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Thursday, October 11, 2007

The N.H. Film Festival takes off for its seventh year

By LARRY CLOW
Contributing writer

Sean Tracey has gazed up at movies on the massive screen in The Music Hall more times than he can count. But this weekend, the Portsmouth-based filmmaker will find his name up on the screen as his documentary "The Jesus Guy" makes its New Hampshire debut as part of the New Hampshire Film Festival.

"I really wanted it to premier at The Music Hall," he said. "I've been to so many Music Hall movies, and it's one of those fantasies. You say, 'One day, I'm going to have a movie here.'"

For some filmmakers, it's a chance to realize a dream of having their film premier in their hometown. For others, it's a chance to connect with other comrades behind the camera. And for film lovers, it's an opportunity to see the best the Granite State and New England has to offer in all things cinematic.

Now in its seventh year, the NHFF will take over Portsmouth from Thursday, Oct. 11 to Sunday, Oct. 14, with screenings at The Music Hall, the Portsmouth Public Library, the Sheraton Harborside Hotel, the Hilton Garden Inn and the Muddy River Smokehouse. The festival's films run the gamut from animated shorts to feature-length documentaries and short films.

Along with a full-schedule of cinematic treats, the festival also features filmmaking classes, screenwriting workshops and panel discussions about the film business. And, of course, no film festival would be complete without after parties, where movie lovers and filmmakers can mix and mingle.

Formerly a director of TV commercials, Tracey began work on "The Jesus Guy" five years ago. For three years, Tracey followed a barefoot evangelist who goes by the moniker "What's Your Name?" and bears a striking resemblance to Jesus Christ.

"What's Your Name" has taken a vow of poverty, wears a white robe, sports a full beard and eschews most material possessions, including shoes. Tracey first read about "What's Your Name" in a 2000 Time Magazine article and soon became determined to find the barefoot preacher and create a film about his life.



A scene from "Including Samuel," one of the documentaries to be screened at the Festival. (Courtesy photo)

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"I thought he was a fascinating character. He doesn't have money, he doesn't carry anything with him. He's living by faith," Tracey said.

But it wasn't always an easy life, for either the filmmaker or his subject. Tracey describes "What's Your Name" as "a very sharp guy, but a bit cantankerous." During one period of filmmaking, Tracey said "What's Your Name" entered a period of depression a difficult time that's chronicled in the film. Tracey also kept a tight focus on his subject and the events around him. Everything including interviews with family and friends of "What's Your Name" was filmed during Tracey's travels with him.



"I made a very authentic, verite film," Tracey said. "If it wasn't unfolding right in front of me, it didn't make it into the film. What I feel confident about is I made a very fair, honest film."

Tracey's film was also shown as part of Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival in Birmingham, Ala. during the last week of September. But for Tracey, having the film shown at The Music Hall as part of NHFF is its own special reward.

Courtesy photo Joe Orrigo and Robert Shea in a scene from "Dribbles," one of the festival's full-length features.

NHFF has come a long way since Dan Hannon and Chris Proulx established the festival then known as the New Hampshire Film Expo in 2001. For its first two years, the festival was based in Derry. It was the

festival's move to Portsmouth in 2003, however, that ignited the furious growth that continues this year.

"Even though it was our third year, it was like our second 'birthday,'" said festival director Nicole Gregg.

Since then, the number and quality of the submissions has increased steadily each year, and the festival is firmly established on the state's cultural landscape. It's also gaining cache among filmmakers in the festival circuit.

Films that have been exhibited at well-known festivals like Cannes, Sundance, South by Southwest and others are making their way to NHFF, and Gregg believes its only a matter of time for NHFF to build up that same sort of prestige.

This year, Gregg said the festival received 500 submissions, double the number of entries received last year.

"The type of films getting submitted are in the festival circuit," she said. "People recognize the name now ... and look out for it."

The festival circuit is well-known to Marc Dole, whose company, Hatchling Studios, produced "Endurance Challenge," an animated series whose second episode is premiering at the festival. Hatchling's first film, "The Toll," appeared in more than 60 festivals last year, including the New Hampshire Film Expo. Of those 60, Dole went to about 15 festivals personally and said NHFF always stands out.



Courtesy photo "Row Hard, No Excuses" is the story of two middle-aged men who enter a race across the Atlantic Ocean in rowboats.

"Out of all the small festivals, this is definitely the best," Dole said.

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"I'm impressed with the way the festival has been branded, and bringing in high quality programs."

"Endurance Challenge" is an animated spoof on reality shows like "Survivor," and Dole has pitched the series, currently available only on the web at www.hatchlingshorts.com, to networks like MTV and Cartoon Network.

In addition to "Endurance Challenge," Dole is also a producer on "Stag Hunt," a short film written and directed by Dover-based filmmaker Alfred Thomas Catalfo.

Described as a "Hitchcockian thriller about probability theory, quantum mechanics and an unhinged triggerman," "Stag Hunt" is somewhat of a departure for Catalfo, whose "Da Vinci Code" spoof "The Norman Rockwell Code" was in the festival last year.



Courtesy photo A scene from "The Jesus Guy," one of the documentaries being screened at the Festival.

"I feel great about it. It's a little different for us. It's not a comedy, but it's something a little different," he said.

"Stag Hunt," which is up for the New Hampshire Filmmaker of the Year award at the festival, was filmed in Portsmouth and Dover, and the cast and crew are all locals. Catalfo said NHFF has been instrumental in bringing filmmakers throughout the state together.

"This is an up and coming festival. It's really well-run. Local filmmakers really are a community, and it's nice to have an environment to interact," he said.

The 2007 New Hampshire Film Festival comes to Portsmouth Oct. 11-14. Screenings will take place at The Music

Hall, the Portsmouth Public Library, the Hilton Garden Inn, the Sheraton Harborside Hotel and the Muddy River Smokehouse. Prices range from \$100 for a VIP pass to \$15 for a day pass. Day passes, weekend passes and tickets for individual screenings can be purchased at The Music Hall or online at www.nhfilmfestival.com.

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