


The Sure Thing

Written by Mark Shaffer

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 UNCSA dominates BIFF Student Film Category

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This year's Beaufort International Film Festival comes with what Vegas odds makers would call a mortal lock: the Student Film trophy will go back to Winston-Salem. All eight finalists hail from the University of North Carolina School of the Arts.

And while such utter domination of the category may be unprecedented, it's not entirely shocking. Each year some of BIFF's best moments come by way of UNCAS. The school is also looking at a possible four-peat in the Animation category.

Last year The Hollywood Reporter ranked UNCSA 12th on its annual list of the Top 25 Film Schools in America. The momentum continues to build through a network of successful alumni working in the business and a state with a viable, booming film industry. It's part of Kate Miller's job to build the buzz on UNCSA. She's the school's Film Festival and Internship Coordinator. Like most of the staff and faculty, she has a background in the business, as well. Every February Kate packs a bag of recruitment material, loads a van full of students and heads to Beaufort. This year she may need an extra van. We spoke by phone from her office on campus.

Mark Shaffer: Congratulations on sweeping the Student Film category.

Kate Miller: Thank you. We are very excited.

MS: This has gradually built up over the last four or five years as it seems that more and more UNCSA entries have made it to the finals in not just the Student Category but Animation, as well.

KM: We never expected this. I know [Festival Director] Ron [Tucker] has been getting more and more films from more and more schools. I've talked about the festival to the people who do my job at other schools, how much fun it is and what a great opportunity it is for the students and how BIFF is so supportive in bringing students to Beaufort. I definitely talk it up among my peers at other schools. So I know that Chapman, Southern Cal, UCLA, Florida State, SCAD and more are sending films. I really thought we'd be getting fewer finalists.

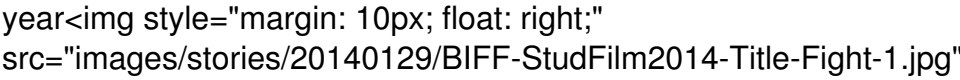
MS: That says a lot about your program. What was the reaction like on campus?

KM (Laughs) Oh, they're very excited! And we're very proud. It's fantastic for us because we're making way more films than we're actually getting seen every year. We make 10 or 12 fourth year films, the same number of third year films and another 20 second year films. So there's a great mix of films in there. And Ron's always asking for everything we've got. It's a great festival to be in.

MS: So, you've got all 8 films in the student category, but there is a ninth.

KM: There certainly is. Austin Taylor's once again a finalist in Animation.

MS: That's his fourth consecutive appearance in the category and he's collected the trophy each year



either as a solo or as part of a team.

KM: Right. This year it's his project, one he's been working on for a very long time.

MS: How do you explain the success of the film program?

KM: That's tough. A lot of it has to do with the founding faculty being part of the School of the Arts. That's a big plus for us because it gives us access to students in the School of Drama who are mostly doing theatrical productions. I think we had a student nominated for Best Actor there last year. We also have access to the School of Music so we have access to a scoring stage and a full orchestra of student musicians who come in and play for free. We also have access to the Design and Production School's costume shop, which is huge.

And, of course, being

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in North Carolina is key. We have terrific film incentives that bring in films like *The Hunger Games* and *Iron Man 3*. And we have returning alumni who bring their own films here. Michael Landon, Jr. has made two or three films here for Hallmark in the last year. So, our students are getting out and interning on films and coming back and sharing what they've learned with their peers and everyone's level of knowledge goes up.

More and more alumni are coming back as guest artists and bringing their films. And the students get to interact with the likes of David Gordon Green (*Pineapple Express*, *Prince Avalanche*), and Jeff Nichols (*Mud*). More and more of our alumni are getting out there and being successful. And students see this and know they don't have to go to NYU and spend 9 million dollars (laughs). Plus we fund our own films and the tuition differences tend to be huge which is a major factor in bringing students to the school.

MS: Hang on. You're actually saying that investment in the arts pays out?

KM: (Laughs) I think it does.

MS: Holy cow. This could be big news in certain circles. We'll try and get the word out.

KM: It's radical, I know.

MS: This is part of a larger conversation, but a lot of people believe this town needs a film program. Perhaps on our own *Arts Campus*.

KM: I've worked on movies down there and I know they're celebrating *Forrest Gump* this year. You've had a long, long history of making movies. A film program would absolutely be a draw to the campus.

MS: A couple of years ago I remember a packed screening for a short called *ZomRomCom: The Musical*, which was indeed a zombie musical romance. It combined all the elements we've been talking about and blew away a packed house on a Saturday morning. Afterward you spent about 20 minutes fielding questions from parents and kids about how to get into UNCSEA. It was kind of remarkable.

KM: (Laughs) Oh, yeah. And I do that everywhere I go. Wherever we know there will be high school students or parents of high school students in the audience, I will make the pitch because I absolutely believe in the program. I would have given anything to go to a school like this (laughs).

MS: Me, too. Is it too late to get in?

KM: (Laughs) Exactly! Same here. Every once in a while I think, maybe I could just audit that class and then it's back to the festivals.

Learn more about The University of North Carolina School of the Arts at www.uncas.edu