



Article Launched: 3/29/2006 01:33 AM

It's all about the method

By David Kronke, TV Writer
U-Entertainment

Though he'll attend largely in the capacity of film director, D.B. Sweeney thinks the concept of Method Fest -- an independent film festival celebrating the art of actors -- couldn't be more appropriate.

"From all my years of acting, I think some directors feel like they have to do too much," he says. "A lot of directors think they should come to the set in jodhpurs and a pith helmet with a bullhorn and 'play' the role of director, when they should just let the actors do what they're capable of doing.

"Early in my career, I worked with Francis Coppola, and he hardly said anything to me. His strategy was to get the script ready, get the production ready and let the actors go."

Sweeney is presenting a directorial debut he dubs a "red-state movie," a belated coming-of-age comedy titled "Dirt Nap," at Method Fest's closing-night festivities.

The film is among the 26 full-length feature films and eight programs of shorts featured at Method Fest 2006, a festival retuning for a second year to Calabasas. It offers a wide-ranging glimpse into the work of accomplished actors such as Ruby Dee and Julie Harris, who will receive Lifetime Achievement Awards (and will appear together in the film "The Way Back Home" on Sunday).

"If they still had drive-ins, this would play in a drive-in," Sweeney says modestly of the film he is presenting. "There are no pretensions to art with a capital A." Still, the film features multiple-Oscar nominee Ed Harris and John C. McGinley, veteran scene stealer on the sitcom "Scrubs."

In addition to name actors, the festival features films with new faces whose lack of name recognition belies their talents. Agnes Bruckner and Kelli Garner, the young stars of Friday's opening-night feature "Dreamland" (a hit at January's Sundance Film Festival), will jointly receive the event's Rising Star Award.

"Dreamland" director Jason Matzner, who comes from a background directing commercials and music videos, says he appreciates the festival's focus on actors even more after discovering how much his cast enhanced his film, about two teenage trailer-park girls who become interested in the same boy.

"I didn't think I'd be into directing the actors; I thought I'd be spending most of my time behind the camera, working out shots," he says. "But it was amazing -- I fell in love with working with my actors in a huge way. On the set, I was more totally focused during my time working with the actors than any other aspect of the production. Each one changed things from what was going on in the script."

"Eve of Understanding" writer/director Alyson Shelton, bringing her first film to only her second festival, says that lead actress Rebecca Lowman's breakout performance -- as a troubled young woman spurred by her mother's suicide to investigate her family's messy past -- utterly defines the movie. "If we didn't get the right actress, the movie would have fallen flat on its face," Shelton insists. "That she's being recognized makes me happy; she gave her heart and soul. She barely knew us, and she really put herself out there." Shelton insists that her film is not autobiographical. "I've gotten that question both from screenings and from the actors in the project," she admits. "I'm flattered that people think it's so real it must've happened, but glad to report it didn't."

Ruby Dee, of course, has been making the unreal real for more than 60 years. She took the occasion of her

(latest) Lifetime Achievement Award to philosophize about her career.

"One thing about the craft that is intriguing comes once you realize that acting is about working on the fact that we are so many people and yet we are each other to an astonishing degree," she reflects. "We are ourselves, and our opposites. It's intriguing to call upon yourself to bring you to other realms and consciousnesses. I find that realization exciting, that we are each other in astonishing ways, the very best and very not-so-best."

Dee, who at age 81 shot two films in the past year, likens the affection expressed to her at film festivals as akin to "the big arm reaching down from heaven and giving me a pat on the back. People make me feel a common connection with them. All these people pat you on the back in an enthusiastic way that doesn't knock you over, but helps you stand up stronger. ... It's a lot of people saying "amen" to what you've done. It's gratifying and humbling at the same time."

Young filmmakers also experience that humility in their maiden voyages through the festival circuit. Lee Krieger, writer/director of "December Ends" (debuting Sunday), evocative drama about a young New Yorker coping with a grief-stricken father and a dangerous, illegal job, declares, "I've been humbled by how supportive everyone at Method Fest has been. Frankly, we are such a small film and they're helping us promote it without any big -name talent. I'm almost embarrassed; I don't know what to do with myself."

Krieger's grandmother was once a casting director. "I can talk to her about indie-film actors that my parents have no idea who I'm talking about," he says. Of his work, he admits, "She's pretty critical at the end of the day, she's proud of the work. ... But if I want a pat on the back, I go to my mom. My grandmother can be more brutal."

By contrast, John Hazlett, the writer/director of "These Girls" (screening Sunday), an anarchic Canadian comedy about three emotionally nave women who blackmail a burned-out pot grower (David Boreanaz of "Bones" and "Angel") into sleeping with them while his unhappily married wife works the night shift, has found that the only brutal response to his film has come from fears that American mores may prevent audiences from appreciating its edgy wit. It will be mildly tweaked for its U.S. DVD release.

Nonetheless, he's stoked that Method Fest is taking a chance on his film. "I'm totally excited that a festival would pick up the film," he says. "If its acting is being honored, that's the highest compliment to me as a director," he says. "Sometimes comic acting isn't really appreciated. But it's very difficult, and people who are good at it should be recognized."

METHOD FEST

What: Independent film festival highlighting actors' performances.

Where: Louis B. Mayer Theater, 23388 Mulholland Drive, Calabasas; Viewpoint, Carlson Family Theatre, 23620 Mulholland Highway, Woodland Hills.

When: Friday through April 7.

Tickets: \$8 for most screenings; \$6 for seniors; other events (opening and closing night and parties) vary; festival passes \$75 to \$195, at www.brownpaper.com, tickets.com or (800) 838-3006; complete schedule available at www.methodfest.com.

David Kronke, (818) 713-3638 david.kronke@dailynews.com