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Exclusive Sundance Interview: Cindy Cowan, Executive Producer of 'Red Lights'

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So begins my coverage for the Sundance Film Festival. Thanks to my esteemed editor-in-chief Andrew Ashari as well as the fine people in charge of accrediting reporters as official press for the festival, I have been honored to receive official press credentials to cover the festival. Over the course of the festival, I will hope to provide you with reviews of screening films, interviews, and journalistic entries about my time at one of the biggest film fests in the world. Hit the jump for my interview of executive producer **Cindy Cowan** and coverage of her world-premiering film, *Red Lights*.

The other day, I had an excellent phone conversation with **Cindy**, namesake for **Cindy Cowan Entertainment**. She is executive producing *Red Lights*, a paranormal thriller written and directed by *Buried* helmer **Rodrigo Cortés**. The film stars **Cillian Murphy**, **Robert DeNiro**, **Sigourney Weaver**, **Elizabeth Olsen**, and **Toby Jones**. From the [Sundance film guide](#), here is the film summary:

Two investigators of paranormal hoaxes, the veteran Dr. Margaret Matheson and her young assistant, Tom Buckley, study the most varied metaphysical phenomena with the aim of proving their fraudulent origins. Simon Silver, a legendary blind psychic, reappears after an enigmatic absence of 30 years to become the greatest international

challenge to both orthodox science and professional sceptics. Tom starts to develop an intense obsession with Silver, whose magnetism becomes stronger with each new manifestation of inexplicable events. As Tom gets closer to Silver, tension mounts, and his worldview is threatened to its core.

Here is our conversation:

Ethan: So how did the film start?

Cindy: The film came to me through UTA. I've known Rena Ronson over there for a long time, and she said would I look at something. She sent me the script, which I thought was great, and layered, and had a lot of depth to it. Right after that, she asked me if I would screen this movie called *Buried*, and I thought "a movie about a guy buried in a box for two hours, ohmygod I'm going to KILL myself" and I walked out of there thinking "I have to be involved with this filmmaker." So I ended up calling them and saying, "when can I meet Rodrigo," and about three weeks later, we got together, got along famously, shook hands over lunch and said let's do this thing. Three months later, we were in Barcelona shooting.

E: Rodrigo obviously attracted some A-List casting with Sigourney Weaver and Robert Deniro. Was that brought about by UTA as well?



Cindy Cowan and Sigourney Weaver

C: Anyone who saw *Buried* really wanted to work with Rodrigo; his work spoke for itself. This was put together by a number of different agencies, and yes UTA was at the point, but we also got really lucky with hiring a great casting director who brought us these actors as well as Elizabeth Olsen. She's a dream to work with and a phenomenal actor. We took Lizzy right before *Mary Martha May Marlene* screened at Sundance and she became this starlet overnight, so we luckily had great timing all the way around.

E: This film sounds like a real poster-child of the Sundance success story, what with Cortés screening *Buried* at the fest last year and then gaining this talented actress right before she has a break out performance at the same festival.

C: Yeah, it really is. We got really lucky all the way around with this one. We snagged Robert right

after he gained the Lifetime Achievement award, and Sigourney Weaver who was just about to jump on Avatar and is just an amazing woman, and Cillian is just one of the most amazing actors I've ever worked with. He's unbelievable; there's an Oscar somewhere in his career down the line. And like I said, Elizabeth was amazing timing, and I have to give our casting director all the props for that one. Even our smaller roles ended up with amazing actors, like Toby Jones, who will be in the *Hunger Games* Trilogy, and Jolie Richardson who's in *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Every part of this movie became special, from the biggest role to the smallest.

E: Let's move on to the film. What can we expect thematically, what will it feel like? I saw the brief teaser online and it gave nothing away!

C: That's the beauty of this film: literally only 6 or 7 people have seen this film. We've kept it VERY under wraps, which includes the full trailer that will not be released till its big premiere at Sundance. It's a psychological thriller that we hope will get people thinking. We're not going for this found footage type of horror film, we're aiming more for a *Sixth Sense* type of film that we hope you'll watch in the theaters and enjoy and keep thinking about as you leave the show.

E: I'm going to jump back to your role quickly. You mentioned how you brought everything together, but were you bringing funds to the film as well.

C: Yes, that's what I did. Rodrigo has a producing partner in Spain named Adrian Guerra, who is great, and Adrian and I set about trying to put this movie together. My company brought the equity piece into it. We helped build up the waterfalls from everything from where we were shooting to the tax credits, etc, and then from there, we all had our notes about tweaking the scripts and ideas about casting. We got to shoot in Barcelona as well, which was not like working at all.

E: Will the city of Barcelona itself play a role in the film?

C: Unfortunately not. Barcelona is a city that will substitute for America, but I would recommend it to anybody trying to shoot there. It's incredible; from the meals to the people to the crews, it was all amazing. Interestingly the language barrier was virtually nonexistent. The crews had little common ground language-wise but everything just seemed to work. It was really beautiful to watch.

E: Do you have any distribution predictions for the film? Is this a wide release film or not so much?



Cillian Murphy in 'Red Lights'

C: I will be curious to see the reactions at the festival. I think it's a mid-level release. We can't compete with the big blockbusters out there. Again we're a *Sixth Sense* type of film, but I hope somebody will see what's here and give it a real chance. It's definitely too big just to be playing in the

art house theaters like the Laemmles but I would hate for it to be released on 3000 screens and not get the life that it deserves simply because it can't compete with the *Battleship*, *Spider-Man* type of movies.

E: Are we going to see *Red Lights* released sometime in 2012?

C: As for a theatrical release, that remains to be seen if we get a distribution deal. This is a film that nobody has seen yet going into Sundance, which we did mostly for the equity, and hopefully once people see it, we can get a bidding war going. Then it'll be in their hands with (hopefully!) us guiding the ship, but honestly we've already had so many phone calls because of the amazing talent in the film. There's a lot of interest, but this will be the first time it will be seen in public at the festival. It has not been leaked and has not been seen by anybody outside of those 6 or 7 people.

E: Who was the person behind all the secrecy? Was this Cortés's idea or did it come from someone else?

C: I think it was all of us. I was thinking about the equity and since I controlled the film, I didn't want it to be leaked or screened to anyone in advance. I think some of the beauty of festivals like this is that you can do this and do it right, and to me, you might as well keep it under wraps till its festival premiere. It's great because in the theater I have my director sitting there, my talent, and they can do Q&A's after, which can generate immediate buzz and hype about the film, and it also helps buyers who can directly see an audience's reaction to the film to justify where they're putting their money. I love the festivals, and if you can hold off screening them till the festival like we've done, that's the best way to do it in my opinion.