



## **Vanguards vs. violence: Two small-budget films at the Nortel Palm Springs International Film Festival contain provocative social agendas for youth.**

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**By Mark Henry The Press-Enterprise**

PALM SPRINGS

Welcome to "Terminal 187," a dusty netherworld between life and death, where some find it is already too late and others get one more chance. And enter the world of "Just Us," where gray is the color and truth doesn't always set you free.

The shoestring-budget films confront youth violence and police brutality with a street-level sensibility. There's no Hollywood sentimentalism, no Tom Cruise or Denzel Washington to save the day. Gunshots aren't enhanced in the studio. They go "pop" instead of "boom."

The two films will screen together Jan. 17 at the 11th annual Nortel Palm Springs International Film Festival, which begins Thursday and continues through Jan. 24.

The festival, with its lavish galas and star-studded awards night, is known primarily for its lineup of foreign films -- "Cinema Paradiso," "Strictly Ballroom" and "The Red Violin" among them in recent years -- and as the place to see a large number of films under consideration to receive Oscar nominations for best foreign film.

But in recent years the festival also has presented films that challenge viewers -- with the films' messages coming first over production values -- or even a paying audience.

"Terminal 187" and "Just Us" were produced at separate boot-camp film schools for young students in Seattle's predominately black inner city, an area known as the Central District.

"We're going to continue on our mission not only to help young filmmakers but to raise social issues," says Craig Prater, executive director of the festival.

A few years ago the festival devoted at least 20 films to children's themes -- alienation, abuse, fantasy and dreams. It has screened disturbing films such as "Vukovar" that depicted the horror of war in the former Yugoslavia. It celebrated the rise of gay cinema in one program and the triumphs of women in film in another.

In 1997, the German documentary "Blue Eyed" drew audience raves as it showed the power of discrimination against people in an American classroom exercise based on their eye color. Jane Elliott, a onetime schoolteacher who created the exercise after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, held a lively exchange with a festival crowd one night.

"Terminal 187" and "Just Us" fit into this category.

In addition to the public screening, Prater said, hundreds of high-school students will get a chance to see the films Jan. 18 in a student-only private screening designed to bring the issues home to the Coachella Valley. Festival organizers and filmmakers are hoping a spirited discussion with students will follow the screenings.

"Terminal 187," a 30-minute film, debuted in Seattle in 1997 and has aired on a few public television stations since then. Prater reviewed a copy and liked what he saw. "Violence in schools is a hot topic everywhere right now, so that got our immediate attention."

The movie is based on the play, "What Might Have Been" by Seattle writer James Lollie. It draws inspiration from the 1946 Frank Capra classic "It's a Wonderful Life," starring Jimmy Stewart, said John Gordon Hill, who directed "Terminal 187."

In the Capra film, George Bailey, the character played by Stewart, is about to jump off a bridge when an angel shows him what life in his small town would have been like had he never existed.

In the modern fable, two teens inexplicably find themselves in an old way station, face-to-face with a caseworker named BJ. He wears a dark suit and tie. Dust covers his hair and shoulders. Trains are coming and going. Soon, the teens learn they are in the Teen Violence Section of "Terminal 187," a holding tank of sorts between life and death, where names are called and some passengers move on to another level. The terminal number 187 holds its own special meaning.

BJ lets the two teens -- a 16-year-old named Lisa and an 18-year-old gang member named G-Money -- replay the last minutes leading up to the shootings that put them in the terminal.

"So we're all supposed to be dying," G-Money says as he begins to comprehend.

Lisa protests. She dreams of becoming a research scientist. G-Money's dreams are less altruistic. He wants to be a rap artist and make money. He cares for no one but his younger brother, who is on his own path of destruction. Lisa and G-Money plead for another chance at life, but there's only room for one George Bailey at a time.

"This film was the community talking to itself," said Hill, a former director for TV's "America's Most Wanted" series and other programs. "You find out how hard it is to stand up to that kind of violence -- no matter what you do sometimes, you can't win."

"Just Us," at 37 minutes, also draws on a film classic in retelling "To Kill a Mockingbird," says Sandy Cioffi, who directed the new movie. The 1962 film starring Gregory Peck tells the story of a white lawyer who defends a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman. "Just Us" turns that tale upside-down.

Prater saw a very rough cut of the film. Still, he felt it was strong enough to be included in a package with "Terminal 187." Filmmakers completed the film on Dec. 23, barely in time to make its scheduled world premiere at the festival.

"Just Us" takes us to an outdoor dance of young theater students, where police brutally beat a young black man.

The students divide and racism cuts both ways. Police seek a scapegoat to make their problem go away and find a white cop with a troubled past. A black woman attorney defends the cop. This angers her daughter Lynette, whose boyfriend was victimized at the dance. Lynette also remembers the injustice

her family suffered at the hands of the legal system years before, when her grandfather was falsely convicted of raping a white woman. Grandpa Raymond told the truth and went to prison. Now she must make her own decision.

Tensions boil during a rally outside the white officer's home. A young activist puts down his own video camera and calls for blood. Will Lynette tell the truth about what her own videotape recorded the night of the dance? Viewers will decide if she did the right thing.

"It's really meant to create huge conversation," said Sandy Cioffi, who directed "Just Us," and served as a producer on "Terminal 187."

Both films were consciously made in a way to connect people with film classics of old, but in a way that makes the stories their own, she said.

The films grew from a collaboration between the Langston Hughes Cultural Center and Heavy Freight Films. The cultural center offers an array of performing arts for youth and deals with issues such as drugs, teen suicide and pregnancy in Seattle's Central District.

Heavy Freight Films is a small Seattle-based production company run by Cioffi; Richard Hazzard, who worked as a mentor and producer on both films; and Tanya Hughes, who was senior producer of "Just Us."

Cioffi said that while she directed "Just Us," students in the film workshop had the final say on the screenplay and development, she said. "Terminal 187" and "Just Us" both involved hundreds of cast, crew and extras, mostly from the inner city and mostly with no previous background in filmmaking.

Professional film crew members either volunteered or worked for small honorariums during filming that took less than two weeks for each film, Cioffi and Hill said. And in both, apprentices from the community were paired with professionals in every position, from director to makeup artist to grip.

The Seattle-based Comprehensive Health and Education Foundation recently purchased the films for distribution. They will be offered to schools nationally part of a program called "Get Real About Violence." Cioffi hopes the initial order for 1,500 copies will help finance their next film.

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"Just Us" and "Terminal 187" will be shown for the public at 11 a.m. Jan. 17 at the Festival Arts Theater, Screen No. 3. The theater is at 2300 Baristo Road, Palm Springs. Admission is \$8. The showing for students is private. For more information, (760) 778-8979.

Art: PHOTOS

Caption: Design by Luis Bravo

The Press-Enterprise "Just Us" director Sandy Cioffi, right, discusses scene with actors, left to right, Marcus Watts and Justin Emeka. Students work on script and direction for "Just Us." Apprentice camera crew for "Just Us." "G-Money" is a gang member who lands in "Terminal 187." Nortel Palm Springs International Film Festival

A scene for "Just Us" was filmed at the King County Courthouse in Seattle.

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