

Jeff Kirkendall's Thoughts For The Month Column

Thoughts, Opinions, Reviews, Commentary & More!

Hello and Welcome! My name is Jeff Kirkendall and I'm an independent filmmaker and actor from the Upstate New York area. This is the section of the Very Scary Productions website where I write about topics related to independent filmmaking, digital video production, acting, movies in general, horror movies in particular, my own indie movies, as well as anything and everything related or in between.

I decided to create this commentary page because I find that I often come across things that either interest me, excite me, intrigue me, or maybe just bug me. Any topic related to movies and cinema is fair game, from the most mainstream to the most controversial. For example I'll often read about movie projects that I have a strong interest in or opinion on, for one reason or another. This page gives me a forum to discuss these things. It's all about discussion and furthering understanding of our pop culture. Anyone who has feedback concerning what I have to say here, feel free to contact me (see the contact link at <http://www.veryscaryproductions.com/>).

I'd also like to point out that the following is just my opinion, and everyone is free to agree or disagree with what I have to say. Enjoy, and to all the Indies out there: Keep on Filming!

SUBJECT: Independent Film in the Hudson Valley by guest writer Jessika M. Pasko – June 2004

The June 2004 column is an essay contributed by Jessika M. Pasko, who is a writer from Upstate New York's Capital Region. I'd like to thank Jessika for including me as a featured filmmaker in this piece.

As the media world becomes more and more monopolized, it can seem that even some art is not sacred. Hollywood and corporate control of the distribution and presentation of film can often be limiting, particularly to independent film projects. Fortunately there are many who refuse to let corporate influences keep them down, and so independent film continues to thrive in many communities. The Hudson Valley region of New York State is just one example of an area with a growing community of filmmakers and film fans pursuing independent film projects.

In many ways, the Hudson Valley area has become a breeding ground for independent film projects, film locations and even a renowned film festival, the Woodstock Film Fest.

Begun five years ago, the Woodstock Film Festival has established itself as one of the best independent film events in the country. Since its founding by husband and wife duo Laurent Rejto and Meira Blaustein, the event has gained more prestige and importance each year. The festival is one of the largest truly independent events of its kind, as well as being a first-rate opportunity for young filmmakers to gain exposure. The festival's board of advisors includes journalists, directors, composers, and even actors such as Ethan Hawke and Griffin Dunne. Each year the festival features a panel of guest speakers and participants. In past years, guests such as actress Parker Posey, and actors Stanley Tucci and Tim Robbins have been included amongst the many.

"Our purpose is multi-fold," said WFF co-founder and executive director Meira Blaustein. "We bring great indie films into the Hudson Valley. We also supply a platform to the filmmakers, and give them an excellent arena to show their films, as well as chance to network." In fact, many films screened at the WFF go on to become prominent films, such as recent hits

"Shattered Glass," "Pieces of April," and "Far From Heaven," all of which were screened at the festival.

Blaustein also added that her company works to facilitate film production in the area through the Woodstock Film Commission. This is an organization that they run to provide a complete source guide for filmmakers that provides listings for and assistance with technical crews, locations, equipment and professional crews. It attracts filmmakers from all over the world.

The Woodstock Film Festival is far from being corporate and prides itself on being fiercely independent, said Blaustein. However, she was careful to point out that the supposed commercialization of some indie film festivals is a bit of a misnomer. Most film festivals and independent films are non-profit, but in order to stay afloat, many are forced to turn to corporate sponsorship, she said. Still, certain film festivals definitely have more cachet than others, such as Sundance and Cannes; while Woodstock is beginning to gain some of this cachet, it still has less corporate sponsorship.

The Woodstock Film Festival also sponsors year-round events throughout the Hudson Valley, including screenings of short films and presentations by independent filmmakers. They also provide internships for local college students, offer a variety of classes and maintain a newsletter to keep members abreast of current projects and news in local film.

The 2000 Oscar-nominated independent film "You Can Count on Me," starring Laura Linney and Mark Ruffalo, was shot partially in Margaretville and Phoenicia, N.Y. Written and directed by Kenneth Lonergan, the film was a huge hit at the Sundance and Cannes Film Festivals, considered by many to be two of the most prestigious independent film festivals. "Personal Velocity," filmed locally in New Paltz, Pine Bush and Rosendale with the help of the Woodstock Film Commission, was first previewed at the 2001 Woodstock Film Festival. It later went on to win the 2002 Sundance Festival Award.

"The film community in the Hudson Valley is growing a lot - that growth is multi-fold. We have a lot more productions coming into the area. We have more people getting involved in film - either working on it or making their own projects. Most of them are not going into film schools," Blaustein added.

"I think it (the Hudson Valley) is a great place to engage in filmmaking and video production. The Woodstock Film Festival is a great place to start," said J.C. Barone, a communications and film professor at Mount Saint Mary College in Newburgh, N.Y.

In addition to the Woodstock film festival, many filmmakers, both amateur and professional, have begun to establish the area in terms of independent film. According to Blaustein, there is a definite growth in people realizing that film is "definitely a great way to spend your life, to make a living. More people are interested in filming in this area."

Jeff Kirkendall is one of those people. Kirkendall, a filmmaker who runs Very Scary Productions, has written, produced and directed six movies, using digital medium. He also collaborates with other local filmmakers, editing their films and assisting in production. Kirkendall began making films in 1996, right after graduating from the College of St. Rose with a B.A. in communications.

"I know several filmmakers in the area, and I would say that we are keeping true to the spirit of independent filmmaking. Most of the productions I've been involved in have been for little to no money, by people who have a serious love for filmmaking. This is what true independent filmmaking is all about," Kirkendall said in a recent interview. Although he collaborates with other filmmakers on their projects, for his own he tends to work by himself on his own projects, often serving as the writer, producer and director.

Kirkendall's current project is editing a short film that he made last summer. "Of Theatre & Bikinis," his first non-horror effort, is the story of a college-age girl living in a small suburban upstate New York town who wants desperately to be an actress, and who goes on a crazy quest to meet a Hollywood director, according to Kirkendall. "It's a very lighthearted PG-13 style

comedy-drama. Hopefully this movie will be out sometime in the fall," he added. Kirkendall often screens his films at various locales in the Albany-area, including colleges and independent movie theatres. Hudson Valley Community College in Troy, N.Y. often holds showcases of independent films, of which Kirkendall is a frequent participant.

He has worked on several short and full-length films, including his latest feature film, a vampire movie called "The Temptress," in early 2003. He is looking for distribution options for the film as well as working on his own short films and editing the works of others. Two feature films that were edited by Kirkendall, "The Edge of Reality" and "London After Midnight," are scheduled to be released on DVD/VHS in the upcoming months. He also runs a Web site in hopes of encouraging correspondence with other filmmakers and fans of underground/independent cinema.

Some filmmakers turn to teaching in the course of their pursuits, such as Dr. J.C. Barone. A full-time professor of film at Mount Saint Mary College, he has also worked on many film projects and is currently working on a video about interpersonal communications for the Allyn-Bacon textbook company. Next year, he will be working on documentary about the Dominican sisters of Hope of Newburgh, N.Y. In the past, he has produced music videos and local commercials. Barone prefers digital video for his projects.

"When I was a grad student at Syracuse University, my fellow students would put down video saying it would 'never' be as good as film, that it was basically, 'crap.' I disagreed with them then and I'm gloating now," Barone said. Digital video is now employed by filmmakers such as Steven Soderbergh, who won acclaim for the films "Traffic" and "Erin Brockovich," and is considered by many to be one of the most influential modern directors in independent film, he explained.

Barone believes that the area is a great place to engage in filmmaking and video production, because of its proximity to New York City as well as the growing local arts community.

One of Barone's assistants in the Allyn-Bacon projects is his student, Kevin Johnston, a junior majoring in communications with a concentration in film. Johnston is an aspiring filmmaker who hopes to pursue editing of music-related projects such as music videos and documentaries.

He is currently in the planning stages of a short film of his own, using a variety of digital techniques. At this point, he has little interest in Hollywood business and says that he wants to pursue film for the sake of art, a sentiment he feels has begun to dwindle.

"Independent film should remain independent at all costs. There's no disputing that. The more that corporations dip their tentacles into independent filmmaking, the more the spirit of independent filmmaking will be compromised," he said.

Speaking on the local independent film scene, Johnston said, "In general I'd say that there's great support for grassroots projects like documentaries featuring local festivals and the like." This can be seen not only in the Woodstock Film Festival but also in smaller film festivals, the support of local arts magazines such as the Chronogram, based in New Paltz, and venues such as Upstate Films, a non-profit, member-supported arts organization.

Upstate Films, located in Rhinebeck, was opened in 1972 as an alternative to mainstream film exhibition. In addition to showing old and new independent film showings, the theatre also facilitates discussions with directors, filmmakers, authors, actors and other guests. The theatre attracts young, old and middle age, according to employee Janice Sandwick with a laugh.

Upstate Films often works to incorporate advocacy by coupling screenings of documentaries with discussions led by political and community activists. This past Sunday, May 2, 2004, Upstate Films hosted a new documentary, "Leaps of Faith: Views on American Power and the War in Iraq," filmed in Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

Basically, we just interviewed people on the streets of Poughkeepsie, said the film's co-creator Andrew Davison, a professor of political science at Vassar College. Davison said that for

he and Benjamin Kalina, a fellow Hudson Valley resident, the decision to make such a documentary "was made from the moment of the Presidential ultimatum (to go to war.)" The actual filming was done on three separate days, right before the one-year anniversary of the Iraq invasion. Davison has no background in film, other than a few amateur efforts from when he was a teenager, he laughed.

Upstate Films gladly hosted the documentary and its makers, as part of their ongoing attempts to raise local awareness.

"We bring arts and culture to a community so it can thrive," said Sandwick. "We want to bring good movies and we spice things up a little. And we like working here."

Her words sum up the true sentiment of local independent film. Those involved in any facet most certainly have the desire to spread art and culture, but above all, they do it for the pure enjoyment. Can we say the same about most of Hollywood? Probably not.