

THE BADGER HERALD

ARTSETC.

Notbohm: Film a 'capitol' idea

by Logan Jaffe

Wednesday, April 9, 2008

When Brent Notbohm wrote the script for the movie "Madison," a good part of it wasn't at a computer. After scribbling ideas or dialogue in his notebook, he admits his best work happened without trying. Little did he know his random bursts of inspiration would earn the Juror's Choice Award in this year's Wisconsin Film Festival.

"When I'm making a film, it often starts with me being pissed off at something," said Notbohm, a University of Wisconsin-Superior communications professor. "I was really upset about the war in Iraq and felt helpless. Like I couldn't make a difference. I was frustrated by my ineptitude — that I could stand by and watch and do nothing about it. In my own way, the only thing I could do is tell a story expressing that feeling, and that's where the film comes from."

The film premiered Saturday night to a sold-out crowd in the Chazen Museum of Art. Produced entirely in Madison, the film follows Michael, a middle-aged journalist, in his return after four years of covering the war in Iraq. While the horrors of war still haunt him, he attempts to recapture the idealism he felt as a University of Wisconsin student.

According to Notbohm, 38, Madison was an obvious place to film. Although he attended Syracuse University, he actually grew up in the Madison area and spent most high school weekends on State Street. After countless billiards games in the Plaza Tavern and his introduction to punk music, Madison became the birthplace of Notbohm's own political awakening, he said.

"I always associated Madison with political activism and awareness, which is idealistic and powerful to me," Notbohm said. "That's the heart of the film. The central dichotomy is between cynicism and idealism. You could think that there are bad things in the world with nothing to do to change them, or a difference can be made if we fight, protest and organize."

According to Jim DeVita, an American Player's Theatre actor who plays Michael, the film questions how people act on their own idealism. As his character struggles to balance his experience in war with everyday life, he is unable to remain objective as a journalist, he said.

"We're all confronted with cynicism, but what happens when your faith in ideals come face to face with horror and reality?" DeVita said. "Do you stay committed to your perception or change it? Changing doesn't always mean giving up your ideals. Sometimes you have to see what's really before you."

According to Notbohm, the film's signature scene is a wintry shot of the Memorial Union Terrace. As Michael gazes at the desolate Lake Mendota, he remembers a hopeful conversation about changing the world. While the winter landscape reflects the character's emotional state, it also represents a cold version of the desert surrounding Baghdad.

"The whole film was basically shot in under two weeks," Notbohm said. "We thought we were in trouble because, until the second week of January, there was no snow at all. ... When we finally shot [the Terrace scene], there were a couple of ice fishermen out there, so we bought them a 12-pack of beer, and they moved about 100 feet down the shoreline," he said.

Other scenes around Madison include the Plaza Tavern, where DeVita recalls countless late nights eating plaza burgers or shooting pool until bar time, as well as the University Inn and the Triangle Market. The tie to the downtown area promised a positive turnout among longtime Madison residents and UW students, as both crowds appreciated the familiar scenery.

"It's interesting. [Notbohm] picked the locations that I would pick for a film," said Jennifer Hawkins, a student at Madison Area Technical College who grew up in Madison. "There are people I want to show this movie to. This is my city."

Some viewers, like UW graduate student Beth Zinsli, considered the location less relevant to the film's message.

"['Madison'] offers a different perspective than what you would normally get from mainstream media," she said. "It's a more personal perspective on what's happening in the Middle East and the people there. It's a really beautiful personal story. Painful, but very personal."

Despite the script's political message, Notbohm hopes his viewers will gain a more emotional approach to the war in Iraq — a connection he believes is numbed by corporate news coverage. It's easy to get caught in victory and death counts, but there are people there who face the daily pain of living and dying, he said.

"['Madison'] is completely individual," DeVita said. "Each person that comes to the show will bring their own worldview, experience and age — certainly their own ideas about the war."

According to Notbohm, the production team plans to hire a distribution representative and possibly enter more film festivals. Locally, "Madison" will play at Sundance Cinemas beginning April 24.

"Hopefully, the people of Wisconsin will get a chance to see the film," Notbohm said. "We'll have to see where it goes from here. This is underground cinema. I just want to be able to make films. We'll play it as long as people come and see it."

Copyright © 1995-2008 Badger Herald, Inc. Some rights reserved.