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FIERY FILMMAKERS

Underprivileged youth bring their visions to the screen

By Sushil Cheema

It's the end of week one of the LIFT Project annual program, and different groups sort through footage, discuss make-up and props and experiment with lighting tricks. These filmmakers have just two weeks to learn about shooting and editing—let alone create their own short films—but the ambitious students want to use all sorts of camera tricks. Novice filmmakers, it seems, think big. Very big.

At one point, a dilemma arises: how can one group use time-lapse photography to show a flower growing?

Ambitious indeed.

"Most of them haven't even touched a camera," says project coordinator Chris Langer of the students. "It's completely new." Langer, a filmmaker, has been involved with the LIFT Project since Ed Ratke, an independent filmmaker, created the program two years ago.

"We're teaching kids from at-risk communities...to express themselves in a non-formal way," says Langer. The program culminates on Monday, August 21 with a screening of the teen's creations at Lincoln Center's Walter Reade Theater. Last summer's screening, Langer says, sold out.

The students are randomly assigned to groups, and friends are separated. They come from community-based organizations, and some even come from the Red Hook Community Justice Center. Whether they are here of their own accord or to fulfill a community service requirement, each participant has come to the program with an interest in making movies.

"I wasn't doing anything," says Natasha, a well-spoken, gregarious 16 year-old, of her summer. When she heard about the program, she decided that participating would be a good use of her free time. Tiffany, a quiet but friendly 17-year-old, discovered the program through her volunteer work at the Red Hook

Youth Court, a program, she says, that works with teens charged with misdemeanors, disorderly conduct and petty theft. She is very glad that she found the program.

“In their groups, the students figure out what they want to say collectively,” says Langer. Each group has a facilitator—an experienced filmmaker—who encourages the teens to steer away from documentary and straight narrative styles. Instead, Langer says, “They try to answer questions like ‘Where are you from? Who are they?’” He tells the students, “We’re watching it because we want to hear what you guys have to say.” Often, he adds, the result is experimental. But the teens know they have to have a reason behind the shots and effects they use—the screening at Lincoln Center includes a question and answer session at which they may have to explain their choices.

Natasha’s group, like most this year, consists of five members. “It’s about the personal struggle between three friends,” she says of the film her group is making. “We wake up in a mysterious forest and get clues.” As the friends solve their own personal problems and their conflicts with each other, the clues help them find their way off the island.” To develop ideas, she says, her instructor laid a paper before the group and asked them about things they like and their backgrounds. Their answers helped generate characters and scene.

Tiffany’s group is examining the differences between city life’s fast pace and a Caribbean island’s calm atmosphere. Her instructor, she says, played a game with the group, asking each member to write down adjectives to describe themselves. “The personal struggle idea came from the adjectives,” she says.

Both Tiffany and Natasha agree that the short time period makes the process difficult, but they are enjoying the program. Though neither wants to pursue film as a full-time career—Tiffany’s goal is to become a physical therapist and Natasha’s is to become a lawyer—each would like to keep filmmaking a part of their lives.

Some students do leave the program with intentions of making movies. “There are a lot of kids who really end up sticking with it, which is awesome,” he says.

Downtown Community Television (DCTV) donates cameras and studio space to the program, and Tekserve provides Macintosh computers. The students edit their footage using Final Cut Pro, a program that some professionals use. The cameras are not professional grade, but Langer says that’s a bonus for the program. “Even if you don’t have the money to make these beautiful documentaries,” he says, “you can do it anyway with stuff you have at home—10 year-old cameras—and make it look beautiful.”

But the program involves more than just making movies. The last week of the program includes critiques from real filmmakers as well as other teens. “It’s about learning to take criticism from their peers,” Langer explains.

Working in groups proves to be the hardest part for some students. “I would want another group,” says Natasha when asked about taking part again. Some people, she says, are too quiet, too passive, or even uncooperative. Learning to work together, however, is part of the process, Langer says.

Curbing the student’s ambitions for intense special effects and 20-minute-pieces is one of the most difficult parts of the process for facilitators, Langer says.

But, as last year’s resulting films show (pieces that included claymation and photomontages) the professionals help their students as much as they can in creating their visions. “That’s the hardest part,” says Langer. “Spilling your brain out to the kids and letting them pick it apart.”