

Three Filmmakers Discuss Their First Feature Films

The October 1996 Image meeting hosted three independent film makers who each shared their experiences in shooting their first feature films. The presentation was a free flow of the filmmakers' observations, guided by questions from both the audience and moderator, Sacha Parisot.

Chris Ereneta discussed his film, "Seldom Dreaming", which was shot in 1993. This film was shown last year at Cinequest, the San Jose Film Festival. Chris shot his film in 15 days using 16 mm, at a relatively low 3.5:1 shooting ratio. The film was finished in January 1996 for a total budget of \$47K.

Pete Anderson's "Partners for Life" started shooting in August 1995, but didn't finish shooting until February 1996. Pete told of how he had to grapple with real production woes, which included having to fire his lead actress on last day of scheduled filming. Because of this, it became necessary to reshoot half the film, resulting in a 7:1 ratio. Despite this, Pete's total budget for the 16 mm film was under \$20K.

Halfdan Hussie, a former founder and director of Cinequest, shot his film, "Still Waters Burn," for considerably more money. But then it was shot on 35 mm, with a 6:1 shooting ratio. Halfdan and his team shot the film this last summer and expect it to be finished up by February 1997.

The three filmmakers agreed that much of the fun of making a film is in its pre and postproduction phases. The actual filming tends to be a stressful activity, dealing with pragmatic details of finding lodging and supplying meals for cast and crew. One of the filmmakers noted that disposing of the trash generated by 25 people may seem like a small detail, but it can

become a BIG problem. Especially in a place like San Jose, where there are limits on the amount of trash you're allowed to throw away.

Chris Ereneta shared a technique suggested by their Cinematographer to first storyboard, then shoot rehearsals in all of the locations—using both the storyboarded and new, untried camera angles—and then to restoryboard. This enables the DP (Director of Photography), the Director, and actors to become comfortable with each scene and environment, before committing it to film. This permits the crew to shoot each scene with a minimum of retakes. Chris plans to use this technique for his next film.

The audience asked the filmmakers questions about how each of them cast their films. While they each proceeded in a different way, none relied on actors' headshots as a major method of identifying their talent choices. Halfdan used a casting agent and even went as far as New York and LA to hold casting calls. Chris and Pete tended to use their friends (or in Pete's case, himself), or actors they had worked with before. Pete Anderson noted that for a film to succeed commercially, it either has to have a knockout story, or requires an actor known in the foreign film markets. As Halfdan put it, "a great actor makes a mundane film interesting and come to life."

The filmmakers also discussed the importance of certain crew positions on their shoots. The three agreed that, "If you want to succeed as a firsttime Director, having a good Director of Photography and great cast will get you 90 percent of the way towards being successful. Halfdan added "having a great camera operator and soundrecorder is also essential."

While each of the filmmakers believed in improvisation as a technique for achieving fresh performances, they also felt, as a group, that it should be experimented with during rehearsal, prior to filming. As Halfdan Hussie stated, "Rehearsals are the time to figure out what exactly needs to be said or done." Chris Ereneta said that he wished, in retrospect, that he had pushed back his shooting date: Schedule con-

flicts among his talent prevented everyone from spending enough time in rehearsals.

While none of the filmmakers have yet achieved commercial success with their films, each acknowledged that completing their films has resulted in generating considerable respect among producers and distributors. Most importantly, they noted, having finished films has opened doors that were previously closed to them. As Chris Ereneta put it, "Having screened my film in New York (at the Independent Feature Film Market IFFM), there are now many more people who are willing to take my call and schedule meetings."