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Opal on film Biography from Bay Area independent filmmakers set for autumn release

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BY: JON STINNETT

Opal Whiteley burst onto the national stage shortly after her childhood diary was published in 1920. San Francisco based writer/director Dina Ciraulo hopes her new movie, "Opal," returns Whiteley to the forefront of American conversation.

Shot over a two-year period, Ciraulo and crew are hoping for an autumn film festival circuit release for "Opal." The film , says its creator, is "a low-budget , independent tribute piece."

"I wanted it to be a tribute to Opal Whiteley, to the West Coast and the spirit of the independent woman," she said.

Ciraulo is well aware of the myths and speculation regarding the life of Cottage Grove's most notable icon. She began studying Opal's life about eight years ago while teaching a course on creative writing at City College of San Francisco.

"I ran across a mention of Opal in a book," she said. "The book dealt with right/left brain connections. It's very interesting to read children's writing, because they have very free left/right brain associations. That may be what made Opal such a unique

young writer."

Ciraulo continued studying Opal, reading every book available on the subject. Accounts of Opal's life run the gamut from fawning to speculative to downright vicious. Ciraulo hopes her movie can walk a line between myth and fact.

"There is a line of thought that she is a royal child of French ancestry," Ciraulo said. "There are others that say Opal was crazy and a strict opportunist. I try not to take a position. I'm trying to find a constant, and from what I see, the constant is that she loved and was very inspired by the natural world. I tried to stick with what couldn't be disputed. We know she was gifted and intensely focused on nature and its ability to educate. It's very easy to support these concepts. Everything else, I feel, is interesting but unimportant."

This April found the small, intimate cast and crew celebrating at a wrap party for "Opal." Ciraulo and company are hoping for an autumn release on the film festival circuit, after which they will gauge interest in the movie in an attempt to get it distributed on DVD. "Opal" spans several decades in the life of its subject, though the majority of the film deals with Whiteley as a young woman, played in the film by Nyali Adorador-Knudsen , a college theater major and Screen Actors Guild actress. "She's perfect for Opal," Ciraulo said. "She's got a great voice and was very professional, despite being only 19 when she was cast." Ciraulo visited Cottage Grove in preparation for her film . She says she hopes for approval from Opal's hometown. "I hope people in Cottage Grove like it," she said. "I wanted to make a movie that would make them proud of her."

The director says, though, that some aspects of her film may surprise Grovers.

"They're probably going to notice that it wasn't shot in Oregon," she said. "There are redwoods in the film . I was going for the

effect of a made-up town near the Oregon /California border and the coast where there are still redwoods, because I simply couldn't afford to shoot the movie in Oregon."

Ciraulo hopes the growing interest in environmental issues will spur interest in her movie.

"Interest in Opal Whiteley is definitely growing," she said. "Her works have been translated into German, Italian , French, Russian and Chinese. It's pretty amazing. Opal Whiteley has a new-age appeal as a kind of spiritual environmentalist. People find that an appealing way to get in touch with their inner hippie ."

Ciraulo said she is very interested in scheduling a screening of "Opal" in Cottage Grove, provided the interest is there. To view a trailer of the movie or for more information, visit www.opalthemovie.com.