



Style

# 'Ping Pong Summer' showcases an Ocean City that hasn't changed much since 1985

Rad (Marcello Conte) and Stacy (Emmi Shockley) in "Ping Pong Summer." (Courtesy Gravitass Ventures/Courtesy Gravitass Ventures)

BY JEN CHANEY June 5

The cast of the indie comedy "Ping Pong Summer" may be peppered with some well-known actors, including Susan Sarandon and Lea Thompson. But the real star of the film, which opens in select theaters and on-demand Friday, is Ocean City, Md.

The '80s-era coming-of-ager, written and directed by Maryland native Michael Tully, was shot in Ocean City in the fall of 2012, marking the first time a movie production had parked itself in the seaside town since the 1986 Sissy Spacek/Kevin Kline romance "Violets Are Blue." Tully, 39, banged out the first draft of the screenplay in 1992, when he was just 17. Even though he continued to tinker with the script for nearly two decades, he held off on saying "Action!" until he was sure he could film in and around the Coastal Highway haunts he frequented during childhood summer breaks.

"If it was a decision between never making it or making it somewhere else, I would have decided not to make it," says Tully, who's now based in Austin, Tex.

"Ping Pong Summer" — the story of Rad, a vacationing 13-year-old boy fixated on table tennis, parachute pants and beatboxing — is set in 1985, the same summer that Thompson's "Back to the Future" became a



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blockbuster smash. Trying to make a period piece on location can be a challenge, especially for a movie with a budget of just over \$1 million. Fortunately for Tully, Ocean City hasn't changed drastically since the "Violets Are Blue" era.

"The town has preserved itself in a way that just looks like my family photos from 1985," he laughs.

Here's a look at how seven key Delmarva locations were used to turn "Ping Pong Summer" into a time machine that zips its audience back to Ocean City circa the cassette tape years — with no help from a flux capacitor.

### **Paul Revere's Smorgasbord (109 Boardwalk)**

The interior of this all-you-can-eat restaurant didn't require many changes to match the mid-'80s vibe. According to Tully, the movie's production designer walked into the Colonial-themed, wood-paneled eatery for the first time, looked around and said, "Are you kidding me right now? We're ready to roll." But the massive spread of meat, pastas and fried seafood — captured in the film during a comically long tracking shot — did require one modification. That change came via a suggestion from Harmony Korine, the director of "Spring Breakers" and a friend of Tully's, who told the filmmaker via text message that a buffet from that time had to include red Jell-O. "Because of him," Tully says, "we actually swapped out whatever the last thing was — some sort of oyster or clam — and put the red Jell-O in there."

### **Old Pro Golf (136th Street and Coastal Highway)**

Several Old Pro miniature golf courses are sprinkled along Coastal Highway, each with their own theme and visually striking centerpiece. Tully opted to include the pirate course, which has been upgraded over the years but still houses a large ship that looks mostly the same as it did in the '80s. "It was just the most colorful and visually stimulating" course, Tully says. And it provided the perfect backdrop for the movie's protagonist, Rad, to catch the eye of the girl of his dreams as she stands above him on the deck of that ship.

### **Anthony's Beer, Wine & Deli (33rd Street and Coastal Highway)**

Even if you've never bought a six-pack or sandwich at this O.C. institution, you undoubtedly know its sign, which features a pair of neon dancing beer cans and a wine bottle. "Every year, I would see that and think, 'Okay, now I'm in Ocean City. Now I'm on vacation,'" Tully says. The sign is in the movie, as is the deli's interior, which had to be dressed-up by the "Ping Pong" team because Anthony's had closed for the season when filming took place. (Fun fact: The actor who plays the cashier at Anthony's — Judah Friedlander of "30 Rock" fame — is also a Maryland native; he grew up in Gaithersburg.)

### **Fox Sun & Surf 8 (143rd Street and Coastal Highway)**

The interior of this multiplex may have changed since the 1980s, but from the outside, it still looks like the huge industrial warehouse of a cineplex it was 30 years ago. That made it perfect for some exterior shots in a montage that follows Rad and his friend Teddy as they indulge in all the pleasures — water slides, Thrasher's fries and matinees — of a day on the Delmarva shore.

### **Phillips Seafood Restaurant (2004 Philadelphia Ave.)**

Before Phillips became a chain, there was the original Ocean City crab house, which opened in 1956. Tully chose it as the spot for a pseudo-date between Rad and Stacy, the rich girl Rad has a crush on, because when Tully was a kid, he viewed the restaurant as too extravagant for his frugal family. "I didn't discover it until I was old enough to go to Ocean City by myself and I was like, I don't care," he says. "I have enough money. I'm going to pay the \$28 for the all-you-can-eat."

### **Gold Coast Mall (115th Street and Coastal Highway)**

Tully wanted to shoot a scene at this long-standing mall in which Rad enters a record store and chooses a cassette — complete with that unnecessary, '80s-era hard plastic casing — off the wall racks. But there's no longer a record store at Gold Coast, and the cost of recreating that retail experience was prohibitive. Instead, "Ping Pong Summer" features one scene inside the still reasonably retro-looking mall, followed by one of Rad at his beach cottage, ripping the cellophane off a just-purchased tape by hip-hop group Mantronix. Why that particular cassette? Because Tully once bought the same one at a Gold Coast Mall midnight madness sale.

### **Trimper's Rides and the Ocean City boardwalk**

Though some anachronistic elements had to be blocked out of shots of the boardwalk amusement park, its overall carnival atmosphere hadn't changed much. Even the T-shirts worn by the Trimper's staff look the same as they have since the '70s, Tully said.

But there was one crucial element that Tully added to the mix, just outside Trimper's, to truly recapture the Ocean City boardwalk experience circa 1985: the dunk tank that contained Bozo, a crowd-heckling clown who, in the movie, shouts insults at Rad.

"The memory was that [Bozo] definitely cursed, and he definitely was drunk," Tully says of the red-noser with the cackle that could curdle milk. "I think people will vouch for that."

Bozo is long gone, but after a brainstorming session with longtime O.C. residents, it became clear that the clown — dubbed "Booze-o" in "Ping Pong Summer" — needed to be represented. Says Tully: "It was a credit to them that they pointed out the obvious: that that had to be in the movie to make it legitimate '80s."

**“Ping Pong Summer” is playing at AFI Silver in Silver Spring. Director Michael Tully will take part in a Q&A after the 7:30 and 10 p.m. screenings on Friday.**