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LOCAL

Monday, March 21, 2005

The man behind 'ManBand'

Santa Ana's burgeoning arts scene supported Dermott Petty in his first feature film.

By CHRIS KNAP
The Orange County Register

ORANGE – A very bad boy band in a Jack in the Box commercial gave Dermott Petty the idea.

The ad was funny.

Funnier still, he thought, would be a horrid group of middle-age singers - untalented, overweight and um, plain-looking, and not in the way that the Amish mean.

Just to make it worse, give them a songwriter who hasn't left the YMCA bathroom in 10 years.

And call it ManBand.

Thus began a two-year odyssey in which Petty, 42, wrote, funded and directed his first feature film, shot entirely in Orange County and infused with the independent, rebellious spirit that emanates from Santa Ana's Artists Village, not to mention Costa Mesa's Harp Inn, both of which are featured in the film.

On Sunday Petty showed a rough cut of "ManBand" to 50 people at the Argyros Forum at Chapman University. The applause was deafening.

It should probably be noted that many in the audience were actors or crew who worked on the film. Still, they have a measure of objectivity: All of them are so far unpaid - and will remain so unless Petty is able to find a distributor for theatrical (iffy) or DVD (possible) release.

They worked without pay because Petty is a nice guy and because they trust his creative vision.

"He seems like a normal average guy, but he's really creative," said Mee Vaj, who met Petty at the Nichiren Buddhist center in Santa Ana, then discovered they shared an interest in film. "I'm really proud of what he has done here." Vaj produced the film.

Petty, who grew up in Lisdoonvarna, Ireland, has been trying to break into the film business for 12 years. He has



FILMMAKER: Dermott Petty at the rough-cut screening of his new movie "ManBand" at Chapman University on Sunday.
MINDY SCHAUER, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

DERMOTT PETTY

Raised: Lisdoonvarna, Ireland
Lives: Costa Mesa
Age: 43
Day job: Audio-visual technician
Aspiring: Writer, director, filmmaker
Influences: Ingmar Bergman, Akira Kurosawa, Joel and Ethan Coen, Woody Allen, Monty Python
More online:
www.manbandthemovie.com

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directed plays, and written and directed a soap opera set on Dorchester Avenue in Boston, which nearly made it to Irish television.

But it's been the last five years, since Petty came to Orange County, that he has begun to make progress.

Southern California has all the ingredients for an aspiring filmmaker, Petty said, but it is also a place where people who are not focused can be lost.

"You have to smarten yourself up in California, and you have to define yourself," Petty said.

Although Petty loves the films of Ingmar Bergman and Akira Kurosawa, he realized his talents lay closer to the dark comedy of Joel and Ethan Coen and the absurdist deadpan of Monty Python.

Petty's style is defined by a sharp skewer aimed directly at the black heart of Hollywood – those profit-hungry studios that focus-group films to death, make sequel after sequel while ignoring original ideas and, in Petty's words, "would cast Brad Pitt as Martin Luther King if they thought it would sell."

That style is at the fore in a short he did three years ago called "Paddy Takes a Meeting."

An aspiring filmmaker wants to tell the true story of Brian Boru, the 10th-century Gaelic warrior who drove the Norsemen from what is now Ireland and united the Gaelic race. Unfortunately, he is killed after winning a battle.

"Kind of a downer, isn't it," says studio chief B.P. Mogul, proceeding to rip the real story to shreds, turning Boru into a kung fu master and changing the villains to Nazis, since no one would believe that the makers of Volvo could be murdering bad guys.

The satirical short was shown at the Galway Film Fair in Ireland as well as festivals in Madrid, Buenos Aires and Santa Ana (the latter at the Rat Powered festival in downtown Santa Ana).

"Dermott has a fun and unique way of approaching filmmaking," said Keiko Beatie, who picked "Paddy Takes a Meeting" for the "O Scene," a series at the Laguna Art Museum that spotlights local filmmakers.

While the production values are a lot better in "ManBand," the same dark view of Hollywood remains.

Two aging producers who made their mark with boy bands try to manufacture one last hit – this time with middle-age men.

When you look at the birthdates of Mick Jagger and Steven Tyler, such a concept is really not that farfetched.

But in this case producers Louie Lonely and Joey Jumpy make the mistake of allowing a TV reality show called "Popquest" to film the band's startup, and they are sabotaged at every turn.

The TV producers insist the band include a string of untalented misfits, including an ex-con, a failed opera singer and a white guy who really just wants to sell Tupperware.

Then they insist on a ditz choreographer who appears able to neither sing nor dance (Harrison White, who can actually do both, in an over-the-top performance).

The coup de grace is an obscene songwriter named Loon E. Tone who won't leave a public bathroom.

This last, which was shot in the Santora Arts Building in downtown Santa Ana, was an inspired bit of innovation made necessary because the artist who was going to let Petty use his loft couldn't be there that day.

The cast and crew was already at the building, and somebody walked into the cracked-tile bathroom and said, hey, the acoustics in here are pretty good.

Unlike poor Brian Boru, who was murdered by a Viking in 1014, it all ends well for ManBand.

Hollywood will like that, right?

Petty is working to get the film placed at enough festivals to generate some word-of-mouth. The holy grail would be to have a distributor offer theatrical release – but that's a long shot. More likely is a DVD release, a commercial deal that would allow the cast and crew to get paid – and Petty to pay himself and the other investors back.

In the meantime, Petty hasn't quit his day job, as an audio-visual technician at Irvine advertising agency Foote Cone & Belding.

"In Orange County alone, there are hundreds of struggling filmmakers like Dermott, working day jobs. Some are

joining film coops. Some are going by the seat of their pants. All have a passion to be creative," says Beatie, who curates shows for the Malibu Film Festival and the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film and Video Festival, as well as the Laguna Art Museum.

"It's the luck of the draw many times," Beatie says. "Some of the best stories don't get out there because they are held up in different levels of the industry.

"I don't know what his chances are, but I hope that he goes far."

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