



# THE PUNISHING BUSINESS

a short film by Heather Harlow



STARRING  
STORM LARGE

STORM LARGE MELISSA KAISER SHADE STREETER and SEAN McGRATH

director of photography GARY NOLTON edited by JAMES WESTBY

music by MICHAEL HERRMAN written by SARAH SKIBINSKI

directed and produced by HEATHER HARLOW

## **MEDIA KIT**

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# Production Notes

“My screenplays all share very similar traits and themes. They’re all darkly comic dramas featuring flawed protagonists caught in the balance between the absurd and the tragic,” says award-winning writer Sarah Skibinski of “The Punishing Business.”

Though only 19 minutes long, “The Punishing Business” becomes an intense roller coaster of emotions as the film peels back the layers of guilt, fear and loneliness that plague both Ellen and Addie—and will ultimately become the bond that saves their lives.

Despite her natural beauty and privileged upbringing, Ellen is a recovering junkie, fresh out of prison, who thrives on the edge of self-destruction. Or so she thinks. One more screw-up, however, and Ellen will be back behind bars.

Addie is the developmentally-disabled daughter of Ellen’s landlady, who drops



by for no apparent reason, then refuses to leave. At first, Ellen finds Addie’s annoying personality tics almost amusing—including her idle threats (“Want a knuckle sandwich, lady?”), incessant chatter (“Paying rent means people stay”) and odd gestures (offering

Ellen her pink purse).

But when Addie becomes physically aggressive, then dangerous—a situation compounded by the unexpected arrival of Ellen’s parole officer—Ellen suddenly loses it, leading to a startling discovery that explains everything about Addie’s behavior that day.

Over 6 million individuals in the U.S. have developmental disabilities, which can include autism, cerebral palsy, Down’s syndrome, fetal alcohol syndrome, intellectual disability and spina bifida, depending on the individual.



Few films have depicted this medical condition as realistically as “The Punishing Business.” But then how many screenwriters have had the opportunity to do more than visit such a facility. Skibinski actually spent over a decade managing group homes for the developmentally disabled while penning screenplays at night.

“I know this world intimately. It was a huge part of my life for a long time,” she recalls. Even though Skibinski left the profession three years ago to write full time, she says that she “grew to love many of these people from working with them for years. They were almost like family, even though it was very challenging. A lot of these people don’t have coping strategies for handling stress like we do. For them it’s simply an explosion, whatever form it takes.”

Having started her career in the casting departments on Gus Van Sant’s “Elephant” and “Paranoid Park,” director and producer Heather Harlow knew from the beginning that one of the biggest challenges she faced in bringing “The Punishing Business” to the screen was finding actors with the acting chops to assume these larger-than-life characters.

Although to some it might seem like a stretch to cast poised superstar vocalist Storm Large as Ellen, Harlow knew the legendary songstress socially and was aware that Large had overcome some formidable personal challenges herself (as detailed in her



award-winning 2012 memoir, *Crazy Enough*).

“The very first time I read the script, Storm came to mind as Ellen,” says Harlow. “Ellen’s character is smart, witty, sharp, funny and a little rough, so it seemed to be a great fit—and it was. I reached out to her and she loved the script.”

Even though Large was previously featured in James Westby’s cult comedy, “Rid of Me,” few are aware that she not only studied at but received an associate degree from the prestigious American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York at the age of 19.

“It was there I actually realized I was a terrible actor, so I pursued music instead,”

she says with a laugh. “However I enjoy acting much more now than I did ages ago, and feel more confident in that muscle. So, yes, I’d love to mix it up and do more of it.”

Considering Large’s touring schedule, it was a miracle she was even available for “The Punishing Business.” Since shooting to national prominence in 2006 as a finalist on CBS’ “Rock Star: Supernova,” Large has performed extensively with Pink Martini, including for four sold-out concerts with the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC, and twice at Carnegie Hall (as a guest soloist for the Detroit Symphony in 2013 and the New York Pops Orchestra in 2015.)



Harlow’s instincts were right. In fact, it’s hard to imagine anyone else in the role. Ask Large what makes Ellen tick, and she says without hesitation: “Guilt. She’s also a little cynical. She doesn’t believe she’s capable of any good and is convinced the world sees her as a scumbag.” So how did Large prepare for the role? “Ummm....I’ve felt that way most of my life,” she says with a laugh.

For the role of Addie, “it was a long process,” says Harlow, “because I obviously wanted this character to be authentic. It is the role that would make or break the movie so to speak.” Harlow started with a general casting call, followed by three callbacks—all

attended by the screenwriter. “Having Sarah there was invaluable,” says Harlow. “A lot of the auditions just went overboard trying to capture the mental disability, and it felt really forced.”

Despite the competition, casting Melissa Kaiser as Addie was a no-brainer. “Melissa clearly stood out, and it was obvious she had really researched the role and done her homework,” Harlow says. To research the role, Harlow and Kaiser were able to meet and



spend time with some of the developmentally disabled people who had inspired Skibinski to create the film, as well as shape the Addie character.

“I knew playing Addie would be a stretch for me,” says Kaiser. “She’s a fantastic character because she has a very strong objective and viewpoint. She utilizes numerous strategies to get what she wants, and she doesn’t have filters. Working with Addie, for me, was about tapping into her impulses and then getting out of the way.”

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“The Punishing Business” was filmed in Portland, Oregon, by an award-winning production team. The highly-respected scientist-turned-filmmaker Heather Harlow learned how to make films from literally working in almost every capacity on sets over

the years. Harlow made her directorial debut in 2009 with the 17-minute documentary, “Nous Deux Encore,” hailed by *Los Angeles Times* film critic Kenneth Turan as “a truly, madly, deeply moving love story, inventively told and powerfully evocative of time and place.” “Nous Deux Encore” went on to win over a dozen top prizes from more than two dozen film festivals around the globe—including the Monaco International Film Festival, GIAA in New York, HollyShorts in Los Angeles, the International DocuFest in Atlanta,



Festival Tous Courts in France and the Portland International Film Festival.

Writer Sarah Skibinski is the recipient of nearly two dozen screenwriting awards to date. Among them, she has been a PAGE International Screenwriting Awards Gold Prize winner; a participant in Tribeca Film’s invitational All Access program; featured in the IFP Market’s Emerging Narrative Section and invited to participate in their Screenwriters Lab. The feature-length version of “The Punishing Business” was also a Grand Prize Finalist at Slamdance; a Quarterfinalist for the Nicholl Fellowship (sponsored

by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences); the winner of the Park Avenue Award from the New York Screenplay Competition, and a PAGE Semifinalist.

“The Punishing Business” was edited by two-time Tribeca Film Festival filmmaker James Westby, who writes, directs, and edits “provocative films with economical budgets, no compromises and big laughs” — including “Film Geek,” “The Auteur” and “Rid of Me.” The *New York Times* has called Westby “a wizard of concision and a master of discomfort.”

One of the advertising world’s top directors and shooters, Gary Nolton was responsible for “The Punishing Business” lush cinematography. Between assignments that take him all of the world, Nolton has produced, directed and edited the documentaries, “Evergreen for Kids” and “A-town.” He is currently working on bringing the courageous true story of Holocaust survivor Alter Wiener to the big screen.

# Director's Statement



When the opportunity came to me to direct this film, I was both excited and intimidated. I knew I was taking on a huge endeavor. Casting the role of Addie presented my first challenge. I knew that finding the right actor to fill this role was imperative to the film's success. Once I found Melissa through

a series of local casting sessions, together we were able to embark upon our research into the character of Addie, who was developed out of the life experience of the writer, Sarah Skibinski. Sarah spent many years working in the shared homes of developmentally disabled people in Eugene, Oregon. Addie's character is actually a combination of three people we were able to meet and learn about their lives. One of the film's intentions is to shed light on the point of view that developmentally disabled people, despite their quirks and oddities, are not so different from the rest of us; in fact, in many ways they are exactly the same as us, because their behaviors stem from very universal feelings and identical emotions that we all possess. In the film, all of Addie's actions, from the tiniest to the largest, reflect this. "The Punishing Business" is a story about connection. More specifically, a connection, or friendship, that takes place between two seemingly opposite individuals. However, as it turns out, Ellen and Addie share many similarities, they are two outsiders, both looked down on by society, both with hardened exteriors, both know what it's like to do harmful things without having intended harm, and are both struggling with their internal demons. Consequently, they both come to realize that through each other, their demons can perhaps hurt a little less. This film's success so far would never have been possible had I not been fortunate enough to have such extremely talented collaborators. Award-winning filmmaker James Westby edited the film. Michael Herrman composed an all original score. Local Portland legend Gary Nolton shot beautifully on his Alexa camera, and the list goes on. I hope you enjoy the film! *Heather Harlow*

# Cast Bios

## Storm Large

Musician, actor, playwright and author Storm Large shot to national prominence in 2006 as a finalist on CBS' "Rock Star: Supernova." She spent the 1990s singing in clubs throughout San Francisco. Tired of the club scene, she moved to Portland to pursue a new career as a chef, but a last minute cancellation in 2002 at the Portland club, "Dante's," turned into a standing Wednesday night engagement for Storm and her new band, The Balls. It wasn't long before Storm had a cult-like following in Portland, and a renewed singing career that was about to be launched onto the international stage.

Storm made her debut as guest vocalist with the band Pink Martini in April 2011, singing four sold-out concerts with the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. She continues to perform with the band, touring internationally, and she was featured on their CD, *Get Happy*. Storm has also sung with Grammy winner k.d. lang, pianist Kirill Gerstein, punk rocker John Doe, singer/songwriter Rufus Wainwright, and Rock and Roll Hall of Famer George Clinton.

She debuted with the Oregon Symphony in 2010, and has returned for sold out performances each year thereafter. Storm made her Carnegie Hall debut in May 2013, singing Weill's *Seven Deadly Sins* with the Detroit Symphony as part of the Spring for Music festival. The *New York Times* called her "sensational," and the classical music world instantly had a new star.

In 2007, she took a career departure and starred in Portland Center Stage's production of *Cabaret* with Wade McCollum. The show was a smash hit, earning Storm glowing reviews. Her next endeavor, the autobiographical musical memoir, *Crazy Enough*, played to packed houses in 2009 during its unprecedented 21-week sold out run



in Portland. Storm went on to perform a cabaret version of the show to critical acclaim at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Adelaide Festival in Australia, and Joe's Pub in New York. Her memoir, *Crazy Enough*, was released by Simon and Schuster in 2012, named Oprah's Book of the Week, and awarded the 2013 Oregon Book Award for Creative Non-fiction.

Storm is featured in "Rid of Me," a film by James Westby, starring Katie O'Grady and Theresa Russell. In November and December of 2010, she starred at the Mark Taper Forum with Katey Sagal and Michael McKean in Jerry Zak's production of "Harps and Angels," a musical featuring the work of Randy Newman.

In the 2013/14 season Storm and her band, Le Bonheur, performed in many new cities around the country, including Las Vegas, Boston, and Minneapolis in a evening called "Taken By Storm." In June 2014, she appeared at the Ojai Festival with the exciting new orchestra, The Knights, and the vocal ensemble Hudson Shad. Later in the summer she debuted at the Grant Park Music Festival in Chicago.

In the Fall of 2014, Storm & Le Bonheur released a record designed to capture their sublime and subversive interpretations of the American Songbook. Entitled simply, "Le Bonheur" and released on Pink Martini's, Heinz Records, the recording is a collection of tortured and titillating love songs; beautiful, familiar, yet twisted...much like the lady herself. Storm also makes her debut with The New York Pops Orchestra at Carnegie Hall, The Cincinnati Symphony, The Houston Symphony and The RTE Concert Orchestra in Dublin, amongst others. Storm is also busy creating a new musical with The Public Theater in New York City.

## **Sean McGrath**

Sean is an actor, writer and dreamweaver. He's been a performer and writer for "Live Wire Radio," the nationally syndicated variety show, since 2005. He is also the creator of "Bath Night Sketch Comedy," co-wrote the adaptation for "Weekend at Bernie's: The Play" and the web series, "Hundredaires," and was a member of the comedy group Sweat. He recently appeared as Dean in "Maple and Vine" at Coho Theater in Portland and his recent screen credits include "The Librarians" on TNT and the indie horror flick, "Deep Dark." He's also directed over ten comedic shorts for Cinema Syndicate. He is 19th in line for the throne of Brunei.

## **Melissa Kaiser**

Melissa received her BA in theatre from Barnard College, Columbia University. Some of her on camera credits include: “The Punishing Business,” “The Brink,” “Actual Reality,” TNT’s “Leverage,” ABC’s “Final Witness,” and webseries “Non-Essential Personnel” and “Wage Slaves.’ On stage she has worked with Oregon Children’s Theatre, The Public House Theatre Company, defunkt theatre, Northwest Classical Theatre Company, Portland Center Stage (JAW), and Stark Raving Theatre in which she was also a company member.

## **Shade Streeter**

At the age of 13, Shade began his film career with the lead role in award-winning author Patrick Carmen's short film adaptation of the book, *3:15 Stories: The Beast*. Nearly four years later, Shade has appeared in two commercials, Heather Harlow's short film “The Punishing Business” and Kimber Dion's recently released short film “Goodbye, First Love.” In 2013, Shade filmed a lead role in the feature film, “The Dark Place,” which was picked up for world-wide distribution. He also recently finished filming the role of young director James Westby in the documentary, “At The Video Store,” alongside directors Gus Van Sant, Johns Waters, John Sloss and many others. Shade recently accepted the role of young Dr. Christian in Polluted Picture's "eagerly anticipated" new feature film “Love Sick,” set to be filmed in 2014.

Shade is also a screenwriter. His short film screenplay, “Head Trip,” was selected as a semi-finalist at the Eerie Horror Film Festival in 2013, and was an official selection at the Sacramento International Film Festival in 2014. “Head Trip” also won Honorable Mention at the California International Film Festival in 2014 and was selected for the Columbia Gorge International Film Festival in 2014 and as a Quarter Finalist at the Creative World Awards.

# Crew Bios

## **Producer / Director Heather Harlow**

“The Punishing Business” is Heather Harlow’s second film as a director and producer. Her first, the critically-acclaimed documentary, “Nous Deux Encore,” was hailed by the esteemed *Los Angeles Times* film critic Kenneth Turan as “a truly, madly, deeply moving love story, inventively told and powerfully evocative of time and place.”

“Nous Deux Encore” is a compelling portrait of one couple’s profound passion for life and each other, recounted by former French television journalist Maxie Leoussis 22 years following her husband’s premature death. The 17-minute short captured the hearts of viewers around the world, as well as over a dozen top prizes from more than two dozen film festivals around the globe. Among them were the Monaco International Film Festival, GIAA in New York, HollyShorts in Los Angeles, the International DocuFest in Atlanta, Festival Tous Courts in France and the Portland International Film Festival.

Harlow holds an undergraduate degree in fine arts (Photography) from the University of Oregon and two master’s degrees (in Botanical Sciences, Conservation Biology and Ethnobotany) from the University of Hawaii. She began her career in film and video production in 1999, while doing documentary research in Northern Himalayan, India. In 2002, she co-founded the non-profit Northwest Documentary Arts & Media and spent two years on the team that made the award-winning documentary, “Sun Gu Ja: A Century of Korean Pioneers,” which traces the 100-year history of Korean immigration to the Pacific Coast.

She has since worked in every capacity of production, including as the producer and director of the documentary, “Balancing the Elements,” on the healing practice of Tibetan Medicine; associate producer of the the Pander Brothers’ feature film, “Selfless,” a thriller about identity theft; member of the casting department on Gus Van Sant’s “Elephant” and “Paranoid Park” and Hideo Nakata’s “Ring II”; production coordinator on Oregon Public Broadcasting’s “America’s History in the Making” educational DVD; and co-produced the music videos for Ben Folds’ “Landed” and The Shins’ “St. Simon.” Harlow currently serves as the digital media content producer for top award-winning agencies such as AKQA.

## **Cinematographer Gary Nolton**

Gary Nolton began his career in his hometown of Los Angeles, studying film at the prestigious Art Center College of Design. In 1982 he migrated north to Portland, Oregon, where he opened his first studio. Gary's success shooting commercial photography assignments for clients nationwide inspired the 1998 launch of his film production company Limbo Films, where he now concentrates on shooting broadcast commercials, digital content and independent film.

One of the Northwest's most successful director/cameramen, Nolton has worked for an impressive list of agencies, including BBD&O, BP&N, Cole & Weber/Seattle, DDB Needham, Dentsu/Tokyo, Element 79/Chicago, FCB/NY, Fahlgren, GSD&M, J.Walter Thompson, Leo Burnett, Magneto, McCann Erikson, Ogilvy, Periscope, Rodgers Townsend/St.Louis, Rubin-Postaer/Los Angeles, Wieden & Kennedy and Zimmerman Agency.

His client list is equally impressive: Adidas, Blue Cross, Bonita Bay, Budweiser, Coca-Cola, Converse, Del Taco, Dove, Dunlop Golf, Dusquene Power, Gatorade, Honda, Jansport, Jantzen, Intel, L.L. Bean, McDonald's, Mead Notebooks, Microsoft, Mississippi Power, Napa Auto, NIKE, Nikon, Nintendo, Pampers, Papa John's, Precept Golf, Precor, SBC, Sprint, Sony, Tommy Bahama, Windstar Cruises and hundreds of others.

Nolton has been trusted to serve as Director of Photography on several independent films including "CPR" and "9," both directed by Kimberly Warner; "The Divine," directed by Tim Hoover; "The Light," directed by Josh Dion; "Legacy," directed by Guy Baker, and "Shave," directed by Joe Molina. Nolton has produced/directed and edited the documentaries, "Evergreen for Kids" and "A-town'," and is currently in production with "From a Number to a Name," an inspiring story about Holocaust survivor and author Alter Wiener.

## **Editor James Westby**

Called "a wizard of concision and a master of discomfort" by the *New York Times*, James Westby is an independent filmmaker from Portland, OR. He writes, directs, and edits provocative films with economical budgets and no compromises. And big laughs!

His features include "Film Geek" (video store clerk loses his job and starts working at an auto parts warehouse), "The Auteur" (sweet romantic comedy about the world's greatest porn director) and "Rid of Me" (timid housewife wreaks revenge on her yuppie husband and his asshole friends).

Westby's work has shown at the Tribeca Film Festival, Michael Moore's Traverse City Film Festival, Palm Springs Shortsfest, and many many others. He is currently at work on his next feature, the experimental documentary "At The Video Store."

## **Composer Michael Herrmann**

Michael Herrman is a composer, producer, performer and humanitarian who recently spent a year and a half between Kabul, Afghanistan and Paris, France. He has worked with youth in Afghanistan using music as therapy and taught Rock n Roll at The Rock School Kabul. As well as performing for ambassadors, he scored multiple short documentaries during his time there, one of which focused on the progress of Afghan women over the last 12 years. While in Paris, he scored "The Punishing Business," and produced songs for various artists as well as writing, recording and producing the next record for his own Portland-based Chamber Rock band, Buoy LaRue.

## **Screenwriter Sarah Sibinski**

Sarah Skibinski has been highly recognized for her past five feature screenplays. "The Rhythm of Chaos," currently under option with Molly Mayeux's Dhalia Street Films and Sarah Knight's Jo Films, won the Gold Prize for Drama at the PAGE International Screenwriting Awards, and was also the Scriptapalooza Runner-Up and a Nicholl Fellowship Semifinalist. She co-wrote an adaptation of Michael Dorris' bestselling novel, *A Yellow Raft In Blue Water*, which was featured in the 2007 IFP Market's Emerging Narrative Section. Actors Misty Upham ("Frozen River") and Q'orinka Kilcher ("The New World") are attached. Her sci-fi/fantasy script, "Hannah Rice" was a 2007 PAGE Finalist and Slamdance Quarterfinalist, and her drama, "A Room Without A Ceiling," was a 2008 PAGE Semifinalist. Skibinski's feature version of "The Punishing Business" was a 2013 Slamdance Grand Prize Finalist, a Nicholl Fellowship Quarterfinalist, an Austin first-rounder, and the winner of the 2012 "Park Avenue Award" for Drama in the New York Screenplay Competition.

# **Production Credits**

**“THE PUNISHING BUSINESS”**

**A Short Film by Heather Harlow**

**Starring Storm Large**

**Melissa Kaiser, Shade Streeter and Sean McGrath**

**Directed and Produced by Heather Harlow**

**Written by Sarah Skibinski**

**Director of Photography Gary Nolton**

**Editor James Westby**

**Music by Michael Herrman**

## **Logline**

When a recovering junkie, fresh out of prison, reluctantly opens her heart to someone else’s profound grief and pain, she finally learns how to deal with her own.

## **Synopsis**

Though only 19 minutes long, “The Punishing Business” quickly becomes an intense roller coaster of emotions as the film peels back the layers of guilt, fear and loneliness that plague both Ellen and Addie — but will ultimately become the bond that saves their lives. Despite her natural beauty and privileged upbringing, Ellen is a recovering junkie, fresh out of prison, who thrives on the edge of self-destruction. Or so she thinks. One more screw-up, however, and Ellen will be back behind bars. Addie is the developmentally-disabled daughter of Ellen’s landlady, who drops by for no apparent reason, then refuses to leave. At first, Ellen finds Addie’s annoying personality tics almost amusing—including her idle threats (“Want a knuckle sandwich, lady?”), incessant chatter (“Paying rent means people stay”) and odd gestures (offering Ellen her pink purse). But when Addie becomes physically aggressive, then dangerous—a situation compounded by the unexpected arrival of Ellen’s parole officer—Ellen suddenly loses it, leading to a startling discovery that explains everything about Addie’s behavior that day.