

## **24-Hour Madness**

**Given A Genre And A Theme, Teams Race To Produce A Short Film In Just One Day**

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**By JOHN JURGENSEN, The Hartford Courant**

**Jocelyn Gombac stepped out of her Subaru wearing a wig, a pink mini skirt and a once-elegant fur jacket. As intended, she looked like a hooker. She clomped on heels across the parking lot to find her mark beside a lamppost.**

**Bobbing a knee, the amateur actress looked almost at home, at 4 a.m., outside a motel where real illicit acts seemed to be in progress.**



**24 Hour Movie Madness**  
**(CLOE POISSON)**



**Mocha Beige**  
**(Bubbles & Pickles Entertainment)**

**Close by, Gombac's friend Zoltan Deak aimed a borrowed video camera at her. A bearded guest sipped a beer outside his room, looking on. When Deak signaled, a car recruited for the shot wheeled up beside Gombac. She leaned in the window, chatted up the john, then climbed inside.**

**Cut.**

**Within five minutes, a movie production on the tightest of deadlines had wrapped its first scene.**

**But the clock was ticking on the 20 hours Gombac and Deak had left to**

complete the film they had started writing at midnight, just four hours earlier. That's when they, along with 23 other teams from around the country and Canada, received their assignments for the second annual NYC Midnight Movie Making Madness contest.

Like a "Cannonball Run" of cinema, the contest pitted creativity against the clock to see which team could create the best film (10 minutes long or less) in 24 hours. To the winner, \$10,000.

Sets, costumes, actors and equipment could be secured in advance. But content had to come from scratch after the starting gun. Given the same surprise subject, the teams competed on a more level playing field. With time as the biggest expense, the contest logic went, large budgets and professional experience would count for less.

Zoltan Deak would be the ersatz director for the only Connecticut team. A 42-year-old part-time accountant from Norwalk, his moviemaking debut took place last month when he and Gombac created the piece that got them to the finals. "Pretend" was a soap opera about a doctor who impregnates the wife of a transvestite's brother. Although all 11 first-round contestants from the region had received the same topic, the duo might have easily conjured up such a plot themselves, given their sensibilities.

"Can we do something other than comedy or camp? No," said Deak, summing up their aesthetic parameters last Friday as he awaited word from Gombac, who was in downtown New York for the start of the contest.

Her call came one minute after midnight. The required genre: mystery. The subject: an unwanted gift.

He stepped out of his seat. "It's showtime."

At 1 a.m., Deak and Gombac rendezvoused at their favorite diner, the El Dorado in Elmsford, N.Y. There, according to annual custom, they guessed

the weight of a bloated pumpkin in the lobby. Then they started to write.

On the phone, the partners had already agreed on the nugget of a plot, which Deak had conveyed to a pair of musicians in Stamford on his way to the diner. Only original music could be used in the soundtrack, and the Saucers (Meredith DiMenna and Keith Saunders) would supply it.

Before leaving their studio, Deak told them, "Think `Shaft.'"

To an outsider squeezed into the diner booth during the script session, the team's plan to mold a 1970s blaxploitation plot into a 10-minute mystery seemed risky, if not baffling.

Gombac laid her hands on the table, widened her eyes and said, "Here's what I see. Mocha is the unwanted gift."

She was referring to her heroine, Mocha Beige, whose exploits she had scribbled into a notebook as she drove up from New York in the dark and the rain.

Mocha is a street-smart chick, quick with a gun, a kung fu chop and a one-liner. A former jailbird, she works for a faceless boss - "Charlie's Angels"-style - who asks her to go back to prison undercover. Her job is to break out a gaggle of hookers whose organs are being sold on the black market by an evil warden.

Playing Mocha Beige, of course, would be Gombac, a lanky 45-year-old with sharp features and a big laugh who lives in Jersey City. A vice president of a major international bank, Gombac met her best friend, Zoltan Deak, more than a decade ago when they both worked for an accounting firm in Stamford.

She, it must be noted, is also white.

Later, discussing the incompatibility of her skin color with that of stock

blaxploitation heroines, Gombac would say, "The actors playing those parts were as far from those stereotypes as I am."

By 5 a.m., a rough script filled the duo's red composition books, the first wardrobe change had been accomplished in an Exxon parking lot, the hooker scene had wrapped at the motel, and they had driven to their main set, an estate in Greenwich, where they'd work nonstop for the next 10 hours.

The yellow house sat on 30 well-kept acres down the hill from Leona Helmsley's mansion. Lined up by chance just days before the contest began, the spread belonged to the family of a friend of a work acquaintance of Deak's. Unoccupied but fully furnished, the estate was on the market for almost \$35 million.

They had gotten very lucky.

As they unloaded the props, costumes and equipment Deak had crammed into his Jeep the day before, the guts of their production spilled out into the foyer.

"I bought everything I could think of," he said, including handcuffs, toy machine guns, a plastic knife, a police uniform, granny wig, adhesive scar, rubber chicken, cowboy boots, sunglasses, fishnet stockings and, for inspiration, a videotape of the 1973 Pam Grier film "Coffy."

Buried in props and separated by five hours from their last dose of coffee, the team began to succumb to inertia. The day ahead seemed both brief and infinite.

How long could it take to make a 10-minute movie? The answer became apparent as they grappled with a shot of Mocha on the phone. Harsh Home Depot lighting, the wrong phone ring, bungled cue cards, fumbled lines and sound worries all made the seemingly simple scene tedious.

But by dawn, as Deak clambered onto the roof of his Jeep to shoot a slow-motion running sequence, energy returned to the partners. All day, Deak's blue eyes stayed bright and focused as he jockeyed lights and changed costumes for the four characters he played.

"I'm not even tired," he said at 6:30 a.m. "It's weird."

Gombac matched his pace, only slurring her words occasionally. "Variety is the spice of life," she said at 10 a.m.

Creativity divided by time multiplied by exhaustion. They worked that equation for the rest of the day despite only one infusion of Dunkin' Donuts coffee.

Directing half a dozen friends who showed up to help, they staged a rumble, a jailbreak, a gratuitous cheesecake scene and still completed shooting by 4 p.m., almost two hours ahead of schedule. But time moved swiftly as the team rushed to New York, Gombac by car and Deak by train. On the way, he met the Saucers in a parking lot to collect the soundtrack, a facsimile of sleazy funk, complete with a theme song for Mocha, "First Lady of the Universe."

All told, the production budget added up to more than \$1,000, the amount they had won in the first round. The bulk was wisely spent on a professional editor, Steve Pequignot. For \$200 an hour, he transformed a bundle of slapdash scenes into a bona fide film (clocking in at 7:57) that had everyone involved howling in the editing room.

Sipping a celebratory plastic cup of wine, Deak said, "I imagine this a lot like childbirth. You say, 'Never again! Never again!' and then, 'OK.'"

After a 20-minute cab ride, the partners strode into a camera rental house on the Bowery, the contest headquarters, and handed in their entry. It was 11:42 p.m.

They didn't linger. Walking up the street through groups of bar-hoppers just starting their night, the duo chattered excitedly, riding out what seemed like a 24-hour fever dream.

FOOTNOTE: The following day, 22 contest entries (two teams failed to meet the midnight deadline) were shown at a Lower Manhattan cineplex. But technical glitches marred the presentation, so the films were re-screened for judges later in the week. The winner was announced Thursday. The Connecticut team, Bubbles & Pickles Entertainment Conglomerate, did not make the top five.