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Posted on Sat, Oct. 25, 2003

THE KANSAS CITY STAR.

KC team takes shot at N.Y. contest

By ERIC ADLER The Kansas City Star



Photo by Gary Dunkin ()

At a New York City diner, Mike Cano (left) and Ty Jones of Kansas City viewed footage of their short film, "A Way Out," that they hoped would win their team \$10,000 in the "NYC Midnight Movie Making Madness" competition. Cano was the film's cameraman.



Photos by GARY DUNKIN/Special to The Star

Photo by Gary DunkinA New York subway car was used for one scene in the Kansas City team's film. Taking part in the scene on the morning of the competition were (from left) Dac Lam, Mike Cano, Ty Jones and actress Jauqui Craig.

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Photo by Gary Dunkin

Photo by Gary Dunkin(October 18, 2003) New York, NY- Seasoned Vets cameraman Michael Cano buries his face in his hands in frustration over the ever-changing script Saturday afternoon. The Second Annual NYC Midnight Movie Making Madness competition in New York City had participants from all over the nation. The teams sent in short films made in two weeks, then they were selected as finalist and given a theme in NYC. The movie made had to be a mystery, involving an unwanted gift. The participating teams had 24 hours to write, shoot, edit and submit the film and turn it in the following midnight based on the information given to them.

NEW YORK — The scene: A week ago Friday. Midnight. A fifth-floor hotel room in lower Manhattan. Street noise blasts through the room’s open window.

Inside, eight wannabe independent filmmakers from Kansas City, their eyes red from lack of sleep, wait for the phone call that will set them in motion. And, perhaps, bring them closer to their dream:

Life as professional moviemakers.

The room stills. A cell phone chirps. Chris Swartz, 30, a computer wizard with a shaved head, answers and listens.

“Unwanted gift,” he says. “Mystery.”

The finals of the second “NYC Midnight Movie Making

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Madness" competition are on.

The team's task is herculean. In 24 hours — from midnight Friday to midnight Saturday — the members must write, act, shoot, edit and set to original music a movie no more than 10 minutes in length. No stopping. No sleep.

Comedy. Drama. Musical. It doesn't matter. But for the 24 teams from the United States and Canada that competed in one 24-hour period of madcap, tension-filled, sleep-deprived moviemaking, the final film must contain a "mystery" and an "unwanted gift."

At stake: \$10,000 prize. Winner takes all.

A flurry of ideas erupts from the team.

"How 'bout a spoof? Film noir?" Chris says. "A voice-over where the mystery is who gave an unwanted Christmas gift or birthday gift. Melodramatic about something stupid?"

"Yeah, like a 'Chinatown' spoof," says Mariah Andrews, 31, an advertising executive.

"Or what if the unwanted gift is a baby?" says Stephanie Reed, 57, from Lenexa, whose pitched voice and wild red hair seem charged with electricity.

"Or the unwanted gift could be like a physical gift," says Mike Cano, 26. "He's a great athlete. Or a psychic, able to read people's minds."

The team members are all friends, all with regular day jobs, all supportive buddies from the Independent Filmmakers Coalition, a local film club. And all are astounded they've made it this far.

A month ago, Swartz, who builds computers and edits video as the sole operator of Random Access Video on Southwest Boulevard, was surfing the Web. He clicked on a site and read a tantalizing come-on: "Can you make a movie in 24 hours?"

Yes he could, Swartz thought. In fact, he had.

For years in Kansas City the Independent Filmmakers

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Coalition has run its own “One Night Stand” competition in which filmmakers, using high-end video, create a short movie in 10 hours. Swartz and his buddies had always done well.

But this time, Swartz wondered, why not compete in New York? Why not go up against moviemakers nationwide?

People dream, he said, but not until they’re tested do they know how they stack up.

The chances of winning, of course, were slim. The chances of becoming rich and famous were less than zero. But the experience would be a blast. And the \$10,000 prize was nothing to sneeze at.

Close to 280 moviemakers would enter the Midnight Madness preliminaries. Entrants came from most states, Canada, England and Australia. Of those, judges would pick 24 to compete in the finals.

Swartz entered, and with friends Cano and Ty Jones, made a short movie about a romance between a feminist and chauvinist. They made the film in two days.

Lo and behold, they were chosen as one of 24 finalists, invited to New York and given \$1,000.

So on a Tuesday in mid-October, Chris, Mike, Ty and two other friends, Dac Lam, 30, and Bob Swope, 44, squeezed into a rented minivan and drove 26 hours straight through to New York.

Meanwhile, four film coalition women — Mariah Andrews, Stephanie Reed, Jauqui Craig and Sharon Chapman — flew in from Kansas City to help. Erin Hand, 25, a Kansas Citian now living in Connecticut, pulled in on the train just before midnight.

As we pick up the scene, eight of the team are inside a hotel room, with two more, Dac and Jauqui, rushing up from contest central.

Hunkered down, the team sits in a circle, hands flying, voices raised, eyes alert. The \$100-a-night room is littered with half-

full glasses of Pepsi, pizza boxes, greasy paper plates, mounds of luggage and an inflated air mattress jammed into a galley kitchen.

The next few hours are crucial. The script is key. A bad one equals a bad movie. Already the initial flurry of ideas — mystery scavenger hunt, serial killer who gives the “gift of death” by taking away others’ pain — begins to weaken.

“What are unwanted gifts in general? Let’s lead with that,” urges Mariah, the lead writer, trying to recharge the group.

Pulling this off will require every available minute, Mariah knows. Four teams last year didn’t even finish. On her laptop, she has typed a strict schedule.

But already the schedule is falling apart. They’re 30 minutes into brainstorming, and no one has a good idea. It’s then that Dac and Jauqui, back from contest central, push into the room.

“Guys,” Jauqui says. “Whatever you do, make the best movie you can. Because these people on the other teams? They are *serious*.”

To win they must take risks. Risks with the writing, the camera, the color, the acting, the editing.

Suddenly Ty stands up. He’s tall, 6 feet 4, and stands in the room like a wrestler at center ring, hands apart, eyes focused.

“OK, OK, OK,” he says. The group silences. “Here’s the story! A couple. They’re having a fight about money. A knock comes on the door...”

Though no one says it, a wave of uneasiness washes through the group.

In quieter moments, the four primary team members reveal themselves.

There’s Chris, from North Kansas City, the philosophy major who, on a lark, once helped a friend make a film.

“It ruined me for anything else.”

Mike, whose mother abandoned him when he was 3, was raised by his father. As a child, Mike said, he would visit his mother in California. They would go to the beach, and she would swim far out in the waves while he watched her from the shore.

“That was the symbol of our relationship. Me, on the shore, never being able to get to her. Her, swimming out of reach.”

For Mike, movies are about making people feel. For Dac, they are about ambiguity, story and journeys like his own.

Dac, a Vietnamese immigrant and martial arts expert, grew up in a tough New Orleans neighborhood. He wants to make movies in which the good guy and the bad guy are the same person.

And then there's Ty.

Ty is a Jehovah's Witness who lives with his parents and works for the family business. Over the last six years, he has sacrificed free time, money, thoughts, energy and dating to make films with the Independent Filmmakers Coalition.

By his own count, he has made more than 30 films and worked on at least 70. His family, though supportive, worries. He is, after all, 31.

“They don't want me being 50 years old, living upstairs, making little films. And I don't want that either,” he said. “I want a life, to get married, to have kids.”

Until he's forced to give it up, he wants to prove he can be a true filmmaker. As serious as Ty is, his films tend to be one-dimensional, moral parables about good, evil and the consequences of wrongdoing. Or they're sex farces filled with adolescent humor and frequent unflattering portrayals of women.

The movie that got the team into the Midnight Madness finals, “Perfect Match,” portrayed a romance between a feminist and a porn king. It was heavily influenced by Ty.

Before the Midnight Madness finals began, a New York theater screened all 24 of the entries. The Kansas City teams' jaws dropped when they saw how stylish and

sophisticated the other films were.

When “Perfect Match” flashed on the screen, Mike and a few others cringed.

Ty’s idea worries the team.

In it, a couple argues about money. Their lives are swirling down the drain. Then, out of nowhere, a mysterious man knocks on their door. He holds a box, the “unwanted gift,” and offers a choice. Open it and all your problems will be solved. But if you do, someone you don’t know will die.

The storyline is exactly like a “Twilight Zone” episode written by Richard Matheson. No one in the room knows that.

For a few seconds the group falls silent.

“Maybe, but let’s think some more,” Mariah finally says. The group members agree, but by 2:20 a.m. they’ve come up with nothing.

Ty, Chris and Mike, along with Bob Swope — a Kansas Citian who now lives and works in New York and has won a national Emmy for editing Olympic films — wander downstairs for some air. They stand outside the hotel, bathed in morning darkness and a Manhattan drizzle, trying to figure out what to do. Eventually, because it’s their movie, they decide.

They come back, clothes damp.

“I’m not sure this is the best idea,” Chris announces. “We’ll go with the couple.” Ty’s idea.

He explains the story and set up. Dac as the mysterious man. Ty and Erin as the couple. There will be three locations: a park, subway and apartment.

Mariah turns to her computer, and as everyone shouts suggestions for dialogue, she starts typing in a frenzy.

5:36 a.m. Mike will shoot the film. The city is still and black as he, Dac, Jauqui and Ty tramp to Grand Central Station and descend the stairs to the No. 4 subway platform.

Dac is convinced this film is not going to be edgy enough but keeps the thought to himself. Mike likewise says nothing. But he's sure it'll turn out to be another parable.

Still, he thinks, if the writing is crisp and the shots cool enough, the film could transcend the simple storyline.

On the subway, he films the conclusion. Dac, dressed as the mystery man, hands the "unwanted gift" to yet another stranger played by Jauqui.

Back at the hotel room, the idea of the "unwanted gift" is clear. But "where's the mystery?" Chris asks. "The story is mysterious. But that's not a mystery. Where's the mystery?"

The others agree and decide to add moral ambiguity by shoehorning in a TV news voice-over about a mysterious death in the park. Then they add quick almost invisible shots of a blanketed body at a crime scene.

They want to change the script.

At 8 a.m., Chris picks up his cell phone.

"Ty...?"

10:32 a.m.

The script has changed, and Ty is not pleased.

The whole group now stands in a huge Park Avenue apartment, 15-foot ceilings, floor-to-ceiling glass on three sides. Views to the west side, east side, lower Manhattan.

The apartment belongs to Bob's boss, Bud Greenspan, an Olympics filmmaker for 30 years. Here the team will film the main part of the movie — the argument and delivery of the unwanted gift.

But by this time, Ty thought he'd have a finished script ready to memorize. But no.

"Chris, come in here," Ty says. He, Chris and Mike go to the kitchen. He wants to know what's going on.

“We re just trying to make it better,” Chris argues.

Ty doesn't think it needs a lot of changing. He wants parts of the old script back, the dialogue about the box and its meaning. Time is wasting.

“Ty,” Mariah argues, “how long do you think we need to be talking about this box? This is going to start not making sense.”

By the time Mike has the room set for shooting, it's 11:20 a.m. Not one moment of the main movie has been shot. Mariah, Sharon and Stephanie are spread out in the hallway trying to pull up the old script and write fresh scenes.

Inside the apartment, Ty has made his own decision.

With no script, he and Erin will ad-lib.

Everything the women work on ends up in the trash. The scene with the box drags on endlessly, with Ty fingering it as if it were a live grenade.

Between takes, Mike, flushed with exhaustion and frustration, puts his camera aside and buries his face in his hands.

4:40 p.m. The women fume. Mariah feels used. Betrayed.

If Ty were going to ad-lib the whole idea — the idea he had *16 hours ago* — what was she doing here?

She left her baby and her husband. She spent money, flew halfway across the country. Counting Friday, she has gone sleepless for close to 30 hours.

And for what? A Ty Jones morality play?

At a bar on the lower east side, the four female team members sit in silent anger with one slim hope. Editing.

“If anyone can do anything with that movie, it's Bob,” Jauqui says. “He's great. A lot can happen in editing.”

10 p.m.: The movie is shot. The music on the way. Two hours to deadline. Bob and Chris, holed up at Bob's office at 57th Street and Lexington Avenue, have been editing for hours. Alternately they sit and stand, taking the helm of the computer editing machine. Cutting lines. Slicing images.

Ty hovers over Bob's shoulder. Mike, shocked that the movie is coming together, watches from nearby.

"It's a good film. It's a good film," Ty says.

The guys can't believe it, but it is. Still, Bob is pushing. He wants to cut the lengthy box scene that Ty loves. Mike took the time to shoot the dead-body shots. Bob wants to add them.

But time is running out. Mike is so tired, he's half delirious. Chris lies on the floor and is out cold in a second.

By 10:45 p.m. the music arrives. It's perfect, muted trumpet, eerie and melancholy. Chris and Bob feed it onto the film and by 11:05 are done, except for Bob, who insists on tweaking some more.

Contest central for Midnight Madness is 55 blocks away at the lower end of Manhattan. They've yet to copy the movie onto its own tape, a 10-minute process. Finally, Ty bursts.

"Bob!" Ty yells, "Copy it! Just copy it! Come on!"

"Ty, I'm trying!" Bob yells back. Soon the tape is done. Bob passes it to Chris who, with Mike, bounds down three flights of stairs to 57th Street and hails a cab. At 11:53 p.m., he turns in their tape.

4:55 p.m. Sunday. The lights go down in a movie theater within eyesight of ground zero at the World Trade Center.

The women are still angry and sit off by themselves. The men sit together.

As Mike would later say, "It was the most frustrating, horrible filmmaking experience I've ever had."

For the next three hours, the Kansas City team — "The Seasoned Vets," they call themselves — watched film after

film.

A film noir spoof, just like the one Chris had suggested. Another where the unwanted gift was a baby. The mystery the father.

By the time the Kansas City team's film, "A Way Out," flashed on the screen, the team already knew that it would not win. Bob sank angry in his seat at the long box scene.

Still, the members did better than expected. They placed fifth.

Despite the obstacles of sleep, contention and time, of frayed nerves, frayed friendships and frustration, in the end, they competed.

Later in an east side bar, they talked of how the experience taught them about themselves, about others, about the maddening process of filmmaking under pressure.

But rather than feeling discouraged, they said, they felt inspired.

"We can totally be better than this," Michael said. "It makes me want to do it even more."

"It was worth it," Mariah said. "Demoralizing a bit. But it was worth it."

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