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Two productions at the Little Rock Film Festival highlight home-grown talent.

By [Jeff LeMaster](#) ([Contact](#))

Tuesday, May 12, 2009

LITTLE ROCK — You don't have to have a ton of money to make a good film, though a few mill here, several hundred thou there certainly doesn't hurt.

Most of the films at the Little Rock Film Festival this week represent work on the more frugal end of the budget spectrum, but there are a couple of films with Arkansas ties that, while their expense reports couldn't be more different, are about the same thing: telling an engaging story.

Slumberland is a locally produced mumblecore feature that is the brainchild of former University of Arkansas at Little Rock student John Schafer. Schafer and fellow Pizza Café employees Rhett Brinkley and Zack "Dirty" Turner shot the film over the course of the last two years at various locales in and around Little Rock.

Schafer said he was inspired to make such a movie after seeing the pioneer mumblecore film *Funny Ha Ha*, which set the standard for the genre as a low-budget, no-professional-actors project that examined the lives of twenty-somethings in a post-college world.

Brinkley and Turner play characters that kind of resemble themselves, only adding flaws and challenges that required them to balance a fine line between acting and just being who they are.

That line blurred a lot, and Schafer and crew just rolled with it. Their approach to the film was pretty laid back.

"There was probably a good two weeks of us filming and just not knowing what we were doing," Schafer said of the project's earliest shoots. "Then the house arrest happened."

The real-life Turner was arrested on a DUI charge after they had started filming and was confined to house arrest for a month. Instead of putting their project on hold for 30 days, Schafer, Brinkley and Turner decided to work the house arrest into the film.

Slumberland's second act sets up Turner's character as someone who is coming to grips with the pain he's caused himself. There wasn't a lot of acting that went into that, he said.

"I still kind of cringe when I watch [those scenes]," Turner said.

Slumberland won't be everybody's bag, Turner said, but the three amigos think there's a substantial audience who will be able to identify with it.

"I think people our age range will definitely get more out of it," Turner said.



Photo by Shannon Sturgis From left, Rhett Brinkley, John Schafer and Zach Turner are the three writers of the film *Slumberland*, to play at the Little Rock Film Festival.

When asked why he made the film, Schafer didn't gussie anything up.

"The most we wanted out of it was to meet people who are in the business of making movies," he said. "We'd love to do South By Southwest [film festival in Austin, Texas]. If this tanks here, I don't know what we'll do."

Slumberland will screen at 6:30 p.m. Saturday at Riverdale Cinemas on Cantrell Road.

Breaking into film

James Cotten knows where Schafer's coming from, because he's been there.

Cotten grew up in Fort Smith but bolted for film school in London as soon as he got the chance. A family illness called him back home for awhile, but then it was on to film school in L.A. to finish up his degree. It was there that he met acclaimed B-movie director/producer Roger Corman, who was looking to make a movie using crew from Cotten's film school.

Cotten was chosen to write and direct *Demon Slayer*, a straight-to-DVD horror flick. After that, he went home to Fort Smith, "slept on my dad's couch for a couple of years, raised some money and made Sugar Creek."

The small-budget production paid off in a big way as it gave him a connection to Robert Miano, who had a role in the film. Miano called Cotten soon after the film wrapped to let him know about a project he was working on that he thought would suit Cotten's talents. It was a low-budget film titled *La Linea* about in-fighting among a drug cartel in Tijuana, Mexico.

Cotten signed on to direct, but quickly what seemed at first like a small step to advance his career grew into a giant leap.

Actors Ray Liotta, Andy Garcia, Armand Assante and Esai Morales signed onto the project.

"It went from being a fairly small project, about a \$1 million budget, to being something much bigger," Cotten said.

Cotten said the challenge didn't scare him, but he definitely felt a pressure to perform at the height of his ability.

"You're making promises to people. If you want to be a filmmaker with integrity and not lie to anybody, you have to back up all those promises," he said.

If the film is any indication, Cotten backed up those promises. It's a sand-in-your-mouth kind of tale about bad guys, really bad guys and the innocents who get caught in the middle of the world of drug trafficking, but it's a film with a conscience, and that was by design.

Cotton said he strived to make the themes of the film's story just as powerful, if not more so, than the story itself.

"Around every character I've put a saint," he said, pointing out several instances in the movie where a character is accompanied by a symbol that corresponds to that character's patron saint. "In a world that's very gray, and you can't tell right or wrong or what's evil, how do you make a saint?"

Cotten may have hit the big time, but he knows where he comes from. He said he's thrilled to be able to come back to Arkansas to screen *La Linea* and fully supports what the Little Rock Film Festival is breeding: a film community in Arkansas that's on the rise.

"I said this at a [previous] panel for the Little Rock Film Festival," Cotten said. "Before, the Arkansas filmmakers, it was such a small community, everyone was trying to one-up each other when we could have been helping each other.

"The Little Rock Film Festival is a great place for filmmakers to come and help each other out."

La Linea will screen at 7 p.m. Thursday at Riverdale Cinemas.

Arkansas Shorts Program

Seven short films from the *Natural State* will screen at the festival in four different sittings. Four of the seven will screen at 6 p.m. Thursday at Riverdale Cinemas on Cantrell Road; the same four films will screen again at 12:30 p.m. Saturday at the Little Rock Chamber of Commerce. The remaining three films will screen at 4 p.m. Saturday at the Little Rock Chamber of Commerce and again at 4:15 p.m. Sunday at Riverdale Cinemas. Below is a list, with descriptions, of each Arkansas short.

Memories Of Viola

An emotionally fragile woman learns to let go of a lost loved one while spending her days on her cabin porch overlooking Arkansas' natural beauty. Director: Michael Gunter

Cosmic Legos

Is romance a product of destiny or a simple game of chance? A man and woman, having never met, describe how they would engineer meeting Mr. or Miss Right if they were placed in charge of fate. Director: Gabe Mayhan.

The Death Of The Reel

Hold onto your epilepsy pills. Hot Springs is the scene of an existential tale that will rock your senses. Director: Benjamin Meade

Surfacing

Speaking of epilepsy, this film follows a college swimmer who must reconcile her illness, which harms her body, to the euphoria she feels after each seizure, which ignites her soul. Director: Bruce Hutchinson.

Home Field Advantage

A slacker in his late 20s crashes his ex's wedding and challenges her hubby to a pitcher-to-sluggger showdown. Director: Graham Gordy.

Birthday

Words aren't necessary to capture the painful memory of a lost child. Director: Hans Stirtz.

What Happened To My Brother?

A smart kid must deal with his older brother's attempted suicide. Director: Levi Agee.

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