

# THE Midtown Messenger

NEWS FOR PHOENIX'S HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOODS MARCH 21, 2005



A3F entries screened,  
winners honored  
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## On the town

### Film challenge nets tiny gems

■ BY DAVID TELL, MESSENGER EDITOR

In 1986, David Letterman held the first of at least a couple of annual specials, inviting various writers and performers to produce short films, which were broadcast on the show. Veteran actors and satirists such as Michael Keaton; Andrea Martin and Catherine O'Hara; Harry Shearer and Christopher Guest; and Bette Midler produced shorts for that first special, and they were little gems of filmmaking.

Now a local filmmaker has coaxed similar types of short films out of local producers-directors and their casts and crews, via the Almost Famous Film Festival Short Film Challenge, or A3F. And, we're happy to say, the event has led some local talent to create pieces that are in the same league as those I enjoyed almost two decades ago—perhaps giving the newbies a morale boost and a heightened profile that could help propel them on to bigger and better things.

Late last year, Jae Staats of Ballboy Productions (a Willo resident whose 2003 short film "Stalked" has been covered in features in these pages), began organizing A3F, with sponsorship and various forms of support from Majerle's Restaurant, the



Phoenix Suns, The Midtown Messenger, Z Pizza, Audio Video Resources, Allied Vaughn, and Terra Soft Solutions. On Monday, March 7, a public screening of the resulting films was held at the Ice House in downtown Phoenix, to a capacity audience. (Staats said the next such event will have to find a larger screening venue.)

Fims ran the gamut from rather crude amateurish productions to highly polished, professional quality shorts. All films had to meet three thematic criteria, and were expected to be 9 minutes long or less. The themes were "to be in some

way to be about a missed opportunity," to depict characters sitting on a bench at some point, and to incorporate the line, "Excuse me, but did you drop this?"

Some of the best films self-consciously played with these assignment elements, or showed cast and

crew in some way struggling, generally unsuccessfully, with the 48-hour timespan for creating the film, from start to finish, and turning it in. "Sad Mac" and "48 Hours to Go" took this tack. (For the names of the production companies or individuals associated with the films mentioned here, they may or may not be matched up together on the A3F

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website, at [www.ballboy.net/a3f/2005/48hrchallenge](http://www.ballboy.net/a3f/2005/48hrchallenge).) I think it was the latter film that amusingly depicted a director insisting on an excessive number of takes, and correcting an actor on which word to emphasize in a line (... reminded me of the Michael Keaton entry on the Letterman special, where in the only acting job he can get—a commercial for a local furniture warehouse—the director does the same: “It’s not, ‘We must be crazy! [to offer prices this low]; it’s ‘We must be crazy!’”).

A wonderfully zany film called “Oven Time May Vary,” which in some way referenced a pile of frozen boxed pizzas, included a falsetto-voiced, Monty-Pythesque character in drag, playing the protagonist’s mother. The opening film of the screening, “Princess,” featured a character way too physically affectionate with his pooch, and was the first example of scatological and morbid humor. The former element was also taken to absurd, hilarious excess in “Maybe Tomorrow”—which depicted a piece of doggie dropping (“Excuse me, but did you drop this?”) in the context of a brilliantly executed hallucinogenic sequence. This film won best non-human actor award, with good reason. “Kisses, Mitzi” also featured a small, poorly house-trained, ill-fated canine, whose owner was played to menacing good effect by a skilled actress. The sequence with the

door-to-door sales (?) guys in this short showed a good sense of techniques for maximizing drama and suspense with a diversionary plot element.

“AGTC,” a title biology nerds will recognize as referring to the nucleotide units of the DNA molecule, was a moody and rather effective piece with an extended sense of story for such a short film. Likewise the final film of the screening, “Somerton Storm,” which showed some of the most sophisticated production values among the the 20-odd films screened.

“First Date,” the film that won overall best of the challenge, based on its rating in a comprehensive 400-total-point scoring system, fired on all cylinders—nearly matched “Storm” in production excellence, and featured some of the best acting and sense of story of any of the entries. (For more on this film, see sidebar, page 8.)

Staats said he was thrilled with the event’s success—the number of excellent entries, support for the festival and screening turnout. The A3F web site was expected to be updated with photos from the kick-off party, behind-the-scenes shots, stills from the screening and screen-grabs from the films—and possibly streaming clips. “Our intention is to make the A3F site into an incredible promotion piece for next year’s festival, so we can attract even more sponsors and prizes, to make this a bigger and better event,” Staats said.

# Fest winner a touching tale

Standout in script, acting, production values, direction

**F**irst Date" is the innocuous title of the wonderful little film that was rated "best overall" in the A3F Film Challenge. Produced by Friendly People Productions and directed by Bivas Biswas of D.I.B. Pictures Entertainment ([www.dibpictures.com](http://www.dibpictures.com)), it's the story of a kind of dumpy, middle-aged, reclusive writer-type asked out for a first date—a picnic lunch—by an earnest, beautiful young woman. Written by Serena Torres-Webb (who we believe handled the placing of ads in this paper for Actor's Theater a couple of years ago), the story has a twist—the gentleman being wooed, played by Tom Blackwood, has obsessive-compulsive disorder, resulting in a tragicomic outcome.

We posed some questions to director Biswas about his background, philosophy, and aspirations with regard to film. He said that in college, as hobbies, he composed music, wrote songs and played rhythm guitar and keyboard for local and college bands. He then graduated from ASU with a master's degree in computer science and currently holds a "day job" as a software engineer.

"My current emphasis is on directing and producing films that are driven by story and characters, and are visually rich with good sound and memorable music," Biswas said. "Film music and scoring is very important to me. I always want my films to have the kind of music that if played back on radio years from now can instantly bring back to mind images from the film and the circumstances the characters were going through in the movie."

Biswas called advances in digital filmmaking "a blessing to independent filmmakers" such as those who entered A3F. "If applied correctly, the technology can produce extremely pleasing visuals and professional results," he said.

Biswas gave the actors due credit for the film's warm reception. "Tom and Dona [Wood] are excellent actors. Their performances have raised this film to a completely different level," he said. "I think the defining moment of the film is when Tom breaks down at the end. I couldn't have asked for a more intense performance."

"Dona is an extremely talented actress, very professional in her work and easy to work with," Biswas added. "She kept her spontaneity alive throughout a long production day and through as many takes as I asked from her."

Again, as to Blackwood, "I have never seen an actor get so completely into their character as Tom did for such a short film," Biswas said. He said he'd seen Nick Cage's great portrayal of an obsessive-compulsive in Ridley Scott's 2003 film "Matchstick Men," but had no idea whether Blackwood had seen it. He also gave Torres-Webb kudos for her screenwriting skills.

"We are hoping winning this festival will generate a good amount of exposure for us and possibly give us the leverage to go into feature filmmaking," Biswas said.

—David Tell



PHOTO: DAVID TELL

Director Bivas Biswas (left) walks off after accepting the best film honors from A3F impresario Jae Staats.