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Everything Michigan

KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

'I've never seen a film like this' Locally made 'Comic Evangelists' is on its way to Los Angeles festival

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By John Liberty

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Most young filmmakers would probably balk at the suggestion that more than 90 percent of their first full-length feature film be improvised.

But because of his personality, talent and vision, local filmmaker Daniel Jones was able to turn an unscripted concept into the stylistic mockumentary "Comic Evangelists." Starring the local improv comedy troupe Crawlspace Eviction and filmed here and in Toronto by the then-23-year-old Jones, it tells the story of an opportunistic Christian improv troupe that crashes a Toronto festival to spread its message through laughs.

"His demeanor is so appropriate for directing something like this, because he was never stressed about any of it," co-director and Crawlspace Eviction member Dann Sytsma said. "He was always of the mind-set. 'Oh yeah, that was cool.' He just seemed to have it organized in his head. A lot of it was (that) he worked at it, but some of it was natural ability."

Those skills and the rich humor of the movie seem to be the reasons "Comic Evangelists," filmed on a budget of \$44, was selected to be shown Nov. 5 and 6 at the American Film Institute Fest in Los Angeles. The film, which has been tweaked a bit since its Kalamazoo screening in April, is slotted in the "American Directions" category with nine other full-length feature films, including "Life After Tomorrow," starring Sarah Jessica Parker; "Special," starring Michael Rapaport; and "Disappearances," starring Kris Kristofferson.

About 3,500 films from around the world were submitted for the festival. Its programming committee of about 45 people narrowed those down to a field of 110 features, 91 narratives, 19 documentaries and 36 shorts, said Nancy Collet, AFI Fest director of programming.

The first screener to see "Comic Evangelists" gave it such a high score that it was placed in the "definite invite" category and passed on to a senior screener, who also gave it high marks, Collet said. Another screener echoed the grade before Collet took her peek.

"It was very unusual how quickly it went through the system," Collet said. "This was just liked by everyone and then passed on to me. I saw it and was like, 'Yeah, we have to invite them.' Everyone agreed.

"It was just great. I see so many hundreds of films. I've done this for 10 years now, and I've never seen a film like this."

Collet said "Comic Evangelists" was a "wonderful discovery" that appealed to her because it was funny -- a rarity at film festivals, which usually are overrun by "edgy, art-house" films involving darker subject matter. It also was able to bring in big issues and "tackle them in a very delicate way" without alienating members of an audience. And "I just loved how they all fell apart at the end," she said.

For the 25-year-old Jones, who said he thought the movie had about a "one in a million" chance of being accepted by the AFI Fest, his filmmaking career has reached new heights.

"I've been doing this off and on for a decade, and this is really validating as a director to have it recognized like this," Jones said in a phone interview from Washington, D.C., where he is in the master's program in film and media studies at American University. "It's also really cool it came out of Kalamazoo. It's a place I feel really passionate about."

Jones' career path to the AFI Fest started when he was a sophomore at Loy Norrix High School and his parents, Keith and Janet, nudged him toward the local Community Access Center.

He produced a weekly call-in show on Friday nights called "Z-TV."

"When you're a teenager, you kind of get thrown into activities because your parents force you to. That was one of the activities for me," he said.

The next year he became a student in Education for the Arts, a Kalamazoo County school program in which he learned technical skills from instructors including Amy Levine and Tom Ludwig.

"He was one of those students you wanted to have in class. He was very self-motivated," Ludwig said.

Film production had a hold on Jones until he graduated from high school in 1999. He applied to New York University and was accepted, but the school was too expensive. He decided to attend Hunter College in New York City. By the end of his sophomore year, his career plans had shifted.

"When I got there, I really got into environmental studies and I didn't expect to get back into film," he said.

He became "addicted to internships" and worked at the United Nations, for an Internet company, as a news producer for a radio station and as a journalist for the school newspaper, among other things. In the fall of 2002, he joined three young Reuters reporters on their trip to South Africa to cover the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

He brought a video camera, hoping to make a "Real World"-style film depicting the international political process through the eyes of youths. Thirty-eight hours of footage later, he had enough material for a feature-length documentary.

The film-production bug started to itch again. He enrolled in a film class his last semester at Hunter and learned nonlinear editing, which he later used in "**Comic Evangelists**."

The World Summit documentary was shown at NYU and here by the Kalamazoo Film Society in the fall of 2004.

By March of 2005, Jones was searching the Internet for work when he stumbled across videographer Gary Marino, who was looking for someone to film and cook for his project. Marino planned to walk from Florida to Boston to raise awareness of pediatric obesity. Jones was hired and spent weeks following Marino around with a camera, including a stop at the U.S. Capitol for lobbying meetings with senators.

"It was a lot of fun. I couldn't ask for anything better coming out of college," Jones said. "I learned a lot of great tricks from (Marino)."

Jones returned to Kalamazoo and began working in the Education for the Arts Media Lab, in the Epic Center, in the winter of 2005. He had been a fan of Crawlspace Eviction after becoming a friend of one of its members, James Sanford, who also is a Gazette staff writer and film critic. Jones said he kept encouraging the troupe to come up with some project he could film. He'd float a few ideas, but nothing stuck.

Jones' shot came when Crawlspace Eviction was invited to the Toronto International Improv Festival in August. Sytsma invited Jones on the trip. After discussing different potential film formats, like a documentary or a 10-minute sketch, the group decided on a mockumentary. Adam Carter, who plays Nigel in "**Comic Evangelists**," suggested that they center the project on a Christian improv group.

With a small hand-held digital camera and wireless microphones, Jones filmed the mostly improvised scenes. The group returned to Kalamazoo, and Jones spent the next three months editing the footage at the EFA Media Lab. No one seemed happy with the ending so, taking the advice of his girlfriend, Amy Johnson, Jones taped a new conclusion less than one week before its local premiere in April.

In August, the 75-minute mockumentary was sent to more than a dozen festivals, AFI's being the largest. In early September, Jones received the invitation from AFI via e-mail. Now he's coming to grips with the impact the festival may have on his career, he said.

His former mentor Levine said she thinks this could be the start of a successful career. "I'm really happy for him," she said. "He made a really good movie. I think it's really good for him. It couldn't happen to a nicer person. ... Getting into AFI is extremely difficult. It's a really big festival in a big town. To get into that with your first movie is really impressive."

That's a sign that he could potentially make a good living at this."

Film screenings

"**Comic Evangelists**" -- 9:45 p.m. Nov. 5 and 4:30 p.m. Nov. 6 at the American Film Institute Fest in Los Angeles. \$12 for Nov. 5, \$8 for Nov. 6. www.afi.com.

On the Web

www.afi.com

www.comicevangelists.com

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