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Eugene's indie filmmakers make flicks on tight budgets

Bijou Art Cinemas is one Eugene venue where local films can find audiences

By Ryan Nyburg
Senior Pulse Reporter

When most people picture filmmaking, large casts and crews, truckloads of equipment, nationwide distribution and millions of dollars in funding often come to mind.

But to small local independent filmmakers, productions involve a small cast of friends as actors and crew members, makeshift props and little, if any, money.

With the advent of digital film equipment, local filmmakers have been able to avoid the expense of editing and developing film stock. While this solves the immediate problem of putting a film together, there still has to be something to shoot in the first place.

As with any film production, it all begins with the screenplay. Some local filmmakers work with a screenwriter; some do it themselves. For Dan Epstein, who works with the University film club House of Film, the process is a group effort.

"On our last project we got together and decided what we wanted to do," Epstein said. "We settled on doing a horror film, so we picked the person who was most comfortable writing in that genre to put together the screenplay. The rest of us then contributed our own ideas to the process."

Once the screenplay is written, the next step is picking the cast and crew. Some filmmakers streamline the process by forgoing the latter of the two.

"I don't work with a crew," local filmmaker Henry Weintraub said. "I just do it by myself, guerrilla style."

For a large production, such as Epstein's feature-length horror film "Proctor," a more complex process is involved for casting.

"We put up flyers all around campus for a casting call," Epstein said. "By the end we had over 20 people working on the film."

From there, filmmakers usually go on to making equipment and props for the film. In Epstein's case this was a major expense that dictated the film's shooting schedule. For others, however, this is not an issue.

"I don't actually spend a lot on props," local filmmaker Tyler Benjamin said. "I'm pretty good at finding stuff to use."

But one thing that almost no one producing a film can do without is money. Because there is little if any chance for local filmmakers to make a profit off their movies, investors are



Independent short film director and Lane Community College student Tyler Benjamin demonstrates some of the tools of the trade at an LCC studio Tuesday.

Tim Bobosky
Photographer

PART 2 OF 2

May 20: A look at the independent film scene in Eugene

Today: How local independent filmmakers fund, film and distribute their work

nearly impossible to find. Most budgets are made up of donations from friends and family, or they come right out of the filmmakers' pockets.

"On an hour-long punk documentary I did, called 'Bloodstains Across Eugene,' I spent about \$700 to \$800," Weintraub said. "That was my biggest project. My average is about \$50 for a film."

Other filmmakers' budgets are at about the same level. Epstein said "Proctor" ended up costing about \$1,200, all of it from the filmmakers' pockets. Benjamin said he spends between \$200 and \$300 for his half-hour-long short films.

Such shoestring budgets have a long history in filmmaking. Filmmakers such as Roger Corman and the New Jersey-based Troma film company became famous for making cheap entertaining films at relatively lightning speed, sometimes in only a matter of days. Local filmmakers say that examples such as these work as inspiration for them. Weintraub even has Troma's most famous character, the Toxic Avenger, tattooed on his arm.

But one thing those filmmakers had that the local group does not is distribution. Local films are rarely seen outside of private showings, and any form of mass distribution is beyond what many local filmmakers could ever hope to achieve. But even within these confines, some filmmakers have found ways to get their films to the public.

"We rented a lecture hall to get 'Proctor' shown," Epstein said. "We're also

sending it out to some film festivals. Right now we're trying to get a showing at the Bijou."

For most local filmmakers, the Bijou Art Cinemas, Eugene's art house theater, is the only game in town. But some are trying to expand that game.

"I'm trying to get a film festival started in Eugene," Weintraub said. "I think there is a lot of untapped talent in this town that could be brought to light if we got a real film society going."

For its own part, the Bijou has plans to show more local, independent films in the upcoming months.

"We've been approached by a lot of people who are interested in submitting films," Bijou manager Louis Thomas said. "I think there is a lot of interest in this from the community."

The Bijou is already showing some local films, including Weintraub's "Bloodstains" documentary, which will be showing the weekends of June 4 through 6 and 11 through 13.

Whether they get shown or not, filmmakers will probably continue to make films. Some even have plans for larger projects.

"I'm hoping to come up with an original idea for a horror film," Benjamin said. "Horror is something that is really hard to do well but really easy to do bad. That is why I hope to make all the mistakes I can possibly make on small films before I move on to something bigger."

Most filmmakers say they have high hopes for the Eugene filmmaking scene.

"I think there is a lot of good filmmaking going on in this town," Benjamin said. "The filmmakers just haven't united. They're out there in their dark corners and you only rarely hear of them."

Contact the senior Pulse reporter at ryannyburg@dailyemerald.com.

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