

YOUTH MOVEMENT

Juveniles and students provide fresh eyes to veteran moviemakers

By DAN LYBARGER

Special to The Star

Local filmmakers Lisa Marie Evans and Benjamin Meade have had plenty of success on their own.

She's won festival awards for "Assembling Poncho Villa and "Box This."

He has sold his documentary "Das Bus" to the Sundance Channel and shown "James Ellroy Presents Bazaar Bizarre" to the Horror Channel. Nonetheless, with their latest projects, both are not only teamed with amateur filmmakers half their age, but they have also both benefited by following the lead of their younger collaborators.

A CONSTRUCTIVE SENTENCE

For the last two years Evans has led a series of 10-week workshops that teach juvenile delinquents how to make public service announcements about issues they see in their own communities.

Through the Sentenced to the Arts program — which involves the Jackson County Prosecutors office, Community Backed Anti-Drug Tax (COMBAT), Kansas City and Family Court — Evans has been able to show adjudicated teens how to learn other skills to avoid returning to a life of gangs, drugs and violence.

"They're learning a lot of decision-making skills in this program," she said. "It's much more than the technical aspect (of filmmaking)."

One of the films discussed the issue of race as a group of young black men are harassed while an adult white woman (played by Evans) steals a box of hair dye undetected.

Evans says she learns things that help in her own filmmaking projects — some students have tried camera angles she herself might not have tried.

"Just because they're youth doesn't mean I'm not going to get anything out of it," she said. "Because I do."

The programs that Evans hosts are among more than 20 offered through Sentenced to the Arts. The programs involve everything from art to music and even include the Brazilian martial art of Capoeira. Many graduates of the program have seen a reduction in court referrals and raised their grade-point averages. Nonetheless, Evans said the filmmaking program began modestly.

"We're in a blank room with a table," she said. "I used to come in there with a brown piece of paper rolled out and a marker. And then we'd just create with that."

She now plans to use the program to get some of the videos presented on local television stations. She would like to set up internships for some of her graduates and see the program grow.

"Once they get some equipment in their hands, it's great. It's tangible," she said. "They like that part because they get to physically do something."

WHO NEEDS A SCRIPT?

Local filmmaker Benjamin Meade and students from Avila University spent last Saturday at Knuckleheads Saloon making an improvisational film. The movie, "Table for Three," offers student actors a chance to work on-camera, while teaching student filmmakers how to shoot and edit spontaneous events.

From what was being filmed in the bar, the improvised story concerned a trio of recently signed musicians (Pete Weber, Andy Perkins and Eric Johansen) who meet with three young women (Whitney Wegman, Whitney Beiler and Rachael Redler) after a gig.

After that, it was anybody's guess where the film would go. Weber said the actors had only characters, a situation and a relationship.

"We endowed our characters with a back story and gave ourselves little traits that we did or didn't tell each other," he said. "We don't know (the actresses') characters. They don't know us."

The new film required some planning, but came with three of his students who joined him in operating the cameras — two Canon XL2s and two Panasonic VX180s — so the improvised action could more easily be captured.

As a result the Knuckleheads part of the shoot moved quickly and efficiently. Meade supervised the shooting, while Robert Foulk, Avila's assistant director of theater, watched the action from a distance and coached actors between takes.

"I would tell them, 'loosen up' or 'something needs to happen,'" said Foulk said.

The real location fed the actors' imaginations. At one point the performers danced together to a real band, both in the bar and in the parking lot.

As the actors started dancing, a mischievous grin crept over Meade's face, and he said he had thought of a plot twist.

Whether the twist gets used won't be known until the finished film unspools, possibly in the next couple of months.

"I asked Ben about (the segment)," Foulk said. "And Ben said, 'We'll see after it's done.'"

PREMIERE

The world premiere of Lisa Marie Evans' latest film, "The Same But Different," is scheduled for March 9 at the Tivoli Theatre, 4050 Pennsylvania. Tickets for the event cost \$10, and a Q&A with the filmmaker will follow.

YOUR FILMS, OUR SITE

If you have a short film you'd like to share, we'd like to put some or all of it on KansasCity.com. Interested filmmakers should send an e-mail to preview@kcstar.com and tell us all about it.