

Mastering the Mysteries of 24-Hour Filmmaking

By LYDIA POLGREEN

When you have only 24 hours to make a movie, the first four are the toughest. Or so Natalie Milbrodt, a filmmaker from Detroit, learned the hard way during a wrenching, sleepless day that began at midnight on Saturday and ended when she and her teammates pressed the button that electronically transmitted their makeshift masterpiece, "The Coffee Culprit," to New York City with about an hour to spare.

"You have eight people with lots of ideas," Ms. Milbrodt said, looking surprisingly untired as she waited for her group's entry in the second annual NYC Midnight Movie Making Madness competition to be screened yesterday at Regal Cinemas in Battery Park City. "We were hoping to decide on a story by 3 a.m. and have a good outline by 4. But it was 4:30, and we hadn't even chosen a story yet."

Ms. Milbrodt and her fellow auteurs were among 24 teams of filmmakers who, equipped with \$1,000, rudimentary digital video equipment and a whole lot of coffee, each set off at midnight on Saturday to make a 10-minute film in just 24 hours.

The participants were chosen from about 300 teams nationwide that sent in short films made in two weeks. The teams selected as finalists were then given a theme: the

Young moviemakers get a day to make 10 memorable minutes.

movie had to be a mystery involving an unwanted gift.

The first part — mystery — was easy for Ms. Milbrodt's team. A camera operator in the group proposed a script based on something that had actually happened to him. In the movie, a riff on the petty frustrations of life at the office, a worker named Darius, upset that someone is always taking the last cup of coffee without making a new pot, hunts down the person he thinks is the culprit and, waving the empty coffee pot, confronts his pod mate, the one who last visited the coffee pot.

But the tale has a twist: the co-worker tells him that she has in fact started a fresh pot, and the coffee is running down the counter and onto the floor while he waves the empty carafe in accusation.

And the unwanted gift?

"It had to be a coffee mug," Ms. Milbrodt said. "That's the only thing that made sense."

At the beginning of the movie, Da-

rius is called into his boss's office and handed a gift-wrapped package.

"I know you've been expecting a promotion, but we've been very slow, and our stock is down," the nameless, white-haired boss tells him.

Darius opens the box, revealing a white mug with "Star Employee" printed on it, along with a small constellation.

"Thank you, sir," Darius says, staring at the mug in disbelief. "I don't know what to say."

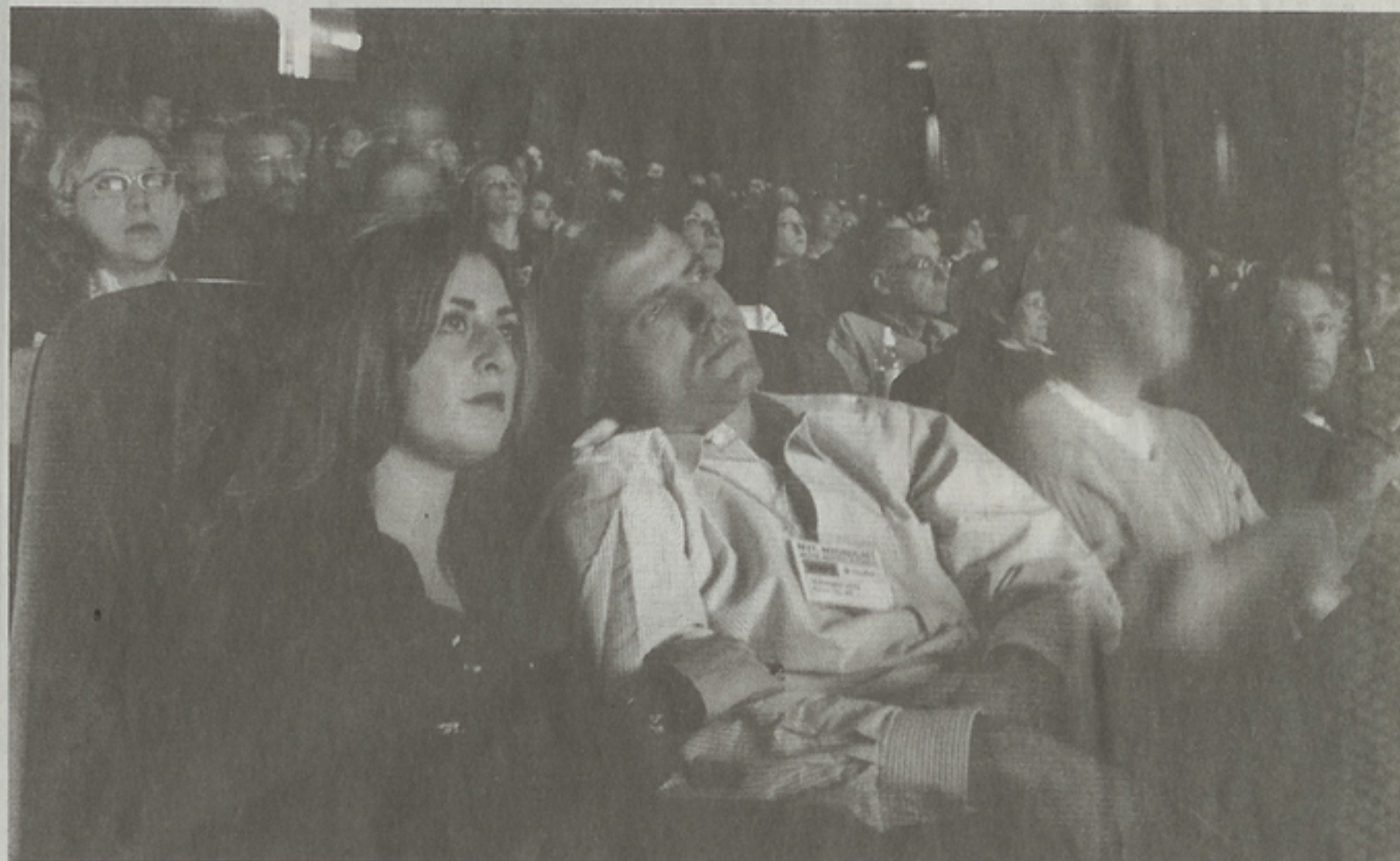
From that opening indignity, the rest of the film flows, and the frustration Darius feels finally builds to a rage when he spots his pod mate bringing a gallon-size mug of coffee out of the break room.

The organizers of the competition, two young New York City filmmakers, Charlie Weisman and Craig Flamm, started it last year as a way for unknown directors to make movies and have them screened without spending a lot of money.

Judging was originally supposed to be completed last night, but a spokeswoman for the competition said that because of a "technical glitch," all the films would have to be screened again for each judge and the winner would be announced later this week.

The time pressure on the competitors was intense.

"Our plan was to write till dawn,



Michael Nagle for The New York Times

Lauren Wheeler and Ty Jones, two of the competitors in a New York City filmmaking contest, screening entries.

shoot till 3 and then postproduction until the end," said Jay Sterrenberg, 20, a junior at Sarah Lawrence College whose film, "Forte," focused on a young man with a truly unwanted gift: ultrasensitive hearing making it nearly impossible for him to interact

with the world without earmuffs on. "But we didn't start shooting until 10," Mr. Sterrenberg said. "Then the shooting ended up going until 8 or 9. Then we found out all our sound was screwed up."

Fixing that sapped precious hours,

and the team finished editing the movie in a van on the way to drop off the completed version just 10 minutes before midnight. "It was the most stressful two and half hours of my life," Mr. Sterrenberg said of the contest's finish. "But we did it."