

ROLL CALL

He's Making D.C. a Film Town

February 5, 2009
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A few years ago, Jon Gann showed the short film “Cyberslut” — the story of a man who is obsessed with meeting people online — at about 65 festivals internationally. Along the way he discovered the dreary reality that greets filmmakers at these festivals.

“I discovered most film festivals were about parties and money, but they were not about films and they were definitely not about filmmakers,” he recalled, adding that the festivals are “big economic engines” for host cities.

Gann, a Washington, D.C., native, was convinced he could spearhead a festival that would showcase the artistry of short films. At the same time, he saw a need to reform a large, unwieldy D.C.-area film community that lacked teamwork and communication.

His solutions to those two problems formed the foundation for the nonprofit DC Film Alliance, which incorporated in 2006.

To tackle the first problem, Gann hosted the first annual DC Shorts festival in 2003. Each year, he invites filmmakers to submit their best short films. About 100 volunteer judges are trained on what makes a good film, and they narrow them down to the films that are eventually shown during the fall festival. Winners are named in categories including Best Local Film, Best First-Time Director, Audience Awards and Filmmaker’s Favorite. Fourteen of the top films will be screened this Friday and Saturday night as part of Best of DC Shorts 2008.

In 2008, the festival received more than 760 entries. They were whittled down to 102 films shown over the course of 15 screenings at the E Street Cinema during the week of Sept. 11. Filmmakers from nine countries were represented, but 12 of the films screened were made locally.

Rob Rafferty won the prize for Best Local Film in 2008. An amateur producing his “first legitimate film” (he’s less proud of his 2006 entry and some work on YouTube), Rafferty was inspired by a competition being held at the Arlington Cinema ‘N’ Drafthouse to find the funniest federal employee. That contest attracted 40 entrants, but unfortunately, Rafferty didn’t make it past the first round.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission attorney was undeterred. His film, named “Funniest Fed,” featured backstage interviews with the top five comics spliced between cuts of their onstage routines.

Rafferty’s work is an example of the kind of local talent Gann tries to cultivate, solving the second problem he originally encountered. That regional focus is encouraged in meetings of the D.C. Film Salon, which started in the spring of 2004. Now it meets every other month and attracts 65 to 70 filmmakers and other interested Washingtonians. Each session at Bar Louie on

Seventh Street Northwest features a speaker, usually someone local. The most recent session was on music production.

“We had local composers and someone talked about copyrights and someone talked about musical clearances,” Gann explained.

These days, the alliance offers services beyond DC Shorts and DC Film Salon to area filmmakers.

A calendar on the group’s Web site alerts readers to upcoming classes, casting and crew calls, festivals and meetings. An online resource library offers a database of the tools local filmmakers need, ranging from listings for businesses that sell props to those that offer payroll services. A new weekly video blog will promote upcoming events.

The group debuted a screenwriting contest last year in connection with DC Shorts. The top six screenwriters bring their scripts to D.C. and cast actors for a reading in front of a live audience. The audience’s favorite received \$2,500 to make the film and then submit it for DC Shorts. This year, Gann hopes to hold it as a weekend-long event in October.

As Gann juggles the duties of DCFA and his new film consulting firm, Reel Plan, he continues to make his own movies. He tries to put out one film each year but has stalled on his current project, a feature documentary on dating tentatively titled “I Shaved for This!?”

“I’ve actually recruited nine other local filmmakers, and everyone’s doing a short documentary about some aspect of dating today,” Gann said.

The project has dragged on as Gann juggles his other duties, but he has a backup plan in case it can’t be finished.

“If worse comes to worse, we’ve already taped about 30 people telling us their worst date nightmares,” he said. “[I asked], ‘Who would watch two hours of people just telling horror stories?’ And everyone says, ‘I would watch it.’”

