

LIIFE opens in Bellmore

by Lauren Urban

The 13th annual Long Island International Film Expo (LIIFE), boasting 156 short- and feature-length films, kicked off with an opening night party last week flooded with filmmakers, and followed with an 117-minute opening night film block that featured measurable doses of laughter, tears, tension and suspense, offering something for everyone.

Steve Strangio of Oceanside, writer/producer of "Just a Kiss," the romantic drama about a couple who reunites 10 years after one perfect kiss, was there.

The woman in the film, married with three children, and the man, single and still searching, run into each other at a bachelorette party.

"I wanted to write a film where it's really just people talking simply, but still holds [the audience's] interest. It's a simple story [about] people with real emotions... Basically, it's all about closure," said Mr. Strangio.

The 11-minute, low-budget film was shot in one day in Oceanside. It had its world premiere on Tuesday, July 13, during the 7 p.m. film block.

In addition to filmmaking, Mr. Strangio has dabbled in playwriting, stand up comedy and even invented his own sport.

"Only by attempting the insane can you achieve the impossible," he concluded.

Daniel Bulger, director of "14 Days," also mingled among the independent celebrants during opening night.

The 13-minute drama, inspired from the Terri Schiavo case, revolves around the dreams of a comatose man, dying since his wife pulled his feeding tube.

It had its world premiere on Tuesday, July 13, during the 9:30 p.m. film block.

The New York Film Academy student film took six days, 14 people (including actors), and \$1,200 to make.

"We filmed at my parents' house in Levittown," said Mr. Bulger.

While he usually likes light-hearted films, Mr. Bulger is in pre-production on a horror comedy because it was "too good to pass up."

Also present were writer/director Gregory Behrens and producer Mark Donne of "The Windmill & The Watershed."

The 20-minute movie, which took six crew members and \$2,000 to make, is about a New York writer who goes to visit his aging father, a drip painter who has begun to lose grip of reality.

The father and son struggle to see eye-to-eye in their last brief interlude before the father's final masterpiece ends it all.

While the film appears at 4:30 p.m. on Saturday, July 17, it premiered at Fairfield University's Film Festival, where Mr. Donne attended.

Judge Jim on giving films the "green light"

Jim Cook is one of the judges for the festival. Mr. Cook interned for Debra Markowitz, director of the Nassau County Film Office, which sponsors LIIFE, when he was in college. The two stayed in touch, while Mr. Cook freelanced in the film industry and made some of his own films.

"I now volunteer my time at the Nassau County Film Office," said Mr. Cook. "I showed Debra some sample critiques I had of current films, and from there, I eventually became a judge."

When judging a film, Mr. Cook goes in with "an open mind" and "little to no expectations of the film." He eventually asks himself what the filmmaker is trying to achieve.

"I am a firm believer that in any form of art, especially film, you can do whatever you want, as long as it works," he said. "If the filmmaker achieved his/her goals then I will continue to break the film down in other ways."

Mr. Cook especially focuses on the acting, direction, editing and cinematography throughout the film. He also seeks to be enlightened or entertained, and to see if the film resonated with him on some personal level.

"It was a rewarding experience to give some very special films the green light and have them shown to the world," he concluded.

Hell hath no rage...

During the opening night film block, "Kiss Me A'ready" offered the audience an eight-minute roller coaster ride of emotion. The scene opens with romantic tension, as a woman awaits a goodnight kiss from a man after their first date.

The woman's anticipation increases as the couple stares at each other and she then hints at what a great time she had. But the man does not make a move!

Comic relief finally comes, among much laughter from the audience, when the man explains he forgot to wear deodorant and does not want to get close. Sigh...

Tension increases yet again as the woman leads the man inside. He sits in silence as she gives him a sponge bath while he sits in a chair. The anticipation in the audience continues to build as she then leads him back outside to the scene of the failed first kiss.

As the man goes in for the kiss, the woman blocks him with her hand, turns around and goes inside, causing the audience to cheer and laugh.

As the film's synopsis tells us, "Hell hath no rage like a love to hatred turned, Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned!"

Video killed the radio star...or did it?

"Mildred Richards," produced/directed by 1995 Calhoun High School graduate Jill Schissel, was the second movie of the evening.

The 19-minute film concerns Mildred Richards, an egomaniacal, nearly bankrupt actress who enlists the assistance of her reluctant brother Gerald to wrest away their dying aunt's fortune.

Mildred puts on the performance of her life, pretending to be a sweet, young woman in order to gain her aunt's inheritance. However, upon learning that her aunt knew about her three divorces and anything-but-sweet lifestyle through the help of a private investigator, Mildred kills her.

When the aunt's lawyer comes to the house to draw up the will, Mildred hides the dead body and uses her acting skills to pose as her aunt. She keeps her face hidden in her dark bedroom and requests that her assets be fully divided between Mildred and Gerald.

Mildred's scheme may have worked, had it not been for her ego. While posing as her aunt, she reads newspaper critiques to the lawyer praising her "niece's" Broadway performances.

Upon hearing this, the doctor, one of the few people who knew the aunt was blind and could not have read from the paper, suspects Mildred.

Mildred pulls out a gun, but when a struggle for the weapon breaks out, she is the one who gets shot.

"Mildred Richards" was produced by Radio Film Pictures, LLC, which Ms. Schissel started in order to combine her passion for filmmaking with the Golden Age of Radio.

The audience was shocked when Ms. Schissel announced during the question-and-answer session after the film block that much of the audio was pre-recorded from radio, and the actors were mostly lip syncing.

Kat Wisener, who played Mildred, was also on hand. She said the film was a challenge as an actress because "so much has already been decided" for her.

Ms. Schissel added that it was demanding to format the story, originally made for radio, to a film. She said that in film school you learn to "show, not tell" what is happening, but in radio, the characters' actions had to be narrated since the audience can't see them.

She said it was also a challenge to connect the segments of the story because on radio they were separated by commercials.

Despite the difficulties, Ms. Schissel clearly proved that video did not kill the radio star; the two can live simultaneously.

Living for two

"The 5th Quarter," starring Andie McDowell and Aiden Quinn, had enough emotion to fill a football field.

Jon Abbate, played by Ryan Merriman, actually does fill a football field with his feelings.

After the tragic and fatal car crash that takes the life of his 15-year-old brother

LI International Film Expo opens in Bellmore

But Jon has a transformation, and decides he has to "live for two." He begins training hard to start playing football again since his brother loved the sport, as he played for the high school team in his beloved number 5 jersey.

Jon's strength and perseverance inspires his entire team. Wearing his brother's number 5 jersey, Jon also inspires thousands of fans in the stadium, who held out five fingers in honor of Luke, ultimately implementing an honorary "5th quarter."

The Deacons, originally ranked to finish last in their conference, go on to win the championship game and have the most successful season in school history.

As the film's tagline says, "From the ashes of great tragedy can come great achievement."

At moments there was not a dry eye in the theater. Particularly heart-wrenching scenes included Luke's mom, played by Andie McDowell, explaining to her family that Luke wanted to be an organ donor, and when Luke's dad, played by Aiden Quinn, rolled his son's casket out of the wake in hysterics.

The many football scenes, however, gave the audience something to cheer about, especially when Jon blocks a field goal attempt to win the game.

Bittersweet feelings stir when a woman who received Luke's heart, and her

young daughter, visit the Abbates' house at the end.

Andy Medelson, who composed the score and co-wrote three songs for "The 5th Quarter," was present at the question-and-answer session.

He explained that director/writer Rick Bieber held a national talent search among songwriters/musicians in order to select the songs featured in the movie.

One audience member asked Mr. Medelson if the film had ever been accused of "being done before," in movies such as "Remember the Titans,"

although saying that he himself did not feel that way.

Mr. Medelson responded that the film is "based on a true story, which gives it a certain resonance and makes it different from other movies."

The Long Island International Film Expo continues through July 18 at the Bellmore Movies, 222 Pettit Avenue, Bellmore.

You can visit www.Longislandfilm.com or call 783-3199 for information.