

Aspiring Pittsburgh Filmmakers

Hollywood cinema is only interested in money, in taking something from the people, while artistic cinema is interested in giving something to the people, an independent filmmaker once said.

Christopher Cussat does not argue. "The quality of mainstream Hollywood films is currently in a state of degeneration. Plots are weak and the writing is mediocre. Films in today's society cater to pop culture and lack any depth of emotion or creativity."

Like other aspiring independent filmmakers, Cussat has developed disdain for mainstream Hollywood films.

"The only hope for film today is independent writers and filmmakers, and the only hope for mainstream Hollywood are those independent filmmakers who not only made it to the big time but who fight to maintain their originality, vision and their voice," he says.

Cussat, a freelancer who writes in the North Hills, is currently working on his first film, "Last Night," a 10-minute short which he hopes to enter into the Sundance Film Festival next January.

Cussat says the short will be filmed in reverse chronological order. The story focuses on six characters with the running theme that everything we do affects someone else in some way.

So why a short?

"You can often say more with less," he responds.

Shorts used to be common in theaters, preceding screenings of feature-length films. According to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which bestows Oscars to animated and live-action shorts, a short is anything less than 40 minutes, but most last less than 10 minutes. Nowadays, shorts are usually made by aspiring young filmmakers because they are economical - less studio time, less film, less money from filmmakers' pockets.

Cussat acknowledges that money also played a small role in his decision to make a short rather than a feature length. Through research, Cussat discovered that

there are a number of national funding opportunities for filmmakers, but very few, if any, in Pittsburgh. To date, Cussat is still seeking funding for his film, which has a projected budget of \$10,000.

"That's my biggest obstacle. There is simply no funding outlets for independent filmmakers here," he says with a twinge of disappointment in his voice.

Dawn Keezer, executive director of



the Pittsburgh Film Office agrees. "We help filmmakers in every way but we can't help with funding. That is the greatest challenge that an independent filmmaker faces here."

The film office helps market the region to the film industry and also assists local filmmakers from finding the right crew, to choosing locations and obtaining permits - everything possible imaginable, except for funding projects and assisting in securing funds.

So why even bother making a movie here if funding is hard to come by?

"Allegheny County is a great place to shoot movies. We have good union and non-union film crews established here. They work with filmmakers no matter how small their budget is. We also have plenty of supplies available. And we also have Pittsburgh Filmmakers, which is a great resource for new and even experienced filmmakers," Keezer says.

Pittsburgh Filmmakers is one of the largest and oldest independent media arts centers in the country. According to a spokesperson, in addition to the classes

they offer, there is also a large collection of film equipment that can be rented on an unlimited basis for an annual fee of \$275. There are darkrooms, computers and a bulletin board where filmmakers can find local actors, find cameras for sale or get information about exhibits around town. There are also two screening rooms where they can show their work.

Despite the lack of funding opportunities, Cussat says that you can live in Pittsburgh and still be a successful filmmaker. "If you believe in yourself, are diligent and hold true to your vision and values, you can be a success here."

"But I'll let you know," he quickly adds with a laugh.

He may end up like former Pittsburgher, Chuck Ozeas, who now lives in Los Angeles. Ozeas moved out west to attend USC, one of the premier film schools in the country, where he specialized in cinematography and now shoots commercials and rap and R&B music videos.

Ozeas believes that schooling and training is important to new filmmakers. Like other aspiring filmmakers, Cussat does not have the training or technical background to actually shoot a movie himself.

"If you want to direct, and you have no prior training, it may get in the way of your vision," said Ozeas. "There are many technical issues that can arise in the course of filming. If you don't have a handle on what they are, you won't be able to resolve them and you won't get to the creative side and make your vision come to life."

Cussat understands this and is currently in talks with local prospective cinematographers to help him film his project. He says that if he's going to film a movie, he wants to do it right the first time around.

A model and actor himself, Cussat, also plans to cast locals for his project. "I want to utilize the talent of the city. There's a lot of talent ill-used by the current agencies. I think that Pittsburgh

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is a limited market for actors and filmmakers and the local film industry's incestuous, dramatic cliques limit it even more."

Cussat paused for a moment when asked about the motivation to make his own film. "I always felt that I had ideas that were important enough to share with the world. Currently, film grants the

most access to the most people, more than books, poetry or any other artistic form of expression. Films are what people go to see and are what people understand in our modern society.

"All of my favorite movies are able to transform me into another world for a little while. I like the escape that movies provide," he adds.

As for his future goals, Cussat says he would love to be able to live and survive

through his artistic work. For the time being, he's finishing writing the script for "Last Night," and hopes to begin shooting later this summer.

Provided, of course, he gets some funding.

For more information on the Pittsburgh Film Office, visit their web site at www.pghfilm.org. For more information on Pittsburgh Filmmakers, visit their web site at www.pghfilmmakers.org. For more information about Christopher Cussat, send him an email at cussat@duq.edu. ❖

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