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LOCAL FILMMAKERS FIND CREATIVITY AT HOME



C. Kelleher Harris

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When one thinks of the city of Worcester on the silver screen, those in the know may tell you about the few big-budget films that have recently shot on location here: 2010's "Knight and Day" starring Tom Cruise and Cameron Diaz; 2009's "Surrogates" starring Bruce Willis; and "The Maiden Heist" starring Christopher Walken and Morgan Freeman. Yet most are unaware that for many aspiring filmmakers who call Worcester home, the city offers a flourishing community of like-minded talents and a supportive pool of resources and inspiration.

SMALL SCREEN

Independent film writer, director, editor and producer John Stimpson has worked in Los Angeles in the film industry but his preferred movie hub is Worcester. "It's a town that offers everything you need," Stimpson says, "as far as locations and opportunities."

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Stimpson, who has made four independent feature films including "The Legend of Lucy Keyes," which was shot in Stimpson's native Princeton, says that Worcester is a "great place" to shoot and says he's here to stay.

Filmmaker and musician Kaz Gamble agrees with Stimpson. The 36 year-old Gamble, who was born and raised in Worcester, attended New York University where he studied film. He worked for 10 years in the Big Apple and later went to Los Angeles to focus on the industry. But eventually, he too, returned to Worcester to pursue his career.

With two bands, Bad Ronald and later Cooler Kids, Gamble's musical talents were featured in the television series "Smallville," and big screen hits "Scary Movie," "Not another Teen Movie," and "The Lizzie McGuire Movie." Plus, Gamble's band signed with Warner Brothers and released an album to rave international reviews.

Now in a duo group called Gamble and Burke, who have found a level of success with their catchy, danceable tunes, Gamble says Worcester has always felt like a home worth returning to. "While I was touring with the bands, I found myself spending a lot of time in cities and towns that reminded me of Worcester," Gamble recalls.

Gamble developed a longing to return to Worcester and get back to independent film making. "Worcester on film looks so amazing," Gamble explains. "It's a pretty cool movie set, and that's inspiring."

Worcester native, Ben Allotey has just completed his first independent full-length film shot entirely in Worcester. Locations featured in his film "Dead Giveaway" include Green Island, The Raven on Pleasant Street, Patriot Pizza, The Cantina and Spoodles. Allotey is in the early stages of developing Wor-town Productions with friend Joe Black.

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FOT

Summer in Worcester is:

- ☐ Hot and wild in more ways than one
- ☐ The best time of the year
- ☐ Fun with lots of outdoor events
- ☐ Boring without college students
- ☐ Violent and too humid

Submit

Seasonal

"Wor-town's whole purpose and emphasis is to put Worcester on the cinematic map," Allotey says. "We want to do for film what Motown did for music. We want to be our own bosses."

Allotey entered the filmmaking industry after studying and working in the television-broadcast industry. He and Black are currently seeking a distributor for "Dead Giveaway."

At just 16, Sergio Castillo helped put Worcester on the map with an award-winning documentary. Castillo's filmmaking work began after he joined Worcester's Toxic Soil Busters – a youth-led organization that focuses on keeping Worcester clean of lead contamination through free lead testing and cleanups.

The group made a documentary short entitled "A Worcester Environmental Justice Story." The documentary focuses on the Toxic Soil Busters efforts to clean up the city and bring lead poisoning to the community's attention. Castillo, although having no previous filmmaking experience, co-directed the short.

"I didn't see it coming. Because of them, I'm a filmmaker," declares Castillo, now 18.

Castillo's short went on to garner several awards, including first place in the National EPA "Faces of the Grassroots: Environmental Justice Video Contest." Most recently the film won two more awards, one at the International Kids First! Film Festival (the world's largest youth film festival); the other, the heart award for Best Youth Produced Film at the San Diego Latino Film Festival.

Andrea Ajemian dreamed of being an actress ever since she was used as an extra in a low-budget horror film when she was a preteen. While pursuing her acting career in Los Angeles, Ajemian became interested in film production itself. "I was in films, and I thought 'Why don't I just make my own?'" Ajemian recalls, adding, "I'm self-taught."

But Ajemian, too, decided to return to seek her passion and dream career in Worcester.

"What I love about working in Worcester is that it has so many great locations. People are excited about films," she shares. "I came back in 2006, and I started falling in love with being here."

ON THE MAP

For all of these filmmakers, bringing attention to Worcester is a strong motivator behind their locally developed and produced films. Gamble, for instance, is currently working on an independent documentary about the history of Worcester.

"I started by doing research about what happened to cities [like Worcester] after World War II," Gamble explains. For example, he notes that to make way for building highways, people would be forced out of their homes and whole communities would be cleared out.

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Gamble's documentary will focus on how the oncebooming metropolis of Worcester was affected by misguided attempts to improve the city. "In trying to save the city they inadvertently destroyed it," Gamble says. But Gamble sees hope for Worcester's future – his documentary will also focus on current revitalization attempts in Worcester.

Ajemian has a similar vision for Worcester. "[We] are trying hard to be part of the revitalization of Worcester," Ajemian says. Together Gamble and Ajemian formed Artigo Ajemian Films, a production company centered on Portland Street in downtown Worcester. Ajemian has produced or coproduced six full-length independent features, as well as several short films.

AA Films, as it is known, has a compact but a fully functioning production office in the Printers Building. The office features an editing room for film and another for music, production offices, a costume room and a green screen. "I don't know anybody else who has a set up like us," tells Ajemian.

Both Ajemian and Gamble are impressed with the transformation that Portland Street has made in the short years that they have been occupying the Printers Building.

"I used to be afraid of walking down the street after dark," says Gamble. "But now with the Hanover Theatre being renovated and opened up, it's changed the whole feel of this section."

"I think it's really cool," conveys Ajemian, who also lives in downtown Worcester. Between films, Ajemian works on editing and producing corporate commercials.

Together Gamble and Ajemian have worked on several successful independent films. Their film "Boy Band" was filmed entirely in Worcester. The movie, set in 1982, tells the story of a high-school jock who dreams of joining a boy band. After he is rejected by one group, he sets out to create his own. One reviewer described the offbeat comedy as a mix between "Glee" and "Napoleon Dynamite."

Among Gamble's own projects was the 2008 documentary "My Brother Tom." This film, written and directed by Gamble, focuses on his real-life brother who suffers from Asperger's Syndrome, but was undiagnosed for most of his life. The film is personal, illuminating and at times painful, and was nominated as best short film at the Woods Hole Film Festival. (A special screening of "My Brother Tom" will be held July 21 at the Jacobs Edwards Library. The film begins at 6:30 p.m.)

AA Films also created and produced a Web series called Worcester Love, which they call the "video guide to everything there is to love about Worcester County with an emphasis on locally owned businesses, cultural diversity and environmental sustainability."

Although not filmed entirely in Worcester, in collaboration with director Stimpson, AA Films will be releasing the holiday movie "A Christmas Kiss" later this year. The romantic comedy stars Elisabeth Rohm, Lauren Breckenridge and Brendan Fehr, and will premiere on the ION Network in December.

Stimpson, Gamble and Ajemian also just completed shooting an independent film "Shattered Silence," which used locations such as Worcester State University, Worcester Academy, Burncoat



"We take this tough topic and give it a positive spin. It's a difficult subject, but we handle it in a responsible way," Stimpson, a 50 year-old resident of Princeton, says of the movie.

CLEAR RECEPTION

Stimpson remarks that filming in Worcester is a positive experience and that the city's people are receptive and welcoming to such creative projects. "Coming to a place like Worcester, people are really excited," Stimpson reveals. "They say, 'Yes! I want to help,' 'Yes! I want to be involved.' The community welcomes me with open arms."

Stimpson says that an additional advantage of filming in Worcester is the ability to help fledgling film makers get a start.

"We have been able to help young people to get a start or spark a career," he continues, pointing to another advantage of filming in Worcester.

"I love making the magic happen. I love seeing the actors bring words alive. I love seeing the confluence of good performances and good camera work come together," Stimpson says. "There is nothing better than seeing an audience be moved by work that I'm a part of."

"I plan on doing a series of movies in Worcester," reveals Allotey, who also wants to keep Worcester as the center of his independent features. "It [Worcester] is not looked at as a fi lm Mecca, but if I keep working, it has potential."

"I noticed nobody was capturing the Worcester I know and I grew up with," Allotey divulges. "I wanted to capture aspects of inner city Worcester."

Allotey, who both writes and directs, is currently editing his film "Dead Giveaway." The full-length independent film is a thriller that tells the story of four friends who have fallen on hard times and turned to crime as a way out. But a robbery gone bad and a haunted gun botch their plans.

Allotey initially planned "Dead Giveaway" as a short fi lm, but later decided to make it full length so that audiences could become "emotionally invested" in the characters. Currently, he is also planning to produce a soundtrack for "Dead Giveaway" and encourages local musicians to contact him with their work ranging from R&B to techno.

Allotey says that he looks forward to creating comedies, action films and Web series. He also wants to put a new slant on horror movies. "I want to unleash my own brand of horror fi lms, not the cliché," he explains. "I have many kinds of stories. I'm not a one-trick pony."

Castillo, who graduated this year from University Park Campus school, says that he hopes to focus on documentary fi lms that heighten social awareness. "It would be great spreading the word of all injustices—food injustice, social injustice, politics and Palestine," Castillo admits. Likewise, he hopes to break down stereotypes with is community involvement and socially conscience documentaries.

"I'm trying to destroy the stereotype that youth are lazy," Castillo says, noting that he would like to see more organizations like Toxic Soil Busters for the area's young people. "I see a lot of youth without opportunities. There should be more jobs for youth groups so kids have something to do."

Castillo also has a penchant for action. Currently producing action shorts and posting them on YouTube, Castillo hopes to eventually earn a living from his burgeoning craft. He has plans now to attend Worcester State University and pursue a career in sociology, but hopes to become both a community organizer and filmmaker.

FUTURE EDITS

Although Worcester offers beautiful and convenient locations, fresh faces and a generally welcoming community, there are some hardships of working in a city that is not well acquainted with the movie-making business. "Like being anywhere away from a big-production hub, there is the issue of the ease of getting a crew," Stimpson points out. "[There is] an additional cost of finding a cast and crew. You inevitably need to bring people in and put them up."

But Stimpson is not discouraged by such diffi culties. "In reality, we're not that far. We're less than an hour from Boston. It's a really good compromise," he concedes.

Allotey found similar difficulties during his shoot, indicating that he and his crew had to work hard at pooling resources and garnering support of the community, which did not always come easy in part because some people were skeptical that a fi lm made in Worcester would go anywhere.

"There are more people in Boston with [fi lm] experience," Ajemian says. "As projects and budgets get bigger, the needs grow more. You have to work to raise money and that is a challenging process." Yet still, there are other potential drawbacks to independent film production no matter



"It is a lot of long hours and a lot of work [plus] there is not a lot of money," says Ajemian. "[But] I think that it's interesting that we're doing work in Worcester like they are doing in New York or Los Angeles."

Like all filmmakers, Allotey, Stimpson, Castillo, Ajemian and Gamble have big dreams. And although they aren't snagging marquee stars at major movie theaters, they do find genuine joy in the work that they do.

"I love Worcester," Castillo says. "But I would love to go to Boston or New York City to spread [my



"I have to make my own foot prints in the sand," Allotey reveals. "I want people to say 'hey! that's a Ben Allotey picture!' I want to focus on all aspects of culture in Worcester. We [Wor-town] want to be national and worldwide. We are going for the gusto."

"I find it so satisfying," says Gamble. "It is a battle to get everyday done, but I love that process. What you put into something you get out of it."

Gamble says that he is energized by the creative conglomeration that goes into each film. "One of the things that surprised me is the inspiration people find from working together. You get a synergy from working on a project."

"To have the response 'Oh wow, Worcester looks so cool! Worcester on film looks amazing!'...that is inspiring," Gamble adds, while encouraging other filmmakers to come to Worcester for inspiration. "My quality of life is better than it was in New York or Los Angeles. Worcester is an amazing place for an artist. You do find support as an artist here."

"I'd really like to see Worcester become a big independent location," Ajemian admits. "I would like to build up a large talent base."

"It's intriguing and glamorous and exotic," Stimpson says of filmmaking. "What I love more than anything is sitting alone in the editing room and putting it all together. This is so special. What an amazing thing we do here."

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Georgia Menides said on Sunday, Jul 10 at 9:15 AM

I remember when Worcester did not have a film scene. enter Andrea Ajemian!

Jeoff Archer said on Saturday, Jul 9 at 5:23 PM

Wow...Ajemian and Gamble..in Womag.. again. Whoda thunk it? Out of all of the independent artists in the city working on projects seems we hear about them way more than anyone else. Shareowners or just good friends ?

yusaf joe black harris said on Thursday, Jul 7 at 4:22 PM

congrats to all the filmmakers trying to bring the arts to worcester!! hey make sure you check out the deadgiveaway fb page clike like support the local arts!!

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