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Up Front

Circumstantial evidence

Chance and circumstance have shaped the work of UNLV's David Schmoeller

BY KEVIN CAPP

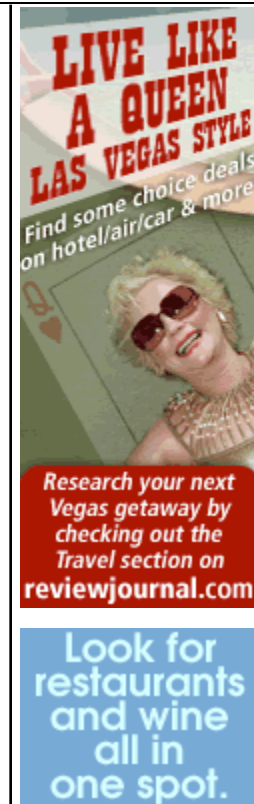
"Every step leads to calamity," says the narrator of director David Schmoeller's short film, *Spanking Lessons*, which is set to premiere at CineVegas as part of the "Nevada Filmmakers" portion of the festival. While the film is concerned with the random acts of unkindness we experience from birth, the sentiment could just as easily apply to the dog-eat-dog world of moviemaking.

It's something Schmoeller learned during his 27 years in Los Angeles, and is reflected in many of his films. Consider his 1999 short, *Please Kill Mr. Kinski*, about Schmoeller's attempts to direct the legendary lunatic Polish-German actor Klaus Kinski. In the short, Schmoeller details six fistfights and other moments of misbehavior that lead the crew to openly discuss



David Schmoeller

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murdering the egomaniacal Kinski while trying to make the movie CrawlSpace.

True, it's not a purely Hollywood moment, but it illustrates the pressure-cooker that most directors work in. Another little-known fact that Schmoeller's struggles to make CrawlSpace illustrate is that films aren't usually produced because the stories are bright, shiny beacons of creativity, but because of less inspired reasons. CrawlSpace landed in theaters because a producer had an old apartment building set he wanted to re-use.

"Films get made because of circumstance. They don't get made because it's a really good script," says Schmoeller, an assistant film professor at UNLV. He adds, "It's about the process. I rarely got to do what I wanted to do. Most movies happen because somebody thinks they can make some money."

Enter the short film into Schmoeller's creative life. The freedom it affords filmmakers is one of the form's primary draws for him, allowing him the opportunity to flex authorial and directorial muscles he may not necessarily have when shooting a feature. "That's why I do like it," he says, noting that he made his thesis short as a master's student in the film program at the University of Texas at Austin in 1973. "Almost every director has started with a short."

Still, even when making a film that's nine minutes long instead of 90, Schmoeller often runs head first into situational circumstance. Case in point: a short he's currently editing called Wedding Day, which is about three different weddings on three different continents happening for three different reasons. Call it a circumstantial three-fer.

One, he was a visiting artist in residence in Singapore and therefore required to come up with a project. Two, he happened to be passing through France at the time. And, three he lives in Las Vegas, the wedding capital of the world. All were forces ostensibly outside of his control, but ones that he harnessed and worked to his advantage.

Even Spanking Lessons came from a similar place -- namely, his role as a professor, which demands that he put his students to work on a real film set to give them practical experience. Thus, he ended up writing and directing a short partly for them, and partly for himself.

But, besides the physical and psychic space to do what you want, what advantages



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are there to making and screening shorts, let alone watching them?

It's a question Americans are more likely to pose than anyone else, says Schmoeller. "We're just not in the habit of watching short films." But, he adds, "When people go to festivals and see short films, they really like them."

Spanking Lessons screens June 13 and 15 as part of CineVegas "See Me, Touch Me, Feel Me" short-film program.

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