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Everything Michigan

KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Improv group plays it for laughs at film screening in L.A.

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By John Liberty

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A small group gathered outside the ArcLight 10 Cinema in Los Angeles 10 days ago and held up signs outside the premiere of the Kalamazoo-produced mockumentary "Comic Evangelists."

One placard did not mince words: "Comic Evangelists are evil." For emphasis, the words "ARE EVIL" were written in red ink -- the color most closely associated with Satan and his diabolical associates.

Had you flown more than 2,000 miles to Los Angeles for the premiere of the film at the 20th American Film Institute Fest, you would have seen the rowdy protesters. And if you've ever seen the Kalamazoo improv-comedy group Crawspace Eviction, you would have noticed the protesters were, in fact, members of Crawspace picketing their own film.

The scene best sums up the AFI Fest experience for the group -- they had as much fun as they could, considering none of them expected to be there in the first place.

"It was pretty much a mindset of 'We have nothing to lose. We spent 50 bucks on the movie. We'd really love for it to get distributed, but if it doesn't, we're not out anything,'" said "Evangelists" co-director and Crawspace Eviction member Dann Sytsma. "It's been a great experience. At heart, we're improvisers and performers, and we said, 'Let's go out and have fun.'"

During the staged protests, an employee of a cable channel covering the AFI Fest pointed out to Sytsma, whom he had interviewed earlier in the week, that Kirsten Dunst was having lunch nearby. Staying true to his movie character, the self-righteous Rick Stevenson, Sytsma waltzed over to Dunst, tracts in hand, and told her why she shouldn't see his movie.

"She was with a friend, and I just barged in," Sytsma said. "It was kind of funny that she totally got the joke and was sarcastic about it and rather cynical. So I gave her a whole stack of tracts and said, 'Do you mind giving these to your friends?'"

The crowds at the mockumentary's screenings Nov. 5 and 6 were humble -- between 80 and 100 people each day for a theater that fits about 400, Sytsma said. The Tinseltown publications the Los Angeles Journal and the Hollywood Reporter gave "Comic Evangelists" generally unfavorable reviews, but a few bloggers said they loved it, as did members of the AFI Fest programming committee.

"I thought it was hilarious," AFI Fest senior programming director Shaz Bennett said in an e-mail. "The cast was just so infectious and creative. ... There were over 3,500 films submitted to the festival and this one stood out from the beginning."

"Evangelists" filmmaker and co-director Dan Jones, 25, who graduated from Loy Norrix High School in 1999 and is attending American University in Washington, D.C., said he met several industry professionals at the AFI Fest, including director Darren Aronofsky ("Pi" and "Requiem for a Dream").

"We're still trying to evaluate what we're supposed to be taking from it. It really is unreal," Jones said. "We met a ton of incredible producers and stars who really know what this industry is about."

Sytsma said Crawspace Eviction, which plans to recap a few L.A. stories at its performances at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday at the Epic Theatre, 359 S. Kalamazoo Mall, is in the process of arranging a local screening of "Evangelists" at the new Rave Cityplace 14 movie theater in early December. He hopes it will trigger more locally produced movies.

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