

A Simple Formula For Success

By Lawrence Pruyne

Rich Moos has a formula for success, but it's so simple he recently tossed it off as a casual comment. However, that formula paid off in a telephone call last Christmas when Renee Missel, organizing force behind the Santa Barbara Film Festival, called to tell Moos that his first movie as a director, ORPHAN, was in.

"Movies are pushed by studios and agents, it's really hard to rise above the din these days. But she was surprised and impressed and we were more than grateful," Moos said.

The impressive part? ORPHAN was shot for \$25,000 but looks like a million.

On a recent iFILMS segment Missel said, "I selected ORPHAN because it was an attempt with so little money, and the Irish actors are extraordinary. The girl was extraordinary, the guy was extraordinary. For \$25,000 cash it was quite an endeavor."

ORPHAN stars Belfast-born actor Marty Maguire, Charis Michelsen (WONDER BOYS, BRINGING OUT THE DEAD) and Robert Wahlberg. The script was penned by WGA member Thomas Murtagh, who conceived a funny pitch line for a mafia movie: Touched by a hit man.

Maguire's hit man kills a mark, almost gets whacked himself and has a near death experience instead. He sees his last victim, and the dead man tells the hit man he has to go back to life and watch over his orphaned daughter. Maguire watches over Michelson's orphan protectively while she vows to take revenge on the man who killed her father. The two finally meet in a bar, a scene shot in Mulligan's Tavern, a watering hole in Somerville's Ball Square.

The plot shifts away from the standard mafia movie, defying the genre formula yet working within its conventions. The emotional content, though, is what attracted Moos to the script.

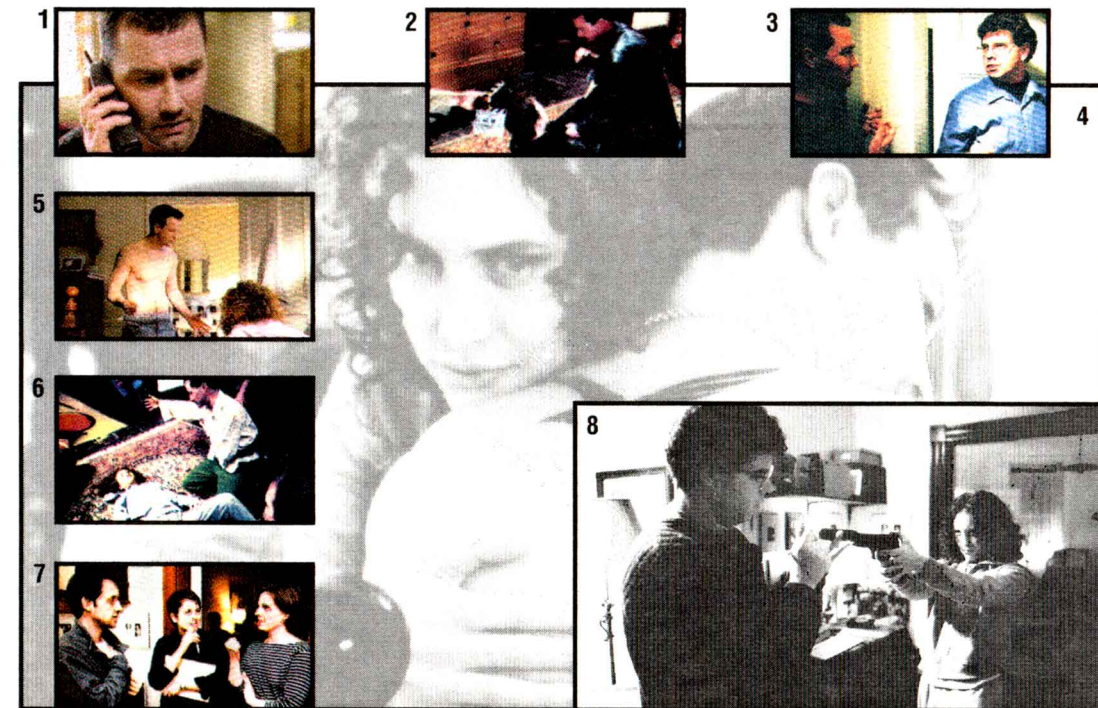
"This is about unconditional loving self-sacrifice. The whole movie builds to a moment of pure selfless love between them. That's what I responded to, it's the heart."

He added, "Even if it's the crappiest looking movie people will still respond to it if the story is compelling."

Moving about his one-room office in the CTV building Moos said recently, "One thing leads to another," and his journey toward his present success began a long time ago. That's when he married Shawna, his wife of 14 years, who produced ORPHAN and a son, Terrence, now 14 months old. She was just 17 when they married, but like her husband, Shawna has a calming influence and a supportive presence. She even remembers the first step that led to ORPHAN.

"We went to college together, and we were trying to figure out what to do with our lives. Then one day Rich said, 'I think I want to make films,'" Shawna recalled.

The two left their Northwestern roots and moved to Beantown. Moos attended the Mass. School of Art while his wife went to Boston University. Before long they were living on the third floor of a triple-decker, Robert Patton-Spruill and his wife living on the floor below. The two couples collaborated on



- 1 - Marty Maguire as "Jake" in ORPHAN.
- 2 - Marty Maguire and Robert Wahlberg go at it during shooting of ORPHAN.
- 3 - Actor Marty Maguire and Director Richard Moos discuss a scene.
- 4 - Charis Michelsen and Robert Wahlberg in ORPHAN.
- 5 - Robert Maguire as "Timmy" in ORPHAN.
- 6 - Cinematographer T.W. Li works out a shot with actress Charis Michelsen.
- 7 - Producer Shawna Moos (right) gives instructions to Producer/A.D. Jay Frasco and Coordinator Liz Berry on how to stay on schedule and under budget.
- 8 - Director Richard Moos tweaks a shot with Actress Charis Michelsen.

All photos / Eric Levinson

SQUEEZE, a groundbreaking work for all involved and the Boston film community at large.

Moos was the cinematographer and film editor. That experience also led him toward his present success. But the Moos' learned financial lessons from SQUEEZE and other projects and decided to set up a limited liability corporation called, fittingly, The Orphanage. All the principal participants in the making of the film took deferrals instead of cash payments and received equal treatment.

Most often cash investors are repaid first after the release of a movie and continue to make money from additional receipts. Creative participants, on the other hand, are paid a deferred percentage of what remains, which often turns out to be nothing.

"We treated everyone's involvement as a cash investment in the movie. They got the same points as if they'd invested cash," Shawna Moos explained.

The simplified financial formula helped attract top talent and off-screen crew for a shoot that lasted 18 days. An indication of the skill of the cast and crew was that the production was shut down only

once before the shooting schedule was completed. On the last day of production the keys to an electrical truck got lost.

In a very tight financial box, post-production on the movie didn't start for a year after shooting wrapped in March 1999.

"We found a lab in Toronto that would take our negative, process it - we didn't want it to degrade - and hold it until we could pay them. Then they allowed us to make payments for the video transfer. That's where films like ours bog down, in the editing. Producers can't pay for the edit," Shawna Moos said.

Moos edited the film himself, during late nights and on weekends while working for Bravo, WGBH and 20/20. His own company, ca•thar•tic filmWorks, housed in a single room on the second floor of Cambridge Television, owns an Avid where the film was edited. The Avid, another element in Moos' success, was put in place by Wilson Chao.

"I was working at an educational video start-up and wasn't happy, and Wilson Chao said, 'If you had the space and an Avid, could you do something with it?' That was the start. Wilson was the angel and the benefactor," Moos explained.

There was still that box, that tight budget. But with the cast and crew working on deferrals and Moos' own experience as editor and director, the production looks much pricier.

"It could have fallen into the CLERKS and SLACKERS kind of movies, that don't look so good ... But nobody will know we shot it for \$25,000 unless someone tells them. It looks like a million dollars," Moos said.

In his one room production company, his wife and child tramping in and out the door, when he said it Moos didn't place special emphasis on his formula for success. He said casually, "One thing leads to the next."

The formula, like Moos himself, is simple yet effective. The world premier of ORPHAN proves the formula, the first film already leading to the next release, DIRT BOY, a movie enjoying a world premier in June at the Seattle Film Festival.