

'Wamego' chronicles labor, dedication in filmmaking

Director Steve Balderson chronicles the making of a twisted movie about death, love and betrayal

By Rebekah Hearn
Copy Chief

Films are a constant and welcome presence in the lives of those interested in pop culture, yet movie buffs may have been noticing the dry, uninspired taste most Hollywood movies leave in their mouths lately. Oftentimes money can not only speak louder than, but drown out meaning in many so-called successful films.

However, in this day and age of big-budget, big-name blockbusters, director Steve Balderson's approach to filmmaking is not just a breath of fresh air — it is a gale-force wind that just may huff and puff and blow that famous Hollywood sign down right before film industry's eyes.

Balderson's production company, Dikenga, is based in his hometown of Wamego, Kansas. After attending the prestigious Cal Arts Film School for three years, where he oversaw production on six full-length video projects, he did the unheard-of: He dropped out to make his own movie. "Pep Squad" — which was made for less than \$500,000 — features expensive-

looking photography and a stunningly horrific plot that anyone with a soft spot for black comedy will cream over.

After the fiery debut of "Pep Squad" and the critical acclaim that followed, Balderson took on his second project with zeal. He segued from peccant killer prom queens to a joltingly beautiful, heartbreakingly sinister murder mystery. "Firecracker," which is scheduled for release in the fall, is a dreamy, fantastical tale of murder, betrayal, abuse, alcoholism, carnival folk and small-town dreams — and the best part is, the plot is based on a true story.

"Firecracker" stars the unique beauty Karen Black ("House of 1000 Corpses") and thorax master Mike

Patton, who is currently the lead singer for Tomahawk and Fantomas and who formerly fronted Faith No More. In an interesting casting decision, Balderson chose to have Black play both Sandra and Eleanor, the mother of David and younger brother Jimmy. Similarly, Patton plays both David and carnival owner Frank. Artistically, the messages are fascinating and the symbolism heavy. Practically, however, having two actors play dual roles without it being overly obvious presents dilemmas.

Selene Luna, who plays carnival personality Harriet, believes this casting choice was a successful one.

"It was really a hit-or-miss kind of

thing," said Luna. "But here, it was really well-done. The way he shot it, it was very metaphorical, and Karen and Mike really rose to the occasion."

Balderson discussed the casting issues during a phone interview.

"It sort of snowballed," he said. "(Dennis) Hopper invited my dad and I to his house in California and he said, 'I really want to play Frank.' But when that happened, I was totally disillusioned and I was sort of hypnotized by that weird, fame-and-fortune thing. And that totally denied the way that I wanted to execute the film ... And then a year went by and I thought, 'No, no, no.' This has come from me visually, and this is a story that I have to tell visually."

So Balderson, acting with admirable brazen confidence, ended up politely turning Hopper down for the role despite Hopper's intense praise of the script and offer of a multimillion dollar budget.

The creation of "Firecracker" is chock-full of interesting stories and tidbits, and Balderson chose to relate these stories in a documentary titled "Wamego: Making Movies Anywhere." "Wamego" details all the toil and joy poured into perfecting this masterpiece of imagination.

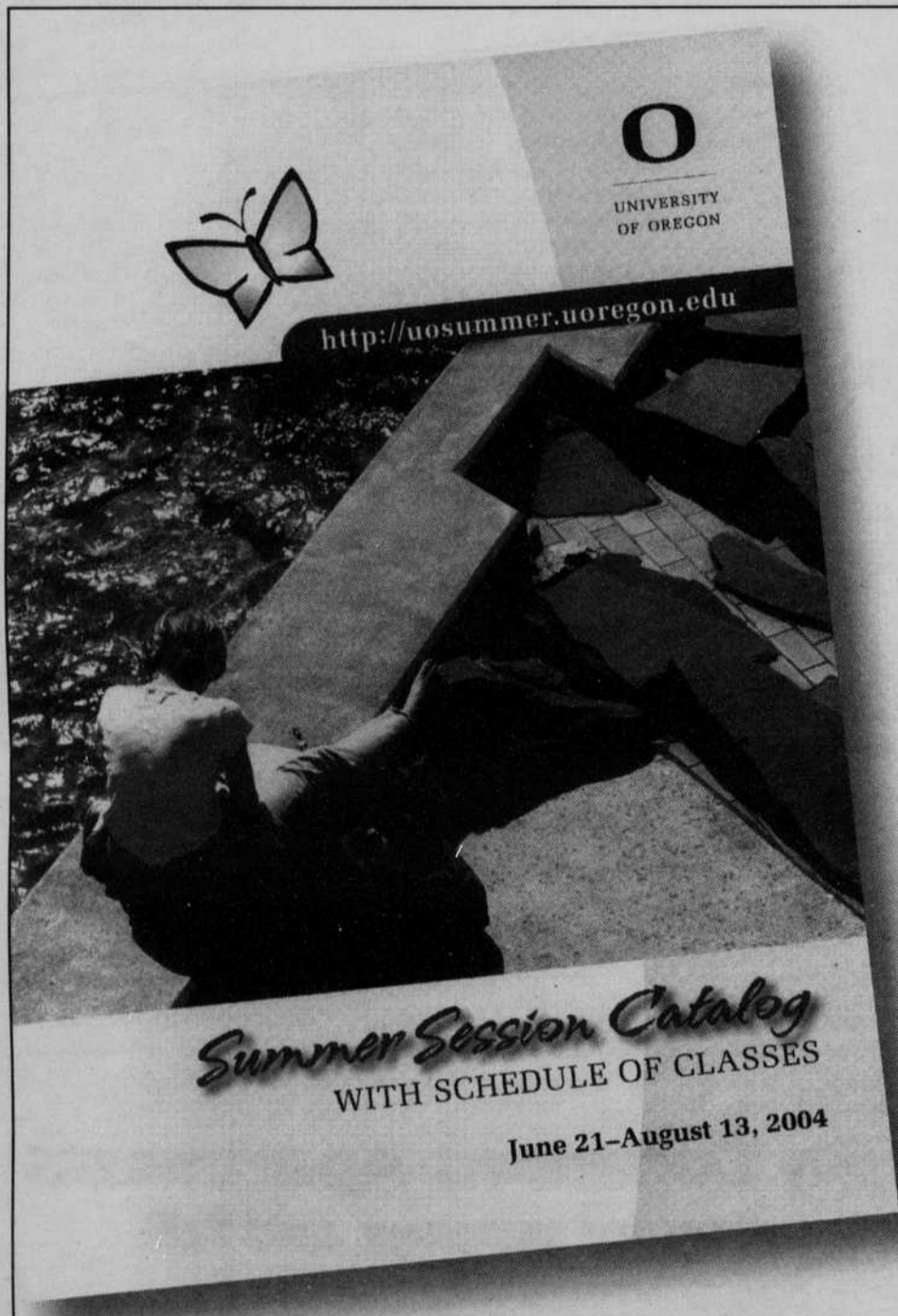
"I did decide that I wanted to do a tell-all, a bare-bones, what-it-takes-to-make-a-movie-in-the-middle-of-nowhere kind of thing," laughed Balderson in his idiosyncratic giggle.

Balderson's father, Clark, is the executive producer, while sister Brooke plays Pearl, and "Wamego" shows how the evolution of the film was a family affair. The trio, with the help of a small but dedicated crew, built and painted much of the set with their own tired hands. In fact, not one element of the film went unscrutinized by Balderson's perfectionist eye — not just the script and casting, but the costumes, lighting, photography, makeup, sets and accommodations as well. If he didn't work to make it himself, he supervised the making of it — and not to mention closely counted every penny spent.

"This was a project of passion," said Luna. "(It was) a team effort. It was stressful, but the kind of stress that comes from your typical Hollywood film wasn't there, because there wasn't that Hollywood pretension."

Not only is the audience of the screener treated to a behind-the-scenes look at the creation of "Firecracker," the DVD features interviews with the cast and crew, as well as a monthly play-by-play of the pre-production and filming process. And, true to its title, "Wamego" shows how a truly original movie not only can, but should be filmed wherever the story's heart lies, and not always in a Hollywood studio. Balderson's unique approach to filmmaking is a

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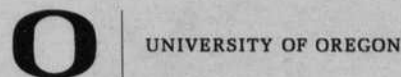
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