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The state of local filmmaking

by **Josh Bell**

Four directors chat about festivals, online video and why no one has made a great Vegas feature



Photographs by Iris Dumuk

The celebrity red-carpet events and indie buzz movies from Sundance may be the biggest attention-getters at CineVegas, but since its inception the festival has been supported by and supportive of local filmmaking. And even as CineVegas becomes bigger and more popular, local film remains an integral part of its programming. Past years have showcased local features, including *Malevolence* (2004) and *Damn Yankee Day* (2006), as well as a wide variety of short films. This year's

Nevada Shorts program has 10 locally produced films, and there are programs dedicated to works from students at UNLV, CCSN and the Art Institute of Las Vegas, as well We brought together three directors with films in the Nevada Shorts program

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Boulder City's Dam Short Film Festival. His CineVegas short is *13 Ways to Die at Home*.

Jason Leinwand is a director whose films include the documentary *Mr. Happiness*, the 48 Hour Film Project award-winner *Three Girls, a Guy and an Apocalypse* and the 2006 CineVegas entry *Wrestling with the Past*. He also works developing TV shows and as a stand-up comedian under the name Jason Harris (and, full disclosure, is a close friend of your moderator). His CineVegas short is *Sally Peppers: Neighborhood Detective*.

David Schmoeller is an assistant professor in film production at UNLV and supervises the university's Short Film Archive. He spent more than 30 years as a writer and director in Hollywood, where he was responsible for such films as *Netherworld*, *The Arrival* and the original *Puppet Master*, which has spawned numerous sequels. His CineVegas short is *Spanking Lessons*.

Roger Erik Tinch is CineVegas' art and online director and an accomplished local filmmaker in his own right. His short films include *Untitled* (which won the Future Filmmaker Award at the Mercury Short Film Festival in 2003), *Dwelling*, *Cleaning Up Matters* and *Better Masque* (which won the Best Nevada Filmmaker award at the Dam Short Film Festival in 2006).

What do you think of the state of local filmmaking today compared to five years ago?

Roger Erik Tinch: I think it's grown, definitely. When I came back here in 2002, it was really small, kind of spread out. And it seems like throughout the years, I think with the help of—like [UNLV's] Spring Flicks was a great way of filmmakers getting together to see what everyone was working, a great way to showcase. The Dam Short Film Festival, too. Ever since then, I think, just providing avenues for filmmakers to show their work has really widened the amount of people doing films in town and knowing what every other filmmaker is doing, which I think helps.

Lee Lanier: I think the quality has gotten better. The first year we had the festival, in 2005, we had a hard time finding enough Nevada films to make an entire program. In 2006, we had enough for a pretty good program, and in this last year, 2007, we had enough for two programs, and had to turn some of the filmmakers away. It's a really good sign. Overall quality is steadily improving also.

David Schmoeller: It's also, I think, access to equipment and advances in technology, and things like YouTube, where you can get instant showings of your work. It's the explosion in technology.

Do your students at UNLV post work on YouTube regularly?

DS: I try to discourage them from putting their shorts on, because it immediately limits its value as a short commercially. But I think at this point most of them would rather just show it to see if there's a way to get it seen in festivals and broadcast.

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LL: We actually find some of our films online. Occasionally we do track down something on YouTube or another site specializing in short films.

RET: I think after a short's kind of had its run on the festival circuit and kind of done its thing, I think YouTube and MySpace video are really great ways of showing your past work and keeping it going as far as interest in what you're doing next.

Is that something that you guys as filmmakers have taken advantage of?

RET: Yeah.

LL: Yeah, AtomFilms—I have a couple films on there. It's great exposure. Some of the top films on AtomFilms will have more downloads and more people watching them than major television events. Tens of millions of people watch it. In some ways you can't beat that. It's the single best outlet. You just don't want to do it too soon. You want to do it after you've done the festival circuit.

The CineVegas local shorts program is strong, but there's no local feature in the festival this year. Why do you think feature filmmaking struggles more locally?

LL: Time and resources, I think. Plus, skilled crews who can pull off that much work. It's an incredible amount of work.

RET: And actors. Great pool of actors; a lot of them do go to LA. So if you're going to make a feature, you've got to have some money to fund it. And also, too, I think the character of Vegas right now is a little clichéd, and if you're going to do a feature in town, I think the best thing to do is not make a film about Vegas, the Strip or anything like that. I think once people start forcing themselves to use outer areas of town, there might be some more interesting stuff.

Jason Leinwand: A lot of the time it's also maturity. I would think that we would all hope that our fourth or fifth film is better than our first or second film. Sometimes you have to go through those steps before you're ready to make a feature, and then on top of all that you do have to deal with resources and schedules and finding a budget to make everything happen, as well as talent. It's not an easy road.

Is it possible to achieve success as a feature filmmaker without leaving Las Vegas?

RET: I think so. It hasn't happened yet, but I think that shows that there's going to be that one feature that does come out of Vegas and puts the city on the map. Like Austin, there were quite a few features that put it instantly on the map, and Vegas just needs that one, and when it does happen it'll be great. I really think it's going to happen pretty soon, if it's one of us in this room, or not. I think it's bound to happen one day.

DS: It's a real struggle to get a short made for free—basically what everyone is doing—and to do a feature is just extremely difficult.

Is there a real filmmaking community in Vegas, or is it more a set of cliques?

LL: I think there is some support there, although what I do personally is a lot of animation, so I get my crew from other parts of the country, who know computer animation. Locally there's really nobody who does that, except for some students.

RET: I definitely think there are cliques.

DS: It's cliquish in my film classes, but it's not a bad kind of cliquish.

RET: But it's an overall support for everyone else, too. Everyone definitely does have their own people that they work with on every film, which is fine, but outside of that everyone supports everyone else's work. The guys that I was working with, the Group Collectively, a lot of them have moved out of town, so I've kind of lost that circle of people I've been doing stuff with. I'm just trying to readjust and see who else is out there to work with.

DS: It's a collaborative process, so you have to have groups.

JL: I think it's kind of a loose association more than anything else. What happens is, you find people who just want to get better and keep working, and you see a film that you like, and you say, "I really think it was shot well," so you talk to that director of photography, and that guy wants to keep working and get better, and then you find a lighting guy from another film, and you kind of all mesh that way. It's the networking. And it doesn't mean that that's your crew every time out, but it's the way you're able to pool your resources.

RET: There's a comfort level, too. Once you've worked with the same crew on one or two shorts, you like that. There's a certain rhythm to the way the set works. Every film that I worked on, I worked with the same group of guys, basically.

How have CineVegas and other festivals and events affected local filmmaking?

RET: I think the platform, for one, of being able to exhibit your film to an audience you normally wouldn't have it get seen by is huge, and on top of that, people in the audience, other filmmakers, are going to see these films, and want to one-up on that. It's this effect of, the next year, that group of people with that talent even being better. I think it just comes down to the platform, the exhibition—being able to see what people are doing in town.

LL: Each year, we have people come to us and say, "I want to make a film because of your festival," and a lot of times they do. A lot of times they come back more than once, and they get better and better, and that's fantastic. People who might have thought it was a pipe dream are actually doing it now because of this festival. I'm sure CineVegas has similar stories they can tell, too.

DS: We have an event in the fall and in the spring, the 48 Hour—not the larger,

national one, but just the local 48 Hour, which really motivates our students, and we have the Spring Flicks in May, which everyone is shooting for. Those venues really motivate.

JL: I think it's absolutely integral to the film community. It's essential, because it changes everything. Now people aren't saying, "Well, we're making a movie, what's going to happen with it? Who knows if anything's going to happen?" There are outlets for it locally. That really helped me last year, CineVegas, and before that, the 48. When people see your work, and you do good work, they want to work with you, and you're able to expand the scope of what you're able to do. I think all the festivals—the UNLV ones, all the ones outside of UNLV—they're all essential to making this a better film community.

Do you think in the future it will matter less where you are geographically in terms of your ability to make a film?

RET: Yeah. And also, too, I think it comes down to where to show it as well. Obviously online has that capability of being able to have it seen by anybody in the world. So that immediately is a definite plus with that sort of medium. I don't think where you are ever should govern what kind of films you make or if you can make films. You should be able to do it anywhere. Anywhere that has electricity, I guess.

JL: It's easier to make films now outside of LA, but I also think that sometimes people put their head in the sand when it comes to LA. LA is still the center of it—or New York. It's good we're all able to make films and get better, but to make a living, it's really tough outside of those two markets, I think, at least from my experience. That's why so many people still go to LA. It's definitely something that people should consider one way or the other.

LL: It's amazing where the submissions come from. I'm sure CineVegas sees the same thing. We get submissions from China, Australia, little bitty post-Communist countries where you're surprised they have anything more than a cow, and they're making these films and sending them all over the world, basically. It's amazing what technology can do now.



You guys are all at different points in your careers, with two of you having spent significant time working in the film business in LA. What are your thoughts on leaving Vegas for LA, or coming to Vegas after spending time in LA?

RET: I guess for me, it's like we were talking about, having that first feature that would really put Vegas on the map. To me, that's a great motivation to try to do something really special. More so than it just came out of Vegas, but that it's a good film. That's what I'm striving for now. Right now I'm still working in short films, trying to maintain the forward motion of working, of creating films, but the ultimate goal is I really do want to make a definitive Vegas film. When, is the question.

So you plan to stay?

RET: Yeah. I see a lot of potential here in town. In just the last five years it's really started to cook. Ultimately it's going to happen, so I'll stick it out.

JL: I've lived in LA, I've done the business there, and for the last few years I've traveled back and forth between here and there, and I love living here, and I love seeing the growth and expansion of the Las Vegas film community and the quality of films out here, and I would love to make movies here. But I would never say that I would go one way or the other on it. I probably will be back in LA, in all honesty, because I have other interests with TV and stand-up comedy, so I probably have to get back there. But that doesn't mean I would just wipe Vegas out of my mind-set altogether. Because I would love to make a good feature up here as well.

LL: For me it was a lifestyle choice. I spent so many years working a lot of long hours between film production work and animation work and special-effects work. It was a lot of fun, but I just wanted to go some place a little bit quieter. Also, I have more time to work on my own projects, like the film festival and all the short films. I think LA's a great place when you're younger. When you get a bit older, it wears on you a little bit, I think.

DS: I came because I had a good teaching opportunity. I'm still making films. I think in our careers, there's all kinds of ebbs and flows in filmmaking. I've been making films for 38 years. I just did a short called Wedding Day that we filmed in Paris, Singapore and Las Vegas, with a bride in each city. It was because I was a visiting artist in Singapore for three weeks, so I did that, and the Cinematheque Francaise had a tribute screening, so ... In terms of technology, we cast the Paris story over the Internet. I had two producers in Paris, and they filmed the auditions, and it was the French version of YouTube that you could look at the auditions on. That's why I think you can be anywhere and make movies. You don't have to live in Los Angeles.

Is there anyone locally who you think is poised to be the breakout filmmaker from Vegas?

DS: I think there are a handful of them, yeah.

LL: From my experience, I love seeing the Nix brothers progress in their career. [Their

latest short, *Lowell Gleason Wears Glasses*, plays CineVegas this year.] They made their first film for us, the Dam Short Film Festival, and it was a good first film, but they've steadily improved the quality quite a bit. It's pretty exciting to see what they'll do. I don't know if they'll go into feature work, but maybe some kind of comedy work.

DS: I think Roger is one, and I think the Thompson brothers and that group that they work with [www.bigbrother-littlebrother.com], and there's Dave Christenson [www.realmfilms.com]. There's quite a few.

RET: It's anybody's game at this point. I'm not too sure.

JL: I think what it's going to be is it's going to be someone who's a really good writer. I think that's one of the big issues with features out here is that I don't think anyone has seen a local feature where they've really said, "Someone just nailed that script." There is talent; there's resources as far as crew, and there's enough if you hustle, you can make it happen. But if you don't have a great script, then you don't have a great movie, no matter what it is. So it's going to be whoever writes that great script.

RET: Exactly. And I think that's where a lot of features that have been shot here, that's where they've kind of fallen. They're so engrossed in just the act of making a feature, and not really bearing down and saying, "Is this a good story that I want to spend years of my life not only making, but trying to market and get out there?" I think it really will come from a great, great, great story, a great script. Having to look past the challenges of making a feature, and just taking it for what it is. It's tough; people know that going in. I think that's why I've been really gun-shy about making a feature, too, it's just you want the best script in the world.

Is it that people are rushing into things?

RET: I don't know, and I'm sure this is like this in a lot of places, but a lot of people are very romanticized about being a filmmaker, about being a film director. They like the title, and they like just being that, but they don't take as much passion in the film that they're putting together. If they would just do that, I think they would get success. Rather than just kind of falling in love with wearing the director hat.







JL: Sometimes people also undercut themselves, I notice. They'll schedule ridiculously tight shoots, and they're trying to get way too much crammed in. You might be able to get something in, but you're not going to get the best quality work in if you don't give yourself the time, and you don't do the right amount of preproduction to make the best product. I think a lot of the time people just think, "We have a camera, we'll go out and we'll shoot, and whatever comes of it, comes of it."

RET: "And then we'll become famous." Honestly, that's sort of the vibe that I've gotten from people that I've known that have done features, is that vibe that "This is gonna launch us." And not planning for that Plan B of, "Well, if this stinks, what's next?"

LL: It's kind of tragic. I've heard a number of stories over the years about features gathering dust on a shelf someplace. People burn every single bridge they have, every single favor they called in, every bit of money they had, and they went nowhere with it. It's kind of sad, actually.

The Nevada Filmmaking Shorts program plays June 13 at 3:30 p.m. and June 15 at 1:30 p.m.

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