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'Prairie Love' heading to Sundance Festival

Film made by Minot grads to premier at Sundance Film Festival

December 7, 2010 - By DAN FELDNER, Staff Writer
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An independent film shot by several Minot High School grads in early 2009 has climbed to heights only a handful ever will.

"Prairie Love," which was shot in the Minot area in January 2009, has been accepted into the Sundance Film Festival, being held Jan. 20-30 next year in Park City, Utah. It is a dark comedy about a nomad travelling the rural roads of North Dakota who saves the life of a stranded man. When the nomad discovers the man is travelling to meet a pen-pal girlfriend he has never met, the nomad assumes his identity in hopes of having a relationship with her.

A record number of films - over 10,000 - were submitted to Sundance this year, and just under 200 were accepted, according to the festival Web site.

Dusty Bias, the writer, director and producer of "Prairie Love," is hard at work finishing the final cut of the film. He said the deadline for the film's completion has been escalated due to being accepted at Sundance, but it's added pressure he's definitely happy to be under.

"It's not so much just about getting the editing done, it's about getting the audio mix and dialogue finalized all at the right levels, sounds that were missing, adding in wind, music," Bias said in a phone interview. "All of those things are happening this month with a studio out of Birmingham, (Ala.), called Boutwell Studios."

"Prairie Love" is in the "Next" category with seven other U.S. films that each have a budget under \$500,000, which is a pittance in the movie industry. Although this category is non-competitive, there is an audience choice award up for grabs.

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Although Bias is doing the editing, he's kept the other filmmakers in the loop the entire time. Douglas Mueller, producer and production designer, said in a phone interview he's seen several cuts of the film and is impressed with how it's turning out.

"I think it's amazing. I think it's a great film on every level. I think it's really well performed and it's a great story, and I think it looks excellent," Mueller said.

Having some creative input on the film after the shooting is done makes the whole experience much more fun, Mueller said, noting that hasn't always been the case with other projects he's worked on in the past.

"Dusty, when he gets done making a bunch of changes, he's really good about getting feedback and stuff. I've worked on other films where, you know, you work on it and a guy will take it and you'll never see it again," Mueller said. "But Dusty's really great about collaborating with everybody."

Holly Lynn Ellis, a producer who also played the role of the pen-pal girlfriend, was the one who originally took the call from a Sundance official about the film's acceptance into the festival. Although submitting to Sundance had been something Bias was planning on doing since the very beginning, Ellis admitted she was more than a little shocked to learn they had actually been accepted.

"I kept telling the guy I was waiting for him to be some friend playing a prank call," Ellis said. "And honestly I didn't even believe it until I think the next day we got an e-mail confirmation, and when I looked at the e-mail and it was an '@sundance.org' e-mail address, then I was like, OK, this is legit now."

Garth Blomberg, a fellow Minot High School grad who played The NoDak, had a similar reaction when he heard.

"When Holly gave me a call and told me the news, you know, I kind of thought she was joking with me a little bit," Blomberg said. "I was really excited and humbled. I don't work in the film industry like the rest of the gang does, it's just a huge achievement for them and (I'm) just completely humbled that I got to be a part of the whole thing."

"I get to go on this experience down to Sundance and be a part of this film. I mean I just feel very, very lucky."

This will be the first time any of them will attend Sundance as filmmakers, and all are understandably excited about the opportunity. While Blomberg wouldn't turn down any opportunities the exposure at Sundance might send his way, it's Bias, Mueller and Ellis who are really hoping to use this as a springboard to bigger and better things in the movie industry.

They are hoping to use Sundance to make some connections and find a distributor for the film, either through a theatrical release or home video. After that, it's onto other projects that will hopefully

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allow them to tell stories in the future and get paid to do it.

While it's the filmmakers that will be travelling to Utah in January to participate in Sundance, they haven't forgotten just how invaluable the people in Minot and the surrounding communities were to the success of the film.

"I was talking to a friend of mine the other day who was congratulating us and I thanked her for everything that she did to help out in the film and she kind of thought it was nothing, but there was so many pieces required to make it all happen that everyone's contribution was huge," Mueller said. "I mean the food that people sent us from Lignite, and the trailers here, just all the little things. The Maysa Arena opening their doors and letting us shoot there. I mean we would not have this particular movie if it wasn't for everyone's support. I'm so appreciative."

One other thing Blomberg was appreciative of was the weather. While he certainly didn't enjoy the brutal winter they fought through while shooting in January of 2009, he said it undoubtedly made for a much more visually interesting film and added one last, very important character to the story.

"It was definitely trying at times to make it through the day. I've been friends with Dusty a long time, which definitely helped me out to, you know, get me through being half-naked when it's 30 below out there," Blomberg said with a laugh. "After seeing the stills and some of the movie I wouldn't want it any differently. I mean you just can't fake with CGI the landscape that we had and the weather."

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