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Thursday, October 4, 2007

Local flavor ... for now

Jim Keogh Film Clips



It's not too often that we get a world premiere in Worcester.

Bob Cousy's involvement in the 1994 Nick Nolte basketball drama "**Blue Chips**" earned that movie a gala debut here.

In the mid-'80s, a group of local guys made a micro-budgeted horror film "**The Hook of Woodland Heights**" in and around the city and staged a premiere party at the old Loft bar, complete with a stretch limo and searchlights sweeping the sky.

Last Thursday, another intimate Worcester celebration took place at Showcase North. Two theaters were crammed with friends, family and the curious who wanted to get their first peek at the romantic comedy "**Third Date**," written by Worcester's own Tom Hendrickson.

The story of how Hendrickson, with no writing experience, came to pen "Third Date" was chronicled in these pages a couple of weeks ago (his older son T.J. challenged him after hearing his father say one too many times while watching a video, "I could do that.") He banged out a 100-page screenplay, then, with the help of writer Jon Seamans, trimmed the story to 25 minutes. Hendrickson and producer Kristen Lucas intend to show "Third Date" at film festivals in the hopes of interesting investors to turn it into a feature-length movie.

It's a logical strategy. Numerous movies have had their starts as shorts. In 1994, then-little-known Billy Bob Thornton wrote and starred in a 25-minute film titled "**Some People Call it a Sling Blade**," which introduced the character of Karl Childers, a simpleton convicted of murder who relates his story while serving time in an institution for the criminally insane. Two years later, Thornton had expanded the story into "Sling Blade," turned Karl into his signature character, and has since fashioned himself a respectable movie career.

The local premiere of a locally made film is unlike anything else. The partisan crowd at the screening I attended was laughing, cheering and clapping — before the movie even started playing. Before the opening credits rolled, Hendrickson stood before the gathering, microphone in hand, and thanked everyone who'd had a hand in getting the project from script to screen.



"Third Date" playwright Tom Hendrickson. (T&G File Photo/STEVE LANAVA)

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The actors, a mix of professionals and amateurs, do a nice job of pulling off the story of Ed (Billy Smith), a 30-something guy cursed with the inability to sustain a relationship with any woman past the third date. While attending a wedding, Ed strikes up a conversation at the bar with another partygoer played by Maurice Lavell, and begins unspooling his tale of romantic woe.

The film flits from present day to flashback, capturing the various calamities that have short-circuited Ed's love life. Among the funniest is a Seinfeld-esque sequence in which a day at the beach is ruined by a passing seagull with uncanny aim who makes an unwanted delivery into the mouth of his pretty — and soon hysterical — second-date girlfriend. Later, Ed experiences a sort of post-traumatic turd syndrome and can't bring himself to kiss her, killing any possibility of a follow-up date. To his relief.

Among the cast members, Maurice Lavell has drawn the lion's share of attention, largely because of his renown as Anna Nicole Smith's former bodyguard. But the find here is Boston-based Billy Smith, who has seen time in "The Departed" and the Showtime series "The Brotherhood." Smith really shows some chops as unlucky Ed. He's at ease with the regular-guy persona, shows a flair for physical comedy, and makes us pull for the guy to finally land the girl of his dreams — or at least achieve that mythical third date.

The screening was pure hometown, with the audience hooting and clapping when they spotted a familiar face in the background of a scene. (And there were many. I've known Tom Hendrickson for about a year through the Sacred Heart basketball league, and even in that short span of time I've been amazed at the length and breadth of his network of friends. His gregarious nature and generous spirit made recruiting extras for long shooting days an easy pitch.)

So many supporters showed up, about 1,200 in all, a third screening had to be added later to accommodate them.

Afterward, as folks poured into the lobby, Hendrickson was there to greet them with hugs and handshakes. At a nearby table, DVDs, T-shirts and sweatshirts bearing the "Third Date" logo were being snatched up. The proceeds will help fund the trips to the film festivals.

If "Third Date" does get noticed at Sundance or some other festival and is optioned for a feature film, the final product undoubtedly will bear little resemblance to the movie that played last Thursday to three theaters crammed with Tom Hendrickson fans. The no-names will be replaced by big, or at least bigger, names; the screenwriting duties might be farmed out; even the story's location could be transplanted from the East to the West Coast. Those are the compromises you make for commercial success.

Yeah, the next time "Third Date" plays around here, it may be bleached of local flavor. But anyone who attended the premiere knows different. That movie will always have Worcester written all over it.



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