

Arts Etc.

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE, AUGUST 5, 2001



RICHARD MOOS
"Orphan"



JOHN GIANVITO
"The Mad Songs of
Fernanda Hussein"



D.R. FARQUHARSON
"Gavin's Way"



FRANCINE PELLEGRINO
"Tea Cakes or Cannoli"



ZIAD HAMZEH
"Shadow Glories"

GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS/JOHN BLANDING

What happened to wonderland? Screen dreams meet harsh reality for local filmmakers

By Scott Bernard Nelson,
Globe Staff

WOODS HOLE - The projector went on the fritz just before showtime, forcing D. R. Farquharson to premiere his first film on digital video. And the auditorium lights at the oceanographic institute automatically shut off at 10 p.m., leaving the Salem filmmaker almost no time afterward for audience questions.

Still, the room was packed and ticketholders seemed to like what they saw during the screening at this week's Woods Hole Film Festival. All things considered, it was probably the highest point Farquharson's film, "Gavin's Way," will ever reach.

A long way, both literally and figuratively, from the red carpets and glitterati of Hollywood, Boston-area filmmakers are churning out more independently made films these days than almost anywhere else in America. First-time directors, like Farquharson, are especially active, inspired at least in part by a wave of national attention lavished on the Boston film scene in recent years.

Films like "Squeeze," which sold to Miramax Films for \$1 million in 1997, paved the way. Then Brad Anderson's "Next Stop Wonderland," which sold to Miramax for an astounding \$6 million a year later, and "Good Will Hunting," featuring native sons Ben Affleck and Matt Damon, blew the top off the Boston scene.

The Hub was suddenly on the map, and local filmmakers responded with relish. The irony is that just as New England filmmaking comes into its own (and just as Anderson's next two films hit the big screen), the odds of getting an independently made film - any independently made film - in front of theatrical audiences are rising to Big Game Lottery proportions. "Not that they lasted long, but the old days

of indie film are over," says Robert Patton-Spruill, who directed "Squeeze" and who now runs a production company in Jamaica Plain. "A lot of these films are being made with big dreams, but the reality is more people will see their movies go directly to video or cable [television]."

Or nowhere, as the case may be. The competition for everything from screenings at small festivals to coveted theatrical distribution has become almost blood sport. "It has gotten harder and more discouraging," says DeMane Davis, codirector, with Khari Streeter, of the 1997 film "Black & White & Red All Over" and this year's "Lift," which while well-regarded at the Sundance Film Festival, has yet to get a theatrical release.

Not every film made in Boston, or anywhere else for that matter, deserves to be shown in theaters from coast to coast. Quite a few of the small-budget productions showcase little more than the inexperience of their helmers, and some are out-and-out bad.

But a handful are very good. And all are the product of blood, sweat, and dreams, not to mention significant borrowing, on the part of would-be filmmakers.

Still, for good and bad alike, the odds are against them. That can come as a shock to filmmakers with visions of "Next Stop Wonderland" dancing in their heads.

Streeter says once Anderson sold his film for \$6 million, every filmmaker in the region - subconsciously, at least - set that as the benchmark to measure their own success against.

"When someone near you has good fortune, you're that much closer yourself," Streeter says. "It's a hard dream to let die."

Even so, Richard Moos says he began the process of directing his first feature in 1998 "with eyes wide open" about the

likelihood of theatrical distribution.

"Orphan," his story of a Boston hitman who promises to look after a victim's daughter, was ultimately filmed over 18 days for less than \$25,000. He put up much of the money himself, tapped friends and family members for the rest, and enticed the experienced crew to work for free by offering "sweat equity" in the form of partnerships in The Orphanage LLC. If the film ever makes money, all will share in the profits.

When "Orphan" was accepted by the Santa Barbara Film Festival this spring, though, Moos faced a financial turning point. He originally shot the movie in Super-16mm format to save money, but would have to pay more than \$100,000 in lab costs and negative costs to transfer the print to 35mm if he wanted to make a good impression - and impressions were important, since Santa Barbara is one of the few festivals frequented by distributors.

So he and wife Shawna, a co-producer on the film, took out two mortgages on their Jamaica Plain home to pay for the conversion and took a chance that it would find a buyer. It didn't, at least not right away, but the film did pick up a distributor's agent and it generated good publicity.

Moos said he is hoping a distributor eventually makes an offer that will at least cover the cost of converting the film to 35mm, so he can pay off the mortgages. But just in case, he may try to do a limited local release on his own, followed by a sale to a cable channel and a video distributor.

If that doesn't work, he may aim for DVD sales through the Internet.

"If we have to crawl on our bloody knuckles for the next five years to get our money back, that's what we'll do," Moos says.

Anderson himself says the unfortunate thing for many first-time directors is that at least some of the movies they produce now with little hope of distribution would have been scooped up just a few years ago.

But after the first successful wave, "the novelty wore off for audiences," Anderson says, and few of the movies made back the money distributors were spending.

At the same time, studios started buying independent distributors such as Miramax to create in-house indie divisions. As the business matured, the number of indie films bought and the price paid dropped to levels the studios could justify financially.

In any case, it's hardly encouraging for filmmakers such as Somerville's Francine Pellegrino, a former special-education teacher who sold her own investments and real estate, and talked friends and family into contributions, to come up with more than \$1.5 million for her first feature, "Tea Cakes or Cannoli." The romantic comedy set in Boston's North End is scheduled for an area premiere at the West Newton Cinema later this month, but where it goes after that is up in the air.

Because it features dual love stories, involving a teenage couple on one hand and a pair of septuagenarians on the other, Pellegrino hopes to create a buzz among the senior set - and use that as leverage to get distribution.

"I'm starting to realize that it will probably

take longer to get my money back than I thought," she says.

Swampscott's Ziad Hamzeh took another approach: He started his own production and distribution company. Hamzeh recently finished his first feature, "Shadow Glories," a kick-boxing story set in Lewiston, Maine. "Shadow Glories" won the best picture prize at this week's Dances With Films festival in Los Angeles, which Hamzeh says generated phone calls but no decent offer.

Regardless, he plans to do a New England regional release this fall. "I didn't want to be dependent on anyone else," Hamzeh says, "so we'll put it on at least 40 screens in New England ourselves and see what happens."

Others have all but given up on distribution altogether.

Farquharson, for example, says "Gavin's Way," made for \$36,000, is likely to be just a "calling-card film" - an opportunity to show off his writing and directing chops and to network with other filmmakers at festivals.

"The chances of a tiny-budget film like this getting into theaters are slim to none," he says.

Despite the doom and gloom over distribution, though, long-time area producers and theater owners say times have never been better for Boston filmmakers. Technology has made movies easier to make. Local facilities for post-production and editing have improved dramatically. The community of filmmakers who don't want to relocate to New York or Los Angeles is growing fast.

Plus, they argue, the Boston area has more screens devoted to art-house films than virtually anywhere else. That gives filmmakers a chance to see other independent fare and to show their own work, at least locally.

"The talent has always been here, and now we have the recognition and the facilities to match," says David Kleiler, a film producer and manager of Local Sightings in Brookline.

Moos, who screened "Orphan" in recent weeks at festivals in both Nantucket and Woods Hole, says he agrees, but that he's been hearing the same basic arguments since he started working in the industry. For two decades, he says, Boston has been "about to happen" on the national scene.

"It's still about to happen, only more so," he says. "I just hope it happens for us before I end up broke and unemployed."

In the meantime, Moos and the other first-time directors are all focused on their next project. After all, "Next Stop Wonderland" was Brad Anderson's second film, not his first