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## THE ARTS FEATURE

### Buddy flicks

by Paul Peters



Photo by Paul Peters

Adam Pitman, Dave Blair, Nathaniel Peterson and Adam Stilwell, left to right, of Whitefish's BadFritter Films at a possible location for a scene in their new film, Paper Dolls.

#### Whitefish's BadFritter Films turns horror into a fairy tale

To explain the beginnings of Whitefish-based production company BadFritter Films, Nathaniel Peterson, Adam Stilwell and Adam Pitman reminisce about the summer of 1998, just after their high school graduation, when the three were sitting on the roof of Whitefish City Beach's concession stand well after midnight, discussing their future. It was the first time the three were going to be away from each other and, as Peterson recalls, they made a pact: "Right now

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we've got to go out and learn about the world, but someday we'll get back together and create something."

If this were one of BadFritter's movies that idyllic high school promise would have been followed by a gory bloodbath and hair-raising screams because BadFritter focuses on producing horror films. Contrary to the scary content of their work, however, the company's real-life story is turning into a fairy tale.

In November of 2004, Stilwell and Pitman teamed up with Pitman's friend from the University of Idaho, Dave Blair, to create *Roulette*, a full-length feature horror film they wrote, produced, directed, filmed and starred in—all on a budget of \$500. The bare-bones effort was about five friends who play a game of Russian roulette, leading to one fatality and a subsequent haunting. *Roulette* showed in Whitefish last Halloween and went on to win Best First Feature at the 2005 Fargo Fantastic Film Festival.

One year later, the BadFritter Films brain trust have fulfilled their post-high school promise by bringing Peterson on board to act in and to help produce their next effort, *Paper Dolls*. The project is scheduled to begin shooting in the Flathead Valley this summer and to be released this winter. They say the budget for this film is approximately \$2 million.

BadFritter has come a long way since making *Roulette*. Unlike that über-independent debut, *Paper Dolls* will include professional post-production work, cinematography, makeup, actors and stunt coordinators. The company bridged the sizable gap between their first and second films courtesy of a few chance encounters, connections made in college and while briefly living in Los Angeles, and through the successful result of their elbow grease and duct tape approach in making *Roulette*.

The big-name help came in part from a chance meeting with Kent Harper, whom Pitman met at a Los Angeles video store in early 2005 before moving back to Western Montana.

"It was a super-sleazy place," Pitman says, describing the store's collection as three-quarters porn. "Luckily, Kent and I were both looking at horror movies."

Harper asked Pittman for a horror flick recommendation, and when Pitman named his five favorites, they were in line with Harper's. The two fell into a longer conversation, revealing that they were both struggling to make it in the Hollywood film industry. Over time they became good friends.

When *Roulette* was finished, Pitman sent Harper a copy. By then Harper was working with Jennifer Chambers Lynch, daughter of Missoula-born director David Lynch, on a film Harper and Jennifer Lynch co-wrote. After watching *Roulette*, Harper called Pitman wanting to help out with BadFritter's next film. And so, for *Paper Dolls*, Harper has hooked them up with Michael Off—currently working on the film crew for Cuba Gooding Jr.'s *What Love Is*—as their cinematographer. Harper also introduced them to actor Kevin Gage—he's appeared in such films as *Heat* and *Blow*—and he's in negotiations with BadFritter to star in the film.

Perhaps the most important Hollywood connection for BadFritter was one they scored on their own. Knowing that makeup was going to be an important element in *Paper Dolls*—the film features sasquatch-like creatures attacking the

main characters in the forests of northwest Montana—BadFritter cold-called Bigfork resident and professional makeup artist Michael Hancock.

“When we talked to him on the phone he sounded skeptical,” Pitman says. “It sounded like we would meet him, get to pick his brain and hear some good stories.” But from the tone of Hancock’s voice, they never expected him to sign on.

When they went to meet Hancock at the Kalispell Perkin’s restaurant at the end of May, a tough, no-nonsense gentleman came over to them.

“You the BadFritters?” Pitman says Hancock asked them in a gravelly voice.

They sat down and, according to Pitman, “he laid it out for us,” saying something along the lines of, “I don’t put up with bullshit.”

A few hours after the meeting, Hancock called Pitman to say he would work on the film.

The money for Paper Dolls is also coming mostly from local connections. After watching Roulette, Whitefish philanthropists Carol and Richard Atkinson donated money so BadFritter would have an actual budget for their next film. BadFritter won’t say how much the Atkinsons gave them, but they expect, in the end, the film will cost almost \$2 million to make; almost \$1 million of which is being covered by donated equipment from Off.

The filmmakers—all of whom are now in their mid-20s—would never have had such success recruiting talent and money, they say, had they just waited for it. Both Pitman and Blair spent a couple years living in Los Angeles, where both tried to launch acting careers.

“We failed miserably,” Pitman says.

But, besides making a few connections there, they learned an important lesson about making it in today’s film industry. “If you really want to make it happen, you have to do it yourself,” Pitman says.

“No one’s going to get ‘discovered’ in Hollywood,” Blair adds. “It just doesn’t really happen.”

Still, it hasn’t all been easy, and the crew says they sometimes feel daunted by the task of making a bigger film.

“Every time we get one thing done, it leads to 60 other things we need to do,” says Peterson.

So far, by deciding to make Paper Dolls, the BadFritter crew has sacrificed two relationships (Pitman lost a girlfriend and Blair a boyfriend), one burgeoning stage-acting career (Peterson had been invited to take part in a Scottish theatre festival), and a pickup truck (sold by Blair for film-making funds). But, Pitman says, “We’ve developed the mind-set like, ‘Fuck it, let’s just get it done.’”

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