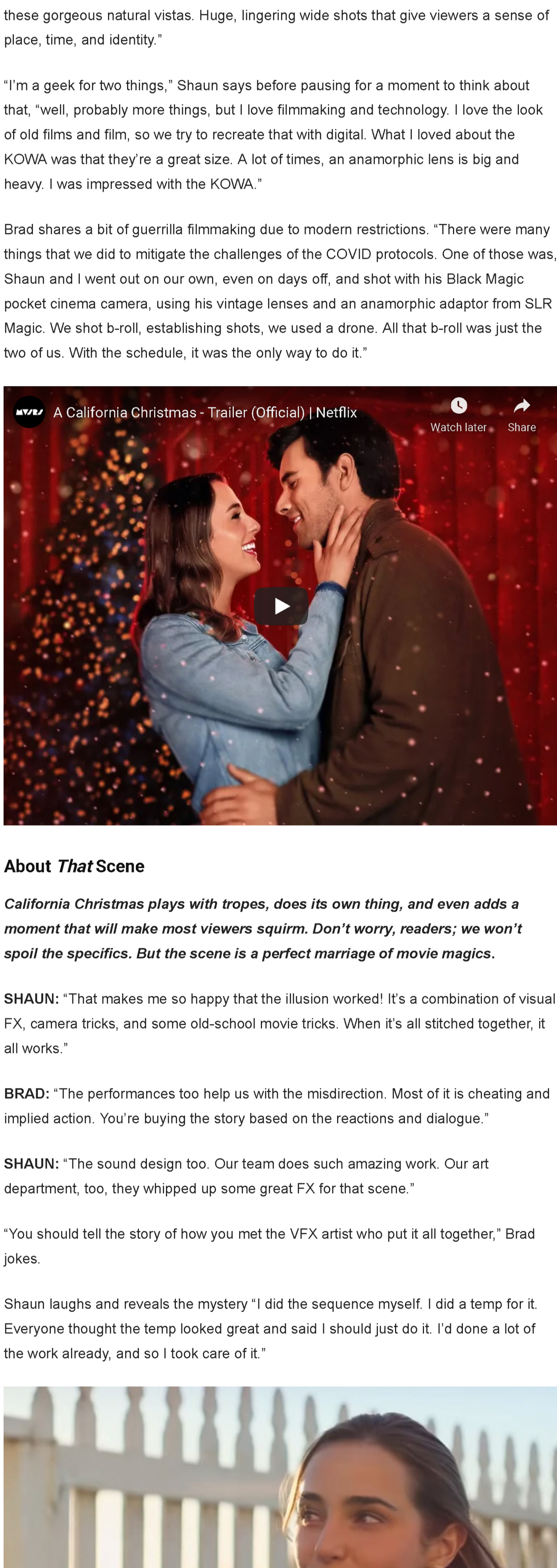
During and after college, both filmmakers found their strengths and passions.

BRAD: "I went into college as a double-major but eventually shifted my focus full-time to filmmaking. I initially wanted to be a director. The first film that I got to be a part of which was a low-budget indie thing. I watched the director. Everyone was coming at him from every direction wanting a piece of his time. Meanwhile, I saw the DP, and for the most part, people were leaving him alone, but he got all the toys. He got to make the visual magic."

SHAUN: "I've done every job; I was an extra for a year, and I treated that as my film school. I brought notepads and took notes on the different terminology and departments. The way I looked at it, I was getting paid for film education. I was a runner getting lunches and coffee for TV shows. I viewed all of it as my education. Luckily, I was able to move up pretty quickly. The process of telling stories has always inspired me."

"Years later, as I was reflecting," Brad says, "so many of my interests converge at cinematography. The visual arts, science, history, even music. There's a rhythm to the camera moving. I will find that there are rhythms in the way we do things, and beats happen."

When Shaun said he's done "every job," he means it. "I also have a background in martial arts. I was also doing fight choreography and performing stunts. That lead to stunt coordination then second unit directing, which lead to first-unit directing."



About *California Christmas*

If you think California Christmas is your typical Christmas movie, you'd be partially right. It's got plenty of tweaks on the formula that make it interesting to a broader range of viewers.

BRAD: "It's funny, I've had several friends who've said to me, 'I'm not a Christmas movie, romance kinda guy, but my wife was watching the film, and I got hooked into it.'"

SHAUN: "It was a conscious choice to do things differently. There are a lot of tropes that we do still hit. But we tried to bring in interesting things, different characters. Amanda Detmer's performance and her story are unexpectedly heavy. We found a nice balance for people to enjoy."

How did Shaun and Brad become a part of California Christmas?

SHAUN: "We both have a friend, a producer, and also a stunt coordinator, Noel Vega. He brought us together. He'd worked with both of us. Noel suggested Brad. Now, *California Christmas* is our sixth or seventh project together."

BRAD: "What I would add, the editor of *California Christmas*, Brett Hedlund, is a friend of mine from way, way back. We met working for Roger Corman at Concord/New Horizons in the 1990s. We have been friends ever since. We've done a variety of projects and enjoy one another's company. I knew a lot of players on the project. It was serendipitous. It was so fun making the movie even with the challenges of COVID protocol."

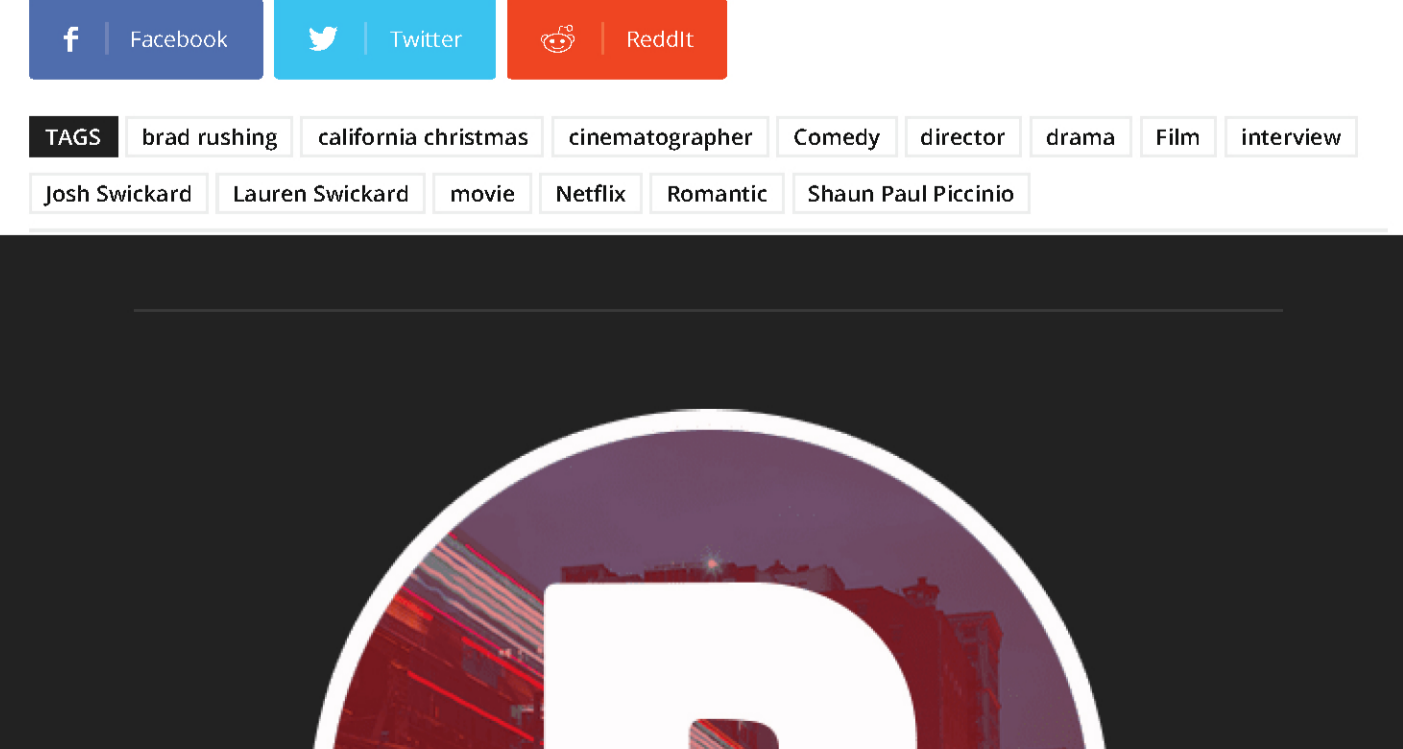
So, what makes California Christmas different than your usual Christmas movie? The answer is in the title.

SHAUN: "It's a Christmas movie, but it's also got California in the title. People have an image of California with sunny coastlines. We wanted to invoke that warm quality, glowing light to the imagery. We looked to Robert Redford films like *A River Runs Through It* and *Horse Whisperer*. The city portion of the film, which is not that long, has cool tones and a little more sterile versus when we arrive at the ranch."

BRAD: "Shaun is a huge lens geek. He's got this wonderful collection of all these lenses that he's curiously picked up over the years. One of the things he likes to do is shoot on vintage anamorphics. For this one, we went with a KOWA. Part of the design and what we got from the films we looked at was the framing and the showcasing of these gorgeous natural vistas. Huge, lingering wide shots that give viewers a sense of place, time, and identity."

"I'm a geek for two things," Shaun says before pausing for a moment to think about that, "well, probably more things, but I love filmmaking and technology. I love the look of old films and film, so we try to recreate that with digital. What I loved about the KOWA was that they're a great size. A lot of times, an anamorphic lens is big and heavy. I was impressed with the KOWA."

Brad shares a bit of guerrilla filmmaking due to modern restrictions. "There were many things that we did to mitigate the challenges of the COVID protocols. One of those was, Shaun and I went out on our own, even on days off, and shot with his Black Magic pocket cinema camera, using his vintage lenses and an anamorphic adaptor from SLR Magic. We shot b-roll, establishing shots, we used a drone. All that b-roll was just the two of us. With the schedule, it was the only way to do it."



About *That Scene*

California Christmas plays with tropes, does its own thing, and even adds a moment that will make most viewers squirm. Don't worry, readers; we won't spoil the specifics. But the scene is a perfect marriage of movie magics.

SHAUN: "That makes me so happy that the illusion worked! It's a combination of visual FX, camera tricks, and some old-school movie tricks. When it's all stitched together, it all works."

BRAD: "The performances too help us with the misdirection. Most of it is cheating and implied action. You're buying the story based on the reactions and dialogue."

SHAUN: "The sound design too. Our team does such amazing work. Our art department, too, they whipped up some great FX for that scene."

"You should tell the story of how you met the VFX artist who put it all together," Brad jokes.

Shaun laughs and reveals the mystery "I did the sequence myself. I did a temp for it. Everyone thought the temp looked great and said I should just do it. I'd done a lot of the work already, and so I took care of it."

Wrapping Up

As life-long fans of all things creative, who make up part of their respective creative DNA?

BRAD: "I come from a fine arts background. My inspiration is very eclectic. Everything from classic artists like Hieronymus Bosch to Edvard Munch, they're both so incredibly evocative. In terms of filmmakers, one of the most influential films to me was the original *Alien*. That is, in so many ways, my favorite film. I'm a horror fan going way back. My dad would let me stay up and watch old black and white horror films like *The Thing From Another World* or *The Man From Planet X*, all of that crazy stuff. *Alien* is one of the first of two movies that scared the bejeezus out of me. I love that word, the characters, that ship, and the lighting. The other thing I would throw into it is that I'm a big believer in my world experiences. When we talk about Robert Redford films, we use it as a starting point and add my real-world experience to it."

SHAUN: "My film influences are wide and vast, from Buster Keaton to Ridley Scott. *Alien* is probably my favorite horror movie, *Blade Runner* is amazing, and so is *Legend*. Kurosawa is a big influence on me. The first *Rocky* movie, the performances, and the way it comes together. You know, he doesn't win at the end, but he does. Also, the story of how that film was even made is so inspirational to me. Robert Rodriguez, he is a huge influence, especially the way he made *El Mariachi*. One of the first feature films we did it on the same budget that he did, around \$7,000, and that was a conscious choice. We wanted to try and make a feature with the same resources that Robert had. I'd love to work with him. Guy Ritchie, Tarantino, and Tom Tykwer, who did *Run Lola Run*. The creativity in that film was a moment for me. *Braveheart* was another big one for me."

What do Shaun and Brad think of remakes, and how would they approach an opportunity to play in the world of a long-time franchise?

SHAUN: "I don't know if I want to say. I'll give the idea away. I hate to do remakes of masterpieces, but I would say I want to do a live-action remake of *The Last Unicorn*. That is on my wishlist. Someone will beat me to it, or maybe they won't do it, but that's been on my dream board for a long time. I know I can tell that story in a way that honors the original piece."

BRAD: "I am not a fan of remakes at all. Sometimes when you remake something for a new generation, it can exist alongside the original. *The Thing From Another World* is one of my favorites, and I do like John Carpenter's *The Thing*. So, I'd like to do a sequel and play in a world. Being a *Star Trek* fan, people ask me if I want to *Star Trek* and I kind of don't. It's my indulgence, and I don't know if I want to go behind the curtain. But I would love to do more space-based science fiction. I'm such a huge fan of the genre and working with visual FX. I'd love to do a historically accurate film set in ancient Egypt."

California Christmas was a hit on Netflix during the holiday season and will bring a smile to viewers' faces all year round on the streaming giant. So, what's next for the long-time collaborators?

SHAUN: "Brad and I both have a couple of projects that will hopefully release in 2021. One is a *World War II* epic we filmed. We shot a bunch of amazing stuff. The other one is *Salvage Marines*, which is a science fiction action series. Both projects star Casper Van Dien. Be on the lookout. Also, *American Fighter* is coming to the US in March through Lionsgate."

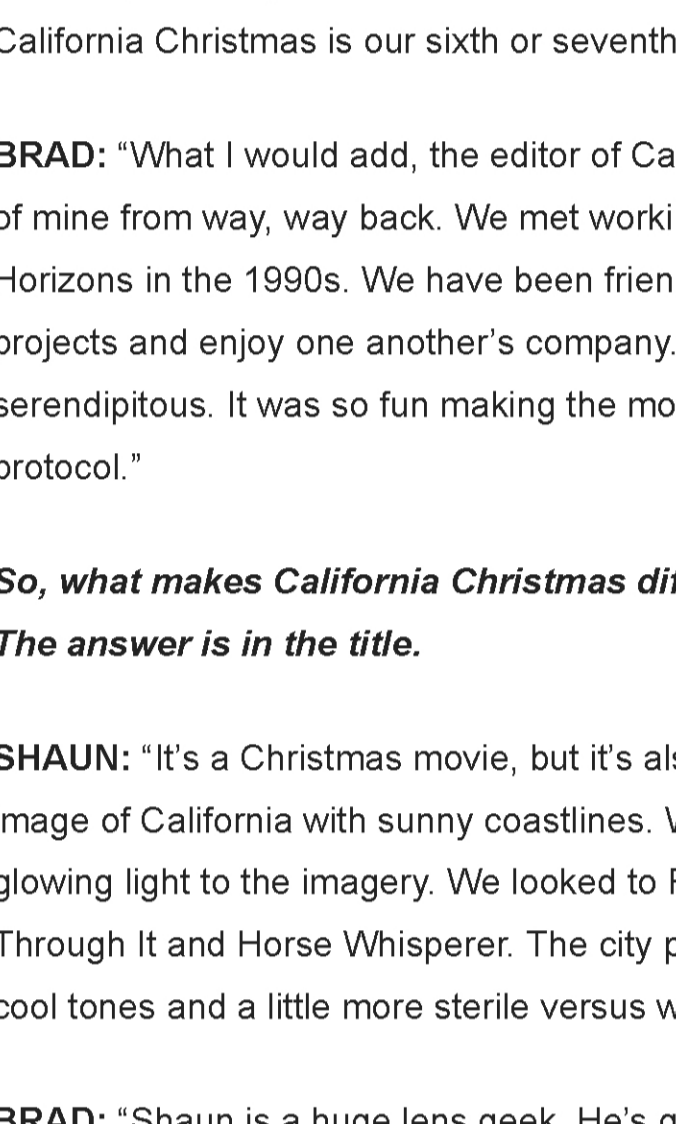
Is California Christmas on your watch list?

Thanks to Shaun Paul Piccinio, Brad Rushing, and Kingmaker Communications for making this interview possible.

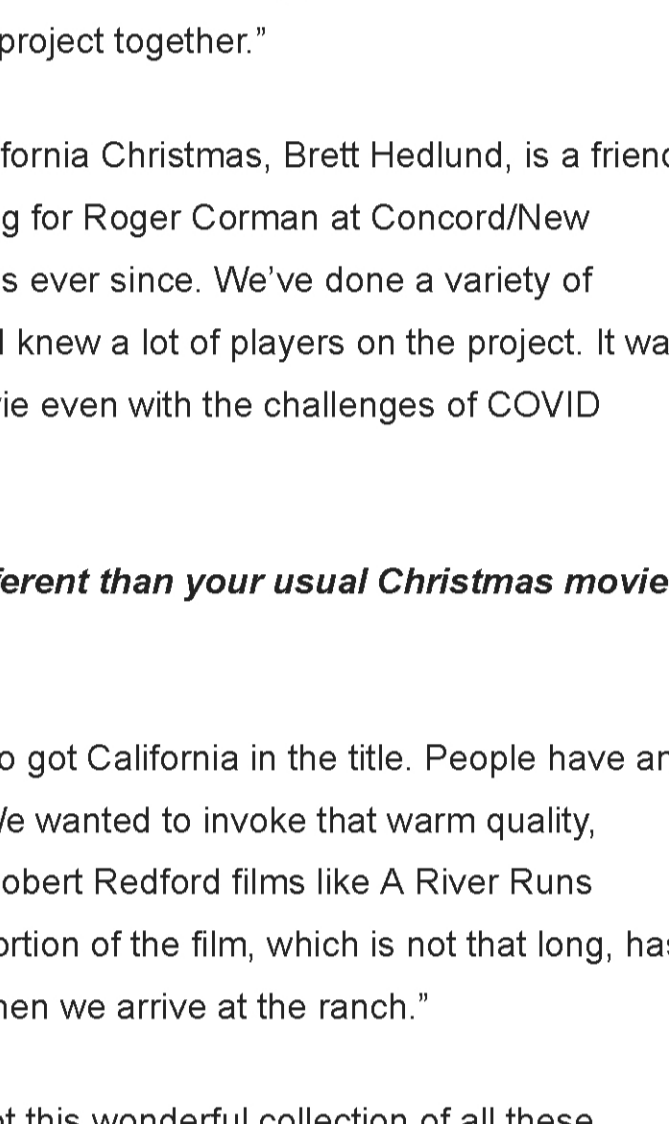
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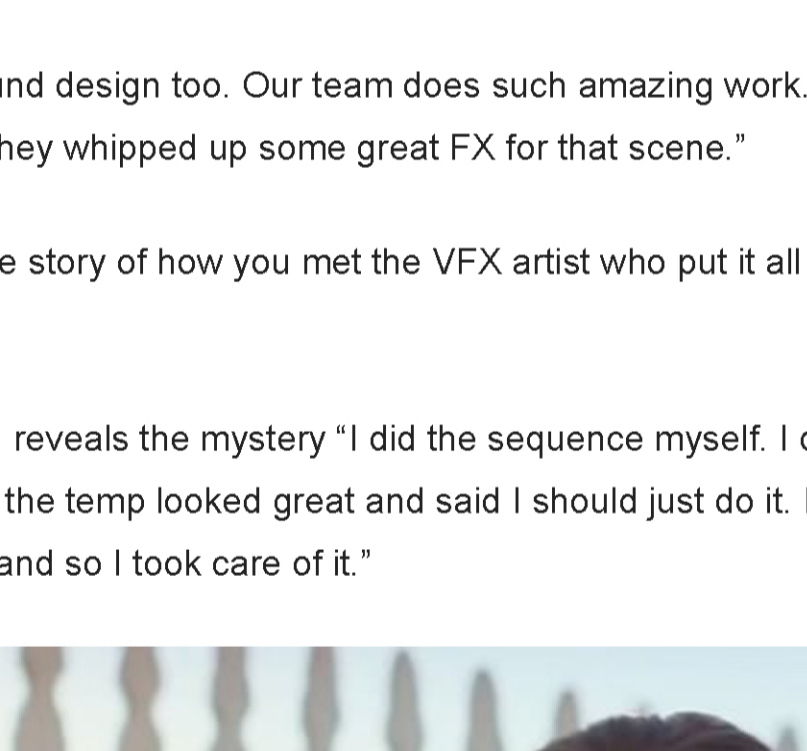
Ruben Diaz

Writer, film-fanatic, geek, gamer, info junkie & consummate Devil's advocate who has been fascinated by Earth since 1976. Classically trained in the ways of the future.



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