

COVERSTORY

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2006

72 hours — 5 minutes of film

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Staff photos by Sam Yu

As part of the 72 Film Fest narrative competition, numerous teams of filmmakers shot and produced short features over a 72-hour time period ending Sunday night. Working on their short film at Two Paws Up Friday evening, behind their high-end video camera, are Allison Levitt as the "Nurse," director Steve Gibson and Todd Moore who plays "David."

Inside a house on Fourth Street in downtown Frederick a crazy jealous woman pulls a gun on her boyfriend as he kneels to propose. She has to pull the trigger again and again and again. "No, don't look at him. You can't look at him. You're too upset to look at him," the director tells her. Her boyfriend kneels again and again too. He does it concerned, he does it playful, he does it fearful, he does it with guilt. It takes an hour and a half to film what will be a one-minute scene.



One of the scenes in an entry in the 72 Hour Film Fest this year is a confrontation between two women in the hallway of a house. Filming Valery Linn, left, and Karen Palting is director Steve Gibson. Holding the sound boom is Todd Moore who also plays a character in the film.

Similar scenarios played out all over Frederick last weekend as 21 film crews worked quickly to produce a five-minute film short for the 72 Film Fest's 72-hour narrative challenge. At the Thursday night launch party, teams randomly selected a sealed manila envelope containing a theme. Teams then had until 9 p.m. Sunday to turn in their tapes.

Team Open Bar drew "death and reproduction," and after a brief pause began tossing out ideas. Before long they were headed for a downtown bar.

It was Guinness all around except for one Heineken and the ideas seemed already to be deteriorating: lesbians and catfights, zombie babies, cows mating.

Some of the crew members are more experienced than others. They've worked together over the years on various film and TV projects, but this is their first contest, and their first deadline-driven film.

Everyone is a bit manic. Everyone has ideas.

Karen Palting, of no fixed address, (she recently moved back to the area from L.A.) is the producer and task master. She asks everyone to take five minutes to privately brainstorm.

The chatter doesn't stop, but everyone puts ideas to paper except for the director, Steve Gibson, of Frederick. He sees things visually, he says. It's one of his images that provides the spark for the team's narrative, and he will make the final edits.

On this first night, Steve is the quietest. After tossing out some action sequences, he lets the others fight

over the story details, reminding them only about the limited amount of time. "I have a coffin idea, but we don't have a coffin," he said.

Scriptwriter Joel DiGiacomo — "Dig," pronounced Dij — of Gaithersburg reinforces Steve: "Put ideas into a format we can use. We don't want robots or spaceships," he says.

By midnight the team has created a rough narrative around a man, a sperm bank, a gun and a crazy jealous girlfriend.

Actor Todd Moore of Virginia challenges the scriptwriters, Dig and Rob Maher, a Virginia-based comedian, to fill in his character and back story. Dig isn't interested. He tells Todd he can worry about those details himself if he needs to; it's not going in the script.

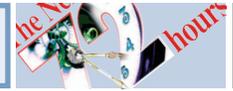
Dig seems apprehensive about the many versions of the story going around the table. Steve assures him he's open to filming different versions, saying simply and more than once, "Write what you think will work."

The next day while the writers work on the script, the rest of the team scouts for sites in and around Frederick. The grooming room at Two Paws Up is chosen to be the inside of the fertility clinic, Colonial Jewelers will be the jewelry shop, and City Hall will become the outside of the Sperm bank.

Scouting out the inside of the "clinic" Karen immediately starts planning the scene, asking repeatedly, "Will it work?"

Steve snaps, "Give me a second." He looks at the grooming room from

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various angles. She tries to confirm a time for shooting an outdoor scene.

"Four, five, six?"

"Shh," he says.

By Friday afternoon locations and actors are in place. The team has lost an actress they had picked up at the Launch Party — was it Mary Anne, Marie, Maribel? No one can remember. Karen, who was going to be the nurse, will now play the sexy neighbor.

Todd and Rob think this is a good idea: Karen is busty, "What woman wouldn't be jealous?"

They recruit Allison Levitt from Two Paws Up to be the nurse at the sperm bank.

"The things I do for my customers," she says.

At lunch Karen wants to know if Todd should shave.

Steve, not quite losing patience, speaks slowly, clearly enunciating each word: "Before I shoot I need the script."

"But don't you have a vision?" Karen asks.

"No. I need a script. We may need this look, where, why I don't know."

Karen tells him to go have a cigarette.

Through Allison they get a contact for a gun. Steve leaves a message: Something like: "Hi my name is Steve, I met you in Allison's backyard... I'm wondering if you have an — obviously unloaded — handgun I could borrow for a film I'm making."

They get the script. Todd doesn't like it.

"It's not funny," he says.

Steve takes a look while stopped at a red light. "I'm going to change it, and that will be it. It won't be going back to the writers."

They get the OK on the gun, but on late Friday afternoon they still don't have specimen cups for the sperm bank. Karen has that scene penned in for 6 p.m.



Director Steve Gibson makes a camera adjustment Saturday afternoon while filming a scene in a house on East Fourth Street. Coming in the door is Valery Linn who plays "Laura."



Director Steve Gibson, left, talks with Karen Palting and Todd Moore Saturday morning in downtown Frederick where they filmed a scene for the movie they are entering in the 72 Film Fest.

On Saturday morning lead actress Valery Linn joins the group. She's just returned from an audition in New York.

Todd wakes up at 6 a.m. to rework the script. Steve wakes up a few hours later to a manic Todd: "I've got it all figured out. It's brilliant." But Steve just groans and says it won't work.

Unlike Todd, Valery asks permission to change a line, even a word: "Can I say 'what's going on' instead of 'what's new?'"

Steve is open to suggestions, maybe because he knows he will do the final editing. He sometimes has them stick with the script, and sometimes tells them to improvise. For one scene he simply says "do it ... more broad"

"What does that mean, more broad?" a frustrated Todd asks. "I don't know. We're almost out of tape. Surprise me, replies Steve.

Valery runs with it. Todd follows. It's clearly the best take, the most natural.

"And cut. And that is the one I am going to use," Steve says.

The volume in the room increases. There is an excited release. It's obvious that the last cut really worked. The script for a moment became live.

The room empties out a little and Todd says shyly to Karen, "I actually made Steve smile."

"I know. Can you believe it," she says.

Todd has been struggling with his character since the ideas for the script were pitched. He wants to know his character's motivation. He fiddles with the script any chance he gets. He wants it to make sense.

Steve reminds the actors of the limited time and resources, urging them to simplify. You don't need a whole scene for what you can tell with an eyebrow raise, he says.

Valery struggles with how quickly her character

goes crazy. She doesn't want to understand it though, she simply wants to convey it. She spends her downtime with her head in her hands, pulling at her hair and making crazy faces, perhaps conjuring up memories of jilted love past. She complains that she just doesn't feel it yet.

"And, action."

She opens her eyes, enters the scene, catches her boyfriend hugging the buxom neighbor. She is no longer seeing Karen and Todd, but Dave and Samantha, the characters in the film. In the exchange, in the action, she finds her character, finds her craziness.

She is suddenly Laura.

The writers breathe life into the director, the director breathes life into the actors, the actors breathe life into the script.

"Writers are on the bottom of the food chain," is how Dig explains it.

He and Rob wrote the story and handed it over to Steve. You start the script here, end it there and let everyone improvise, he says. "If a few lines survive, that's cool."

If they had more time to shoot, the writers would probably negotiate more, he says. "The danger here would be to write a script that is unusable given the time limitations."

To produce the five-minute film, Steve will weed through almost two hours of tape.

He doesn't mind leaving scenes on the cutting room floor. "I've been doing it long enough that I know how long it's going to take... I'm open, I'll film it, but I know if I'm not going to use it."

Then it's the audience's turn, Dig says. "The movie plays, and you watch and you wait.

"Do they respond, do they get it? Or is there just dead silence?"