



Local indie filmmakers have a date with Sundance

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By **Thomas B. Harrison, Press-Register**

FAIRHOPE, Alabama — The story begins on an icy ribbon of highway in North Dakota, where an odd character in a decrepit station wagon encounters a man lying in the road, apparently frozen.

But he's alive and the two men begin talking. The driver, known as the Vagrant, eventually learns that his passenger (the NoDak) has a "pen pal" girlfriend who has never laid eyes on him. On this frozen landscape, the wheels begin to turn, plans are made and romance ensues — sort of, maybe.

This is the world of "Prairie Love" (<http://prairielove.com>), an independent film by Baldwin County filmmaker Dusty Bias that next month has a very hot date with the prestigious Sundance Film Festival (<http://www.sundance.org/festival>) in Park City, Utah. (See information box.)

Bias, 32, wrote the screenplay with his ex-wife, Ashley Martin Bias (www.ashleystruestory.com), and shot "Prairie Love" on location in and around Minot, N.D., where he lived for eight years. The cast includes Bias' friends and former colleagues Holly Lynn Ellis, Jeremy Clark and Garth Blomberg.

Ellis, a New York-based actor and screenwriter, describes "Prairie Love" as "absolutely a comedy, a very quirky comedy."

"There's a great deal of heart in it, a hint of romance," she explains, "but more than anything it's warmth and people seeking warmth, literal and figurative. It's also (about) three very lonely people searching for a connection, someone to be with."

The actors, along with friends, family and filmmaking colleagues, will stay together in the house Ashley rented for the festival. The first few days will be devoted to interviews, meetings, late-night negotiations and other business matters. But the place does have a hot tub, they say.

"I'm not leaving unless I snowboard one day," says Ashley.

Read more about Ashley and Dusty Bias and "Prairie Love" at the Press-Register blog site:

<http://www.al.com/events/mobile>. View the trailer at <http://prairielove.com/trailer.html>.

The filmmakers would not reveal the budget for "Prairie Love," but the film is nominated in the category of films with budgets under \$500,000. The 80-minute film will have four screenings during the festival.

"It really is like that push over the top that we needed," says Dusty, "because it is such a long process and . . . having to do a lot of work by ourselves, this propelled us and gives us more energy to finish the product. There's no waiting now — it's just work, work, work and finish it and show it."



Writer and co-producer Ashley Martin Bias, left, with writer/director Dusty Bias on Dec. 14, 2010, in Fairhope, Alabama. (Press-Register/Victor Calhoun)

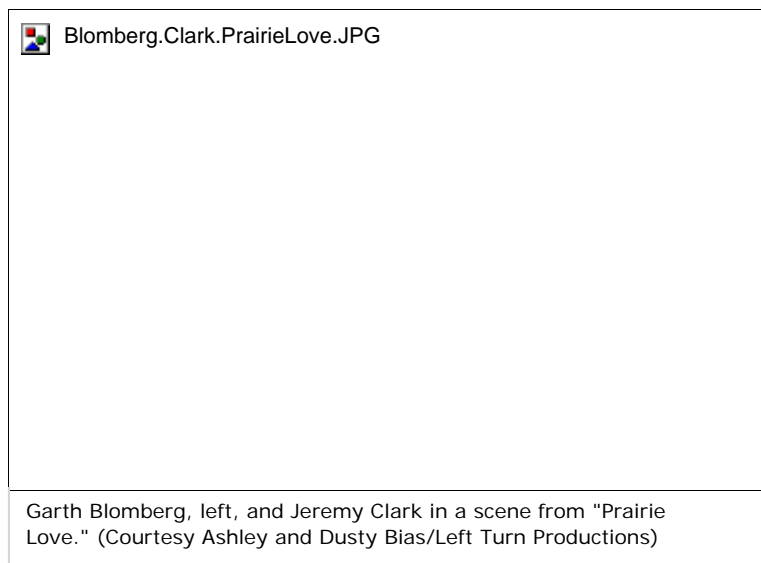
Composer and co-producer Ted Speaker got the news about Sundance in an e-mail from Dusty, who wrote: "Man, we got in!"

"I thought maybe he was kidding," says Speaker, "so I e-mailed him back to make sure he was serious, and he said he was. We all got really excited for about two or three days, then we started to realize how much work we had to do in the next month and a half. That's when the panic set in."

Anyone involved in independent filmmaking realizes the significance of an invitation from Sundance the other major festivals including Toronto, Cannes and South by Southwest.

"Having a film playing at any of those festivals is huge from a career standpoint," he says.

It is also a two-edged sword, according to Speaker, who says a friend told him: "Being in the business of independent film is like winning a pie-eating contest where the grand prize is more pie. That pretty much encapsulates the whole thing."



Cynical humor aside, there is no downplaying the fact that Sundance is a major indie film launching pad.

"I have attended a lot of film festivals as a filmmaker and volunteer and member of screening committees," Speaker says.

"The Sundance experience is one of a kind, for sure.

"The great environment that Sundance has created is this incredible feeling being

around all these other great films and filmmakers and being able interact with them all.

"Knowing that you're part of such a select group is amazing. It's sort of like being invited to an independent film Academy Awards or something."

Ashley Bias says she and Dusty have known each other for more than 10 years, and "ever since we've known each other it's been trying to get to this point."

"There's a lot of hurry-up-and-wait and a lot of downfalls," she says. "We've always had success. Our short films have always been accepted to festivals, but then to finally get there it almost feels like . . . the career is coming to fruition now."

Dusty Bias is a native of Anchorage, Alaska; Ashley is from Jasper, Ala. The two met in film school at Montana State University. They have collaborated on several short films such as "Four Corners" (2005),

directed by Douglas Mueller.

"Four Corners" is about a cyclist who encounters a traffic light at a four-way intersection in the middle of the desert. The film had a popular run on the festival circuit and won second place at the Seattle Science Fiction Film Festival.

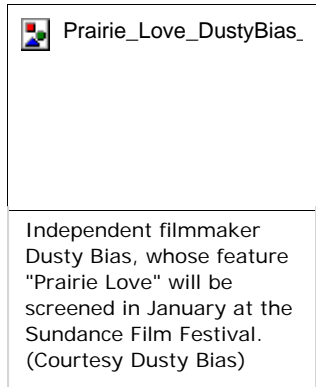
Bias also wrote and produced "1 Phone, 2 Phone, 3 Phone, 4" (2006), directed by Darren Leis. The film is about a series of ringing telephones that leads the protagonist to a group of people.

Bias describes it as an existential meditation on the meaning of life. The film received a Panavision Filmmakers Grant and was screened at more than a dozen film festivals including Birmingham's Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival.

"Four Corners" and "1 Phone," about 12 minutes each, are two of the three films screened earlier this year at The Windmill Market's indie film series begun by Fairhope artist Ameri'ca Jones-Gallaspy. The other was "Destination Lost," which Bias wrote, produced and directed. Jones-Gallaspy attended Bayside Academy with Ashley Martin Bias.

Success notwithstanding, the Biases realize that making movies is viewed by many as an amusing but questionable career choice.

"I knew we could do it," Ashley says, "but with a lot of people it's like, 'You're a filmmaker, that's a nice pipe-dream — but really, what're you gonna do with yourself?' You have to defend this choice for years to parents, other people. They're just concerned."



Dusty Bias attended the Sundance Festival years ago, but he didn't have tickets and couldn't get into the screenings.

"I swore I would never return to the festival unless I had film accepted there," he says. "There is nothing I ever wanted more. I was either going to starve to death or tell stories and make my own films."

Getting exposure at Sundance should help the filmmakers achieve their goals of selling their work, getting the investors' money back and making more movies, says Dusty.

The idea is “to continue on the career path of telling stories, and hopefully someday getting paid for it,” he says. “I want to make a living doing this. I don’t want to work for a local production company. I don’t want to wait tables.”

“We’ve done all that, by the way,” Ashley says.

The idea for “Prairie Love” was born years ago; the film’s original title was “Bride-to-Be.” The director says he spent two and a half months in Minot during one of the worst winters in North Dakota history. The movie was shot in digital HD with a Sony EX1. Bias says it was “a miracle” that the camera worked. Celluloid would have been hopeless.

“We were shooting about three miles outside town,” he recalls, “and it was something I never experienced in my eight years there. It was like being in the Arctic. I thought, ‘We could die.’”

Shooting began Jan. 1, 2009, and wrapped Jan. 27. Conditions were brutal, but the eight-member crew toughed it out. Ellis, a New York-based actor and screenwriter, is both a producer and one of the three stars of “Prairie Love.” She has known Dusty Bias since their high school days in Minot.

The weather and the land itself are “very intricate characters in the film,” she says. “We couldn’t have done it anywhere else.”

Back in November, Ellis took the phone call from Sundance official Trevor Groth, who gave her the good news about “Prairie Love.”

“I asked him several times if he was joking, and who he was,” she says. “I was certainly proud of what we had done, but you never expect someone else to get it, at least at that level.” Like many actors and filmmakers, she is programmed for rejection.

“I do my best and walk away from something,” she says. “If something amazing happens, fantastic, but if not it’s out of my control and I try not to think about it or worry myself about it. I’d all but forgotten that we had submitted (to Sundance), you know.”

"In my mind, it was a foregone conclusion that we'd get rejected because everyone does. 'No one gets into Sundance!' Then we did, and I just couldn't believe it."

The news certainly altered her perspective on the movie.

"It's been funny," Ellis says. "The more that we've worked on it and the more I've watched the movie and thought about the movie as a Sundance film, the more worthy it's become — and the prouder of it I am, the more I recognize its virtues, the more I realize that there is an audience out there for it and we're ready to reach that audience."

Ellis describes "Prairie Love" as "absolutely a comedy, a very quirky comedy."

"There's a great deal of heart in it, a hint of romance," she explains, "but more than anything it's warmth and people seeking warmth, literal and figurative. It's also (about) three very lonely people searching for a connection, someone to be with."

A few months after the film wrapped, Ellis received a DVD of the "rough cut" from Dusty. Characteristically, she was reluctant to view it.

"I hadn't seen any footage," she says. "I went home and put the DVD on the coffee table, walked away and took a couple of shots of bourbon and thought, 'If I don't like this thing, I don't know what I'm going to do with myself! We put so much into this, and two months of our lives. Then I sat down, watched the movie, and I loved it. I was so relieved."

'PRAIRIE LOVE'

WHAT: "Prairie Love" (<http://prairielove.com>) an independent film by Dusty Bias

WHEN: Jan. 20-30, 2011

WHERE: Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Salt Lake City and Ogden, Utah

CAST: Holly Lynn Ellis, Jeremy Clark, Garth Blomberg

CREDITS: Dusty Bias, director/writer/producer; Ashley Martin Bias, executive producer/co-writer/co-producer; Bryant Mock, Holly Lynn Ellis, Douglas Mueller, producers.

MUSIC: Ted Speaker (co-producer)

DIRECTOR of PHOTOGRAPHY: Lawrence Schweich

TRAILER: <http://prairielove.com/trailer.html>

INFO: info@prairielove.com

NOTE: Sundance Film Festival (<http://www.sundance.org/festival>) is the largest independent cinema festival in the United States, and the premiere showcase for new work from American and international independent filmmakers.

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