

Fringe filmmaker to visit campus

By Sean Axmaker
Of the Emerald

The name Jon Jost means very little to the majority of American filmgoers, and it will probably remain that way. Their loss, for Jost's independently made films have made him one of the most acclaimed independent filmmakers in America.

Jost's films are a direct challenge to the Hollywood tradition of filmmaking. Where most pictures offer heroes and stories open to easy vicarious involvement, Jost constructs his films to challenge simple identification with the screen drama. Though his stylistic approach varies from feature to feature, his films are consistently self-reflexive; using techniques as direct address, a mix of color and black-and-white footage, improvisational acting and natural, unmanipulated sound and lighting to create a world that is at once more real and more cinematic than the super-productions showing in the local theaters.

Such a vision forces Jost to make compromises. Some of Jost's films have been made for as little as \$6,000, and his most famous feature, "Last Chants For A Slow Dance" was made for between \$2,000 and \$3,000. Even his bigger-budgeted productions made for German and British television are well under \$50,000.

For these reasons, Jost will remain on the economic fringe of the film industry, carving out his personal visions with a 16-millimeter camera, a couple of "non-actors" and one of the sharpest cinematic insights since Jean-Luc Godard.

Jost presents the Northwest premier of his recently finished feature "Bell Diamond" tonight at 7 in 180 PLC. The free event is sponsored by the Cultural Forum.

The following telephone interview was conducted Jan. 21:

Axmaker: Why do you choose to make films in the form you do, low budget, using 16 millimeter and "non-actors," using direct sound?

Jost: Primarily because the kind of films that I make, I don't think in America at least, could be made with commercial backing. In other words, the nature of the films themselves, what I'm trying to see expressed through them, is almost inherently contradictory to the interests of commercial filmmaking... I probably couldn't raise the money to make the films that I make without changing the films.

The other part is that several of the qualities, however rough-edged certain qualities may be in my work, the virtues of it just can't happen when you work in

a normal production process. In other words, you can't get people to say certain things, act certain ways, particularly non-professionals, if you have a bank of lights or whatever around or you, or recorded the sound like you would in Hollywood.

Axmaker: Why do you go for that rough-edged quality?

Jost: I go for it because I think it's more honest. Basically for me, filmmaking is a mode of politics, and it isn't so much that I mind other films get made other ways, but at least some of my work gets a little more honest about certain things about America, and part of that honesty comes out of the technical and aesthetic choices that are made. And that's what I want to do.

Axmaker: What kind of audience can you find for these films?

Jost: Three. It depends on which particular film of mine you might be talking about. "Last Chants (For A Slow Dance)" shouldn't have any great difficulty with an audience that went in expecting to see some mode of American action movie, as long as they'll go through the first 10 minutes... which I don't think "Last Chants" has any problem doing.

There's no reason why films like "Last Chants" aren't shown in the repertory houses that any big city has where they might show that film every once or twice a year. There's no reason between the film and the audience why that shouldn't be. But there are business reasons why a film like "Last Chants" doesn't get shown and a far more obscure film from Turkey or India or somewhere does get shown. Some of it has to do with the money you spent on it, and some of it has to do with cultural prejudice.

Axmaker: So you're saying that the sacrifices you'd have to make to work within such a system would negate the message you're trying to get across.

Jost: For me it would. Let's say 10 years ago I thought that there was a chance if I went to Hollywood and hung around L.A. and whatever, that there was a chance... that one could get a foot in the door and make something that I would want to make, and in the following 10 years I have concluded that it's not true, that there's no chance that someone like me could go work in the movie industry and make what I want to make.

And along the way the process has become more sort of a mutual process of which they're not aware, but I am, and that is

that, like "Bell Diamond," for example, is deliberately completely cast with non-professionals, and that's deliberate on my part. If I wanted to... I could go and get professional actors, whatever, and at this point the truth for me is that for many things, not everything, but for many things I would rather not have professional actors because I find usually there's something false in what they do.

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