

The short tale of a long marriage

Local filmmaker releases short film 'Happy Anniversary'

By AMY FLETCHER
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Local filmmaker Brice Habeger meticulously planned every aspect of his latest short "Happy Anniversary," from hiring a professional crew, buying top-quality HD camera equipment and carefully plotting every angle and shadow of the four-minute film. But on the day of the shooting, just as the camera started to roll, a rogue element he never considered momentarily sent his plans astray: A chainsaw.

"We get everything lit, everyone's in place, and I say, 'Action' and the actors are starting to go, and then boom op (sound operator) Tim (Miles) says, 'Alright, hold it — I'm hearing something.' And in the background there's someone running a chain saw, vvvrrrrrr. And there's nothing we could do about it."

Already running two hours behind schedule, the interruption was certainly unwelcome, but it didn't last long, and highlighted aspects of the detail-obsessed trade that can be as essential as organization: patience and a sense of humor.

"You've just got to work around it," he said.

The film will be shown at Gold Town Nickelodeon prior to the feature films during the month of February, beginning

Web links

www.happyanniversarymovie.com

with this week's showing of "An Education."

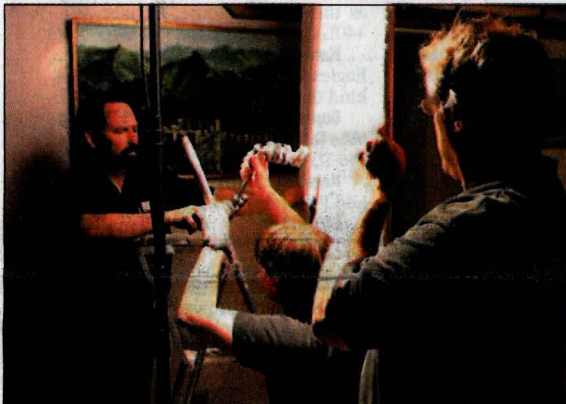
"Happy Anniversary" taps Juneau talent in more than just its direction: it was filmed by a local crew and stars Perseverance actors Kent Pillsbury and Becky Orford. The two play a married couple who engage in a kind of "noncommunication communication" typical in long-term couples. Orford's character, focused on a sculpture of an entwined couple given to them for their anniversary, keeps up a steady stream of chatter as her husband sits reading his newspaper, neither listening to her nor ignoring her.

In spite of the fact that they don't really listen to one another, Habeger said he doesn't see the film as being critical of marriage.

"I saw that as a functioning marriage," he said. "It's not all romance, it's highly-functioning communication... Not necessarily on the surface, but deep down they have that connection that comes from years of marriage."

Consisting of a single scene, a living room, the film also has a local setting — it was shot in the home of Chuck Keen, a local filmmaker who was active in the 70s and 80s. Keen died in 2003

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COURTESY OF BRICE HABEGER

Crew members Greg Chaney, Mikko Wilson and Timothy Miles diffuse a light during filming of "Happy Anniversary."

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but Habeger has forged a friendship with his widow, Karen, and wanted to set his film there to honor Keen's memory.

"In my mind, it's this homage to Alaska filmmaking," he said.

Though Habeger, 25, has made and shown other shorts in town, participating in six out of eight JUMP festivals, "Happy Anniversary" is the first that he considers to be a professional-grade film. Previously, he's worked with a crew of one, juggling the roles of cinematographer, lighting guy, writer and director, among other tasks, a load that proved too heavy for his liking and kept him from making the kind of film he really wanted.

"I made a film last year that didn't really work out that well, and part of it was that I didn't plan it all the way through," he said.

With "Happy Anniversary," he brought in a crew of eight, which, in addition to boom operator Miles, included cinematographer Mikko Wilson, art director Francis Delaplain, assistant director Greg Chaney and makeup artist Laura O'Brien. Having a professional, autonomous team allowed Habeger to focus on directing.

"I was meticulous about everything in the frame," he said. "Everything in the frame was there for a reason — colors, the camera angles — all that is supposed to add up to a single feeling."

To emphasize the disconnect evident in the couple's conversation, for example, he gives husband and wife plenty of space in their frames.

"I wanted the framing and the camera shots to reflect that," he said. "You never see them in the same frame together except for the wide shot, and in the wide shot they're facing in two different directions," he said. "They never even look at each other until the very end."

Habeger, who works for the

city, said he enjoyed writing stories as a kid and became interested in film when he was about 8 or 9.

"For me and probably hundreds of other filmmakers across the country, it was 'Star Wars' and a book about the masks and the special effects. I thought it was the coolest thing ever."

When he was 14, his grandparents gave him a digital camera, and from there he took off, shooting films with his friends. In high school he began editing film on a computer he built especially for that purpose. And after graduation he headed to film school, Columbia College in Chicago, where he took courses in screenwriting and cinematography.

Habeger returned to Juneau after graduation, deciding this would be a good base from which to build his directing skills.

"What I figured that I needed to do to become a director was to learn how to become a better storyteller. So I thought I should go back home, where I have the resources, people that are interested in my filmmaking, locations that are readily available and community support."

Habeger has written most of his shorts, but for this one brought in a script by Martin Dodd, a writer from California who's in his 70s. After reading one of Dodd's short stories, submitted for a contest Habeger also entered, he asked the writer if he could make it into a movie. Dodd agreed. That film, "The Ticket," did not end up being made due to financial constraints but Habeger hopes to shoot it as soon as next year. Dodd has already rewritten the script for a Juneau setting.

He said he'd also love to film "The Kids from Nowhere," a story about a group of high school students from the village of Gambell on St. Lawrence Island.

In addition to giving him a base from which to build his skills, Habeger's home state seems to be fertile ground for his imagination.

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