

LAKE COUNTY NEWS

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'Sherman's Way' has Lake County debut

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MIDDLETOWN - The first feature film to be filmed in Lake County in decades was screened in Middletown this weekend to rave reviews.

The independent film "Sherman's Way" was shown Friday and Saturday during the Coyote Film Festival at the Calpine Visitors Center.

Karen Turcotte-Williams, the festival's creator, arranged for the film's local debut. As an added treat, "Sherman's Way" made its trip to Lake County in completed form accompanied by its director and co-producer, Craig Saavedra of Los Angeles, and lead actor and co-producer, Michael Shulman of New York, two down-to-earth artists who took part in a question-and-answer session following the showings.

"We had so much fun making this film here in Lake County," Saavedra told the audience

"Sherman's Way" is a heartfelt story about an uptight Ivy Leaguer, Sherman Black (Shulman) whose carefully ordered and meticulously planned life one day begins to fall apart, leading to an accidental journey of self-discovery

The film's backdrop includes numerous locations around Lake County, including Library Park, downtown Kelseyville and Butts Canyon Road, and dozens of local residents who were extras.

Saavedra's directorial skills capture the beauty of the county, from small and delicate details like mist on the lake to the county's eye-popping expanses.

Originally, the film was meant to be set in Napa County with Lake Berryessa as a location, said Saavedra. However, he explained, "Napa was so much more beautiful in my mind."

So they looked around, and Shulman came across Lake County on the Internet. He called up the county's chief administrative officer, Kelly Cox, who along with Debra Sommerfield of the county's marketing program showed the men around Lake County and helped them scout locations.

"We just couldn't imagine shooting anywhere else," said Saavedra. Shulman added that finding Lake County "was a blessing."

The men said Lake County offered an incredibly welcoming atmosphere, which is a major departure from Los Angeles. There, Saavedra said, people will see filmmakers at work and will honk their car horns incessantly until they're paid to stop. Those kinds of bribes have to be worked into the movie budget, he said

Lake County, Saavedra told the audience Saturday, made "Sherman's Way" what it is.

The film was shot in 19 days over a four-month period, with other locations outside of Lake County including Los Angeles, San Diego, New York and New Haven, Conn., at Yale University.

Saavedra and Shulman gave big credit to Sommerfield who Shulman called "amazing" for her help on the project. "She did the work of 10 location managers and a film office," said Saavedra.

What sets the film apart most may be what it

conspicuously lacks -- no car chases, explosions or assassins, which seem to be the requisite elements in today's big movies.

Rather, the focus is on crafted dialog -- with people actually talking to one another, realistic relationships and struggles that would be familiar to most people.

Another of the film's traits is its optimism -- which is a characteristic Saavedra said once made American-made films stand apart, but which now is often missing.

Before becoming a director, Saavedra produced TV and film projects. On "Sherman's Way," Saavedra and Shulman also are co-producers.

At 26, Shulman already is an acting veteran. He began his acting career as a child in Broadway's "Les Miserables" and in the original cast of Stephen Sondheim's "Assassins." He acted in M. Night Shyamalan's 1998 movie "Wide Awake" and in "Little Man Tate" with Jodie Foster, but he may be best



Third generation no-license New Yorker Sherman Black (Michael Shulman) pleads with eccentric ex-Olympian Palmer "The Bomber" Van Dyke (James LeGros) to drive safer after a chance encounter in Starry Night Entertainment's "Sherman's Way," directed by Craig Saavedra. The film was screened at the Coyote Film Festival Friday, Sept. 19, and Saturday, Sept. 20, 2008, in Middletown. Photo courtesy of Starry Night Productions

Sherman is the sheltered son of an overbearing mother, Evelyn Black (Donna Murphy) who also is a successful lawyer running for the U.S. Senate. Evelyn tries to protect her son from everything while herding him toward a law career. But when he heads to California to visit his girlfriend, Marcy DeLang (Lacey Chabert), he finds she's got another guy.

In an uncharacteristically spontaneous move, Sherman decides to hitch a ride with Palmer Van Dyke (James LeGros), a washed up Olympic alpine skier driving an MGB Roadster.

The two men can't stand each other at first. Over time, however, they begin to learn from each other, with support from DJ (Enrico Colantoni) and Addy (Brooke Nevin), a free spirit who helps Sherman forget Marcy's betrayal and learn to loosen up a little bit.

The independent film is Saavedra's debut as a director of feature films and the first film made by Starry Night Entertainment LLC, the company he and Shulman formed in 2005, the year after Shulman graduated from Yale.

Saavedra, 44, has directed TV movies; he met a 14-year-old Shulman on the set of "Rhapsody in Bloom," and the two became friends.

known for a recurring role on the TV show, "Party of Five."

The art in "Sherman's Way" does imitate life in some ways, especially when it comes to the similarity in the relationship dynamic between Sherman and Palmer and Shulman and Saavedra. For one, Sherman and Palmer share an age difference with the creators.

As the story develops, the boundaries of age fall away and Sherman and Palmer begin learning crucial lessons from each other; for Sherman, it's about being a better son, for Palmer, a better father.

Realizing the lessons that life has to offer you is a key to the story, said Saavedra in an interview with Lake County News Saturday evening. "That's really the heart of 'Sherman's Way' -- it's never too late to learn from books or life."

While the film features aspects of the the Great American Road Trip -- which has been the subject of many a film -- Saavedra and Shulman point out that the characters spend 90 percent of the movie in one place, staying with DJ at his lakeside home, painstakingly restoring the classic red MGB Roadster.

LAKE COUNTY NEWS

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from PAGE 1

Much of the journey is truly an internal one, they say, and is far more important than the destination.

The car, said Saavedra, is a metaphor for tearing down Sherman. "We needed to tear Sherman down to rebuild him."

Saavedra and Shulman receive hundreds of scripts, but it has to be a special project to make the cut. "We won't do a project we both don't absolutely believe in," Saavedra said.

The film -- which received big applause from Lake County audiences this weekend -- also is receiving great reviews at film festivals around the country.

Although "Sherman's Way" was filmed two years ago and officially opened earlier this year, Shulman and Saavedra are currently on the festival circuit with the film, where it's grabbing the awards.

So far, it has won audience awards at the Cinequest Film Festival in San Jose and the Newport International Film Festival in Newport, Rhode Island; opening night selection honors at the Newport Beach Film Festival; and was made an official selection at the Jackson Hole Film Festival in Jackson Hole, Wyo.

The story behind the story

The movie also has a humorous and quirky back story that touches on everything from cars to cats.

Three MGB Roadsters were used in the film, including one Saavedra bought locally and took home, plus one in mint condition that was on loan from a Pasadena MGB club member. That car, he said, had to be shipped by Federal Express, which turned out to be the movie's biggest expense.

Palmer's black and white tuxedo cat, dubbed

"Sparky" in the film -- named after a tabby cat that liked to play fetch that Saavedra had as a child -- originally was supposed to be played by two trained calico cats.

However, those cats got a last-minute commercial deal and left the film. So the black and white cat was brought in, but its training was so bad that some scenes

"The reason why we're both here is we want to say thank you to Lake County"

had to be shot later, after it had grown substantially bigger. Saavedra and Shulman said they also used a mechanical cat in some scenes.

When it came to catching a broad, sweeping shot of the county's vineyards, Saavedra brought in a helicopter -- at a cost of \$5,000. Because they got started late on the shoot they could only do one take, whereas normally a director might do 20 or more takes to get the

perfect shot. Even so, Saavedra managed to catch a vineyard vista in the golden hour of a summer evening.

For Shulman, a lifelong Manhattan resident, filming in Lake County gave him the summer he never had as a kid, where he was able to swim, get a tan, learn to climb a tree -- not much need for that in Manhattan -- and even learn to drive a stick shift, much as his film character does.

"Sherman's Way" had many important contributors, one of them being writer/producer Tom Nance, who drew from his own experiences with his biological father in crafting a believable scene between Palmer and the son he's abandoned. He also appeared in the movie as a car salesman who hires Palmer for an ill-fated publicity stunt.

Nance was supposed to make the trip to Lake County with Shulman and Saavedra, but here the story has a sad end.

With the money he made from the movie, Nance bought himself a motorcycle. Last week, he was killed when a truck hit him while he was riding the motorcycle through Los Angeles.

More projects ahead

Saavedra and Shulman say their partnership has been a great one, and they have much more planned ahead, including a movie and a play project off Broadway.

When it comes to Lake County, both enjoyed their time here, and have fond memories of the experience, which is why they came back this weekend.

"The reason why we're both here is we want to say thank you to Lake County," said Shulman.



As the story develops, Palmer Van Dyke (James LeGros, above left) and Sherman Black (Michael Shulman) realize how much they have to learn from each other. Top photo: Palmer (LeGros, left) and DJ (Enrico Colantoni) take a break from restoring a classic MGB Roadster for Palmer's estranged son. Above right: Free spirit Addy (Brooke Nevin) embodies all that Sherman is not, and motivates him into "letting loose" in "Sherman's Way." Photos courtesy of Starry Night Productions