

Students take a seat in the director's chair.

BY CARRIE BELL

ASSISTANT EDITOR

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MICHAEL MARCUS, FLORIDA STATE U., AND
KIERNAN HOLLAND, U. OF NEW MEXICO

A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY, A U. OF Southern California film student created a dehumanized world where people lived underground, emotion was outlawed and numbers replaced names.

The futuristic love story and the young director caught the eye of Francis Ford Coppola, who helped turn the 20-minute debut into a full-length feature. The film? *THX-1138*. The student? George Lucas.

Of course, not all cinema-obsessed college kids are launched at warp speed to fame by some Hollywood hotshot. But all filmmakers have to start somewhere, and that somewhere is often a university.

School days

Early in a career, the worst film you can make is no film, according to Colorado College film professor Tom Sanny. Although directing ability stems from natural talent, he says, a formal education and trial films build character, teach discipline and act as a therapy of sorts.

"Movies in America are like hockey in Canada," Sanny says. "We've just always done them well. My role as a professor is not to make films, but to make filmmakers."

Most students fade into the biz with short projects and theory classes. Colorado junior Vanessa Tomasello says the best way to break into the field is to try every job, no matter how small.

"Helping out older students on final projects lets me see how different directors work and how to best compensate for problems that might arise when I'm in charge," says Tomasello, who's working on a

visual interpretation of a William Blake poem.

A film is born

Once the tools are mastered and the confidence raised, the adventure of filmmaking begins — often with an idea.

Most plots are inspired by everyday events. New York U. grad student and Student Academy Award winner Phil Bertelsen fictionalized his parents' interracial love story.

"The relationship was a constant source of inquiry for me," he says. "It was hard to decide how much artistic license to take. It proves life can be stranger than fiction."

Cornell U.'s Chris Spurgin wrote his film entirely around a prop. When he was younger, Spurgin bought a Moonwalk bounce house, hoping to get rich quick. After hauling it a few places and realizing how big a hassle it was, he sold it on the condition that he could use it later in a film.

"It's an absurd comedy about a guy whose life falls apart after he steals a Moonwalk. The metaphor of the plot and the prop was too good to pass up," the senior says.

Other directors aren't so gracefully inspired. In fact, it hit Albany State U., Ga., junior Keith Wade over the head. He made *Chillin' Till We Breathe* in response to Terry McMillan's *Waiting To Exhale*.

"The movie is my male response

to her woman's film. I wanted to pull the covers off male emotion."

Reality bytes

After hearing endless stories of actors' egos, set feuds and missed lines, it's no wonder some students opt to direct computer cursors instead of flaky thespians. And with user-friendly technology and *Toy Story's* success, who can blame them?

"As a computer science major, I felt the only hope I had was to program database systems," says Kiernan Holland, a U. of New Mexico senior.

Holland used his software skills to create *Rise of the Thorax*, a short that won \$2,000 in an international animation competition.

Holland and seven other UNM students are making *Malibu Hamlet*, a five-minute film that's "Shakespeare with a surf-punk twist."

"It's easier in a group because everyone shares their strengths to complete a final goal," UNM senior Elizabeth Dwyer says. "The computer is a way for me to be an artist, even though I can't draw on paper."

Lights, camera, social action

Not all movie buffs turn their talents toward big money, popularity or laughs. Enter the socially responsible, politically aware director.

Chicago's Street-Level Youth Media provides a creative outlet for at-risk youth using filmmaking to address urban issues. Hampshire College, Mass., senior Andrew Bracken worked for the program last summer and hopes to use the experience for future documentaries.

"I've seen a lot of friends drop out and turn to drugs and gangs. It could've just as easily been me," he says. "Working for this group helps me do my part not to let that happen to the next generation."

Instead of shedding light on current issues, Florida State U. sophomore Michael Marcus helps people remember the past with his documentary, *The Holocaust — A Deception of Truth*.

The need to make it consumed him after he returned home from a journey through Polish concentration camps.

"The trip made me realize it was my responsibility as a child of this generation to help expose the horrors of the Holocaust," Marcus says. "It was more important than school, than work, than my social life. I had to share what I saw and felt."

Marcus spent months looking for the right images, writing, editing, seeking permission and raising funds to complete the film, which is now distributed as an educational tool for high schools in four states.

The money pit

Tales of Spike Lee maxing out credit cards to finish *Do The Right Thing* remind students of what it takes to transfer an idea from paper to reality: money, and lots of it.

Depending on length, scale and quality, student movies cost anywhere from a few hundred dollars to tens of thousands to complete.

"No one wants to hear about dreams unless you have the money to make them happen," Wade says.

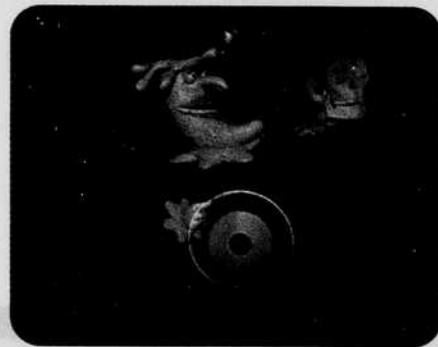
Money comes from jobs, grants, scholarships, parents and loans. Cornell senior and Filmmakers Club president Josh Fagin suggests making rich friends. "You should always be prepared to tack on an extra \$100 to the price of everything."

James Madison U., Va., seniors Jeff Lofgren and Bill Johnson founded Gemini Entertainment to raise money for their made-for-TV movie, *To Helene*, and give students production experience.

"Not being at a film school forces us to be resourceful trailblazers. We want Gemini to help people realize their dreams after we're gone," Johnson says.

With everything that can go wrong, it's easy to understand how an aspiring director could get discouraged quickly. Harvard U. law student Zach Lehman, who won a Student Academy Award for his claymation film while at Dartmouth College, N.H., says your best friend is patience.

"Triple however long you think it will take. Be able to take criticism. Follow your heart. Fight for funding help. All of this is



great advice, but won't help you unless you keep in mind that no matter what happens, it's all in a day's work."

Carrie Bell doesn't know much about filmmaking, except for that hidden camera she stashed in her roommate's closet.

Oscar Child

Limos arrive and anticipation builds. The stars have come out to play. Sharon Stone is either wearing or saying something critics will moan about tomorrow. It could be the biggest night of a student filmmaker's life — the Student Academy Awards.

Now in its 24th year, the program awards the top three films directed by full-time students in the categories of animation, alternative, dramatic and documentary; a fourth award goes to a foreign student director.

"The Academy is interested in the future of the film industry, and colleges are where new filmmakers are coming from," says Rich Miller, the SAA's administrative director. "It encourages good filmmakers to keep making movies."

With more than 300 entries a year, competition is steep to say the least — just look at past winners like Robert Zemeckis, Spike Lee and Bob Saget.

"We only send the best nine films in each category to be screened by Academy members," Miller says. "The movies should be résumé pieces that show you can direct and tell stories on screen."

On top of the prestige, winners are treated to a trip to Hollywood, a cash prize, a celebrity-filled awards ceremony and power meetings.

"The Hollywood people take it very seriously. Doors open that you never knew existed," says Jon Andrews, a Yale U. grad and Silver Award winner. "In a word, the program is affirmation."

Although star treatment felt great, Patricia Cardoso, a '96 UCLA grad who won first place for *The Water Carrier*, says meeting others with similar dreams was more inspiring.

"This was an amazing group of people who shared my commitment to film," says Cardoso, who is filming a romantic comedy for Ciby, a French film company. "There were many times I swore to quit, but the winners gave me hope and strength to go forward." — CB



Back to the cutting board.