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Sasquatch attack

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Lighting director Hollywood Heard lights a cigar before smashing the glass out of the window of a car during filming last month of the movie "Paper Dolls" in the Stillwater State Forest north of Whitefish Lake. Craig Moore/Daily Inter Lake

Stories by JOHN STANG

Four friends team up for horror flick

The scene: An ancient station wagon stops on a foggy, backwoods logging road.

Two 18-year-old boys sit in the front seat — shock turning into terror. A camera pans to the driver's side. That boy shakily rolls up his window.

The camera keeps moving into the back seat, pointing forward through the

windshield.

Four fuzzy man-ape silhouettes stand across the foggy gravel road, holding hands like warped paper dolls, a nightmare version of the child's game "Red Rover, Red Rover."

Then the shapes run at the car. Animalistically. Maniacally.

Black silhouettes transform into brown fur as the shapes jump on the car, pounding the hell out of it. Smashing windows. Groping wildly into the auto.

The boys yell, swear, scream, kick.

More glass shatters. More hands grab inside, snatching the driver out through his window.

Sasquatches have come to Northwest Montana, and they're in a bloody mood.

Fledgling film company

These Bigfoots belong to a low-budget horror movie called "Paper Dolls" that recently finished filming in the Whitefish area. • "Paper Dolls" is the dream of four friends who hope the movie will get their fledgling film company up and running.

Three are Whitefish High School buddies — Adam Stilwell, 25, Adam Pitman, 26, and Nathaniel Peterson, 26 — who split after graduation, eventually to pursue acting careers in different parts of the country.

Pitman roomed with David Blair, now 26, at the University of Idaho, and the pair sought their acting fortunes in Los Angeles after graduating.

The furthest the pair got was Pitman being an extra on "Spiderman II." Frustrated, they convinced Stilwell to move to Los

Angeles from Connecticut, and the trio took a year to put together a

largely improvisational ghost-story movie called "Roulette" with \$500 and help from friends. In the process, the trio created BadFritter Films, named after an inside joke.

No film distributor picked up "Roulette," although it won an award at a film festival in Fargo, N.D.

But the film was good enough to convince people to back BadFritters' next movie, "Paper Dolls," based on a script written in college by Pitman.

It's an R-rated story about killer Sasquatches with several plot twists and psychological wrinkles — as well as a hefty body count and a bit of gratuitous nudity.

Sold on the script

Among the convinced were Whitefish residents Carol and Richard Atkinson — retired from owning a small publishing company — and Kent Harper, an actor-producer who befriended Pitman and Blair in Los Angeles.

The Atkinsons — she loves horror flicks, he doesn't — financed the movie. Harper had the film-world contacts to get a director of photography and other key behind-the-scene technical veterans within the film's budget.

They were sold on "Paper Dolls" by its script, the quality of "Roulette," the filmmakers' intense passion and an indescribable vibe that convinced Harper, the Atkinsons and others that this group — including Peterson, who was called in from Missoula — was worth the gamble.

"They kinda grow on you. They're respectful," said Michael Hancock, a Hollywood makeup artist who lives in Bigfork. His more than 50 credits include "Deliverance," "Witness," "Maverick," "Unforgiven," "Se7en" and "Along Came a Spider." He worked on "Paper Dolls" at drastically reduced pay.

Harper pointed to some flashy moves and angles done with the video camera that taped "Roulette."

"I saw a creativity there that was very unique — the way the camera worked, mixing with the music and montages," Harper said.

The four friends collaborated on tweaking the script, hiring actors and crew, handling logistics and working out the directorial visions for the flick.

However, the four split into distinct roles when the four-week film shoot began in late July.

Besides playing someone who dies a brutal death before the opening credits, Stilwell was the behind-the-scenes producer and trouble-shooter. Pitman and Peterson played major characters.

Blair and Pitman were co-directors. But Blair was the lead director and the focus of the most pressure. Blair's directing experience consisted of leading some scenes in a directing class at the University of Idaho and helping map out "Roulette."

This would be his first film with a locked-in script, a crew looking to him for leadership, a tight budget, a shooting timetable and hundreds of tiny details.

Blair said. "I had no idea what to expect that first week. I was scared."

Assault in the night

Rewind back to the scene where Sasquatches make their first appearance, blocking a forest road by holding hands like paper dolls.

It was a dark and stormy night on that gravel road in the Stillwater State Forest.

Lightning flashed. Rain threatened. About 10 p.m., the sky finally became black enough for a night shoot.

The intricately choreographed scene needed about 20 people to do it in one continuous camera shot.

The scene focused on a barely-running blue 1979 Ford Fairlane station wagon, whose bumper sticker read: "Let their prayers be their hope. Let their hope become their reality."

A camera hovered over the car's front hood, looking back at two actors in the front seat. Then a dolly slowly glided the camera along the driver's door, with a nervously cigarette-smoking Peterson slowly cranking up his window. Then the camera slid into the car's back seat to point forward through the same windshield to show four Sasquatches standing in the road and then attacking the car.

One example of the scene's difficulty: A crew member had to constantly and smoothly change the swiveling camera's focus as the scene first concentrated on two actors, then on one actor and his rolling window, then on Sasquatches 50 feet away and then follow the Bigfoots as they rushed the car.

Meanwhile, the two actors — Peterson and Pitman — talked and moved as they went from stunned to terrified to fighting for their lives — all in sync with the camera's motions.

Enveloped in a funky-smelling pseudo-fog created by a smoke machine, four men in Bigfoot suits jumped on the hood, pounded on windows, mangled the windshield wipers and a mirror — all from the viewpoints of the guys in the front seat.

Lighting technicians constantly fussed with reflections and glares. A sound guy hid with his equipment in the rear of the station wagon.

Blair watched each take on a monitor that showed what an audience would see.

Take after take

Most of the scene worked smoothly every take — except for one part.

When the backseat camera pointed through the windshield, usually only two of the four hand-holding Sasquatches showed up on the monitor.

Much of the screen was blocked by a pair of big plastic dice dangling from the car's rearview mirror. Removing the dice would be a glaring continuity lapse with several scenes already filmed.

The filmmakers shot take after take.

Sasquatches were nudged to the right, to the left and then backwards.

Peterson's and Pitman's movements in the front seat were micro-choreographed. The filmmakers cheated by pulling up one of the dangling dice just a bit. The moving camera's final stop was pinned down to the millimeter.

Rehearsals tried to get everything in the long sequence in sync.

"This is drivin' me crazy," Blair grumbled at the monitor.

More lightning flashed. Raindrops started sprinkling.

Blair looked to the sky, his left hand grasping above him. He called out: "Please, God, don't do this!"

The filmmakers shot another take.

It went perfectly, including the cramped windshield view of four Bigfoots blocking the road.

As soon as Blair yelled "cut," lighting director Hollywood Hearn, a longtime filmmaking pro, said: "If this was the Olympics, this shot would be [scored as] a 12. ... This is a real difficult shot, probably the most difficult shot in the movie."

Minutes later, the rain droplets turned into a downpour.

Everyone covered the equipment and ran to shelter.

Fifteen minutes later, the deluge was done and filming resumed.

Making dreams come true

Many people in Grade B horror movies are trying to make dreams come true.

The "Paper Dolls" cast and crew could be divided into four groups.

First: The Sasquatches and bit-part players, who were local people doing this for a lark.

Second: A half dozen Whitefish High School students doing grunt work while seeing if filmmaking appeals to them.

Third: About a dozen actors and crew members — most in their 20s, living in Los Angeles and working at scant salaries — who want to work their way up Hollywood's food chain to bigger and better-paying productions.

Fourth: Eight to 10 more experienced and higher-paid Hollywood pros — behind-the-scenes camera, lighting, sound and makeup people who were largely there for a four-week paycheck, but also because they liked teaching younger filmmakers. Several said the filmmakers' solid vision of what they wanted, their willingness to listen to advice and an ability to keep on schedule outweighed Blair's and the others' inexperience.

Hancock said: "After this business gave me so much, I'm giving back. It's a chance to give them a chance."

For the four principals of BadFritter Films, an important part of creative satisfaction is the independence to do things their way.

That's what Stilwell, Peterson, Blair and Pitman hope to achieve with their fledgling film firm and "Paper Dolls."

All four talked about thinking up and telling stories in their own ways. All four studied acting, music, story-telling and films.

They began paying their dues in time-honored ways —performing in regional plays and working as extras in television shows and movies, hoping to climb up to bit roles, then to bigger parts.

Then they chose to go out on their own. The four want BadFritter Films to become a viable production company for movies made the way they want to make them.

"This path we're taking is the right path," Pitman said.

Tight budget

The small budget of "Paper Dolls" meant cutting from six to four the number of Sasquatches that could be on screen simultaneously.

A Los Angeles actress signed up as the lead woman character. But her agent then demanded \$1,000 a day, first-class airfare and lodging at a four-star hotel. That was impossible under the "Paper Dolls" budget. She was replaced by another actress, who is headed to Hong Kong this fall to play Cinderella at a Disney-owned amusement site.

The filmmakers found their perfect Bigfoot cave south of Lincoln —four hours away with the owners willing to let them use it. But the filmmakers looked at

the costs of trucking the cast and crew to that cave, shooting there for one day and hauling everything back.

That led to Plan B. Production designer Greg Mannino and others converted a garage's interior into a Sasquatch cave.

However, the BadFritter guys' and head producer Harper's dreams are much bigger than their budget.

Harper and BadFritter Films plan to enter "Paper Dolls" in every film festival they can find. Their immediate goal is to finish the post-production work in time so they can peddle "Paper Dolls" at the American Film Market in Santa Monica, Calif., in late February 2007. They hope to first show the film in Whitefish.

They want to push "Paper Dolls" for theatrical release before settling for the direct-to-DVD market.

Stilwell said: "If our backers barely get their money back with a theatrical release, or if we somehow get \$5 million for straight-to-DVD, we'll go with a theatrical release."

Tension and terror

Once again, let's rewind back to four Sasquatches on the attack.

Why bother with a long complicated moving shot of actors' faces, a side view of an actor slowly rolling up his window, and then the camera settling in the back seat to peer through the windshield?

Why not shoot 10 seconds of the actors going, "'Oh my God!" and then set up the camera at a convenient spot for a swift cut to a separate shot of the Sasquatches attacking?

The answer: To draw out the tension and create terror.

Although inexperienced, the foursome has studied how camera movements, plus what is shown and what is not shown, send subliminal messages to the audience, playing with minds and emotions.

The four are developing their own BadFritter filming style, with camera moves adding to the characters' development and story's suspense.

They also are experimenting with other stylistic touches: Suspense and some bloodiness taking priority over rampant gore, psychological twists among the mayhem, and letting the audience connect the dots in the plot.

"There are no original stories. It's how you tell the story that makes it interesting," Blair said.

When the camera very slowly moves from Pitman's and Peterson's stunned faces to watching Peterson roll up the window, that is supposed to tighten the tension in knowing that something unseen and terrible is out there.

The backseat view is supposed to trap the viewer in the enclosed car.

The Sasquatches are deliberately kept as shadows or as hard-to-focus-on maniacal furballs under the theory that the less the audience sees, the more the viewers are spooked. The filmmakers believe that no one would be scared by detailed scenes of computer-generated Bigfoots.

"We want to mess with people's imaginations," Stilwell said.

So no exterior scenes were shot of this Bigfoot attack. Most of the Sasquatches' attack was filmed from the station wagon's back seat for a panicky, claustrophobic, what-the-hell-is-happening series of nonstop jolts.

"You feel what the characters feel," Blair said.

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