

Anyone with a dream can be a powerful force in the arts. When Scott Silver, a 32-year-old Jewish straight dude, decided to film his version of Hollywood's "mean streets," he took on a boulder Sisyphus wouldn't have attempted.

The big rock in question was his original screenplay about hustling on Santa Monica Boulevard. The approximately one-mile-long, grimy stretch of congested Hollywood/West Hollywood

## Cinema

acts as a financial salvation, albeit temporary, for the thousands of rootless teens who flock to Los Angeles each year.

Telling the stories of youths who sell their bodies for cash or drugs might be considered bizarre for someone who isn't involved in

that sexual spectrum, but to Silver, an attractive, medium-to-tall fellow with light-blue eyes, there's no anomaly in his wanting to do films about the downtrodden: "I like to deal with questions of faith—since I'm not sure I actually believe in anything—to work with characters whose own faith and beliefs are called into question. I have always seen myself as the Outsider, so those guys are me, too. I write on what I'm going through. I'm interested in friendships, bonding and connectedness and I wanted these two main characters [David Arquette and Lukas Haas], as outsiders, to be acting out a friendship in a place where friendships hardly ever exist."

Silver deliberately chose the small "j" for his title, *johns*, to reflect the world as the hustler sees it. "It has a double meaning: whether they are actually named John or code-named John, they're all 'johns.'"

## DESPAIR FOR SALE

*Scott Silver digs into the lives of teenage male prostitutes in johns*

by Dale Reynolds

Silver, originally from Worcester, Mass., is of Lithuanian background. He came to the American Film Institute about five years ago and directed a short on street hustlers called *Three Johns*. It was the research that went into that short which made the full-length project possible: "I went into the dangerous areas where they work, taking a tape recorder and no wallet; just cash, as most of the young guys carry weapons and are fucked up on drugs. I paid each of them \$20 to talk."

straight, but most of them do."

According to Silver, these desperate kids will do anything to make money: blackmail, intimidate clients with knives, steal jewelry—whatever it takes to survive.

"I discovered essentially three types of prostitutes: those who are straight, or too confused to know the difference; the 'gay-for-pay' types who predominate—they're the most dangerous because of drugs; the transvestites—they make the most money and work the fewest hours. The most tragic are the gay boys, because their families kicked them out because they're gay."

The young director had the most fun hanging with the trans youth, but also found them to

Silver never interviewed any actual johns, as they were too nervous about being recognized. Instead, he took their stories from the hustlers themselves.

It was this sense of constant danger that compelled Silver to take his young, mostly white, company and shoot his film in a safer section of the City of Angels: South Central L.A., on the borderline between the murderous rivalries of the Crips and the Bloods, and the place where the destructive 1992 L.A. riots started. "When I first had my crew and actors walking to the location, we caused a parade of onlookers, but we never had any problems."

*johns* is Silver's first feature. The 20-day shoot cost under a million dollars, including post-production—not bad for a feature today—but it's not the film he wished for, as delays prevented some scenes from being shot. In the end, the film's strength lies in his astute casting and the script's integrity.

"The world of the hustler is fascinating to me," Silver says. "I made sure all of the actors spent time in the street, talking with hustlers, to make sure their work ran true."

Silver contends that *johns* is as much for straight audiences as for gay ones: "I want audiences to see them more as kids and not just as gay teenagers. There's a universal sense of friendship



Lukas Haas (left) and David Arquette in *johns*



Scott Silver

be in the greatest danger. Trouble came not from other hustlers, but from the Chicano gangs and deeply homophobic people who would drive by

and throw beer bottles, eggs or other projectiles at the young queens standing there. They have learned to keep piles of rocks handy and lob them off if attacked. (One of the trans youth said to Silver after throwing a rock, "Honey, I may look like a girl, but I still throw like a guy.")

and connections in it. Kids on the street have no dreams—just the moment; no next year, month, week or day—only this moment. Survival is what it's about. And friendship is the opposite end from survival—there's no room for it. Street kids think they have family, but know they have no friends."

*johns* is playing March 21-27 at Cinema 21, 616 NW 21st Ave., in Portland. Show times are 7 and 9 pm daily, with late shows Friday and Saturday at 10:45, and matinees Saturday and Sunday at 1, 3 and 5 pm. General admission is \$5.50. Call 223-4515 for more information.



Michael Scott



**MIKUNI**  
TRAVEL SERVICE

One SW Columbia  
Suite 1010  
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