

RTF assistant professor Andrew Shea's film "Forfeit" was chosen to be screened at SXSW this year.

UT professor Andrew Shea screens feature film 'Forfeit' at SXSW

Teacher credits students for keeping him up-to-date with creative, new ideas

By: Mary Tuma

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Relief and excitement swept through radio-television-film assistant professor, Andrew Shea, as he received the call notifying him that his feature film, "Forfeit," would be screened at the SXSW film festival.

Yet, Shea is no stranger to accolade. His other two feature films, "The Corndog Man" and "Santa Fe" were both screened at the Sundance Film Festival, among countless others, and his first short film, "Take My Breath Away," was shown at the 1993 Cannes Film Festival.

So what made SXSW special for this accomplished filmmaker?

"I think we here in Austin don't realize how SXSW has grown to be one of the top-tier festivals in our country," Shea said. "I see this as a very significant festival, and I'm very proud."

In his third year of teaching directing to undergraduate and graduate students at the University, Shea said he owed a great deal to his

classes for keeping him up to date.

"The preparation for these classes causes me to constantly revisit ideas and refresh knowledge," Shea said.

With an impressive repertoire of work, Shea attributes his love of directing not only to the opportunity to bring a story to life, but also the chance to interact with creative minds.

"I love all the interaction with the collaborators from the designers to the actors," Shea said. "Sometimes it is difficult, but really inspiring. It is a messy, creative process, and that is the really the fun part about it."

Submerged in the creative New York City culture of the late '60s and early '70s, Shea attributes his penchant for the arts to his early involvement in theater.

"I went to a lot of theater and started acting in plays very young. Later on, I got more interested in writing and directing, and by college, theatre directing was not just my major, but my exclusive activity," Shea said.

In a time where video rentals were nonexistent, Shea basked in the shine of Hollywood's Golden Era films playing at local art houses, where the great examples of American cinema emanated.

"I grew up in a very volatile era, where politics and culture obviously left its stamp on me in a lot of different ways," Shea said. "I'm very much still a product of that time, for better or for worse."

After graduating from the college with a degree in theater arts, Shea decided to attend law school. With no intention of practicing law, he soon realized he needed to follow his passion and sought a master's of fine arts in theater directing from the California Institute of the Arts.

"I then ran a professional theater in Santa Fe for eight years, which became the most successful theater in the history of New Mexico," Shea said. "After this, I felt there was only so much further I took that

theater."

Aside from the allure of a larger paycheck, Shea decided to switch from theater to film for a number of factors, namely a larger and more diverse audience.

"I felt it was a transition I was going to make eventually, and I wanted to make it when I was relatively young," Shea said. "I went back to school and got an MFA degree in film and video production, partly because I felt this was an area I wanted to teach in and partly because I wanted the hands-on training."

Shea returned to school, garnering yet another MFA, this time in film in video production at the University of Southern California's School of Cinema-Television.

Influenced by directors such as Stanley Kubrick, Robert Altman and Roman Polanski, among others, Shea was attracted to the socio-political elements of their films.

"They all had very ambitious stories with a social and political point of view," Shea said. "I was also very inspired by their deep sense of humor and satirical side."

Though not credited as a writer for his third film, "Forfeit," Shea's reoccurring themes of revenge and obsession permeate the script because of his involvement from the beginning.

"What started as a heist film turned into a revenge story, which is a sort of running theme for my movies," Shea said.

Featuring Billy Burke from "24," Sherry Stringfield of "ER" and Wayne Knight of "Seinfeld," "Forfeit" is a thriller about the price one pays for blind zealotry.

"The film is about a religious zealot who is intent on destroying the life of a woman who he believes committed a crime against his child and will go to any lengths to do so," Shea said.

"Forfeit" is an atypical movie in that the main character is a sort of

villain or monster, rather than the archetypal "sympathetic" character seen in most films.

"I think it draws you in to his world and forces you look at issues he's facing from his point of view," Shea said.

Like most low-budget films, "Forfeit" faced many obstacles, such as limited resources and a small crew, not to mention a tight schedule.

"It is ironic how you spend several years of your professional life working on something, and the reality is that only a fraction of that time is actually spent on the making of the film," Shea said in reference to the quick 18-day shoot and contrasting years of pre- and post-production.

Shea plans on directing a feature adaptation of the Irish writer George Bernard Shaw's "Man and Superman," a project which has been a dream of his since graduate school.

"Little did I know, the Ransom Center has one of the premier Shaw archives in the world," Shea said. "I never thought I would be doing my research for the film in Texas instead of the British National Museum."

These days, Shea is kept busy with not only reviewing his students' films, but also with his 4-year-old daughter. He reserves the summer to catch up on the year's movies.

"I have to watch about four feature films a week for my directing class, but they are usually not current," Shea said. "So I will watch all the current movies when school gets out in May. I guess it's kind of ironic that as a film professor, I don't stay current and have to play catch-up."

As for future directors, Shea advises exploring not just directing, but different crafts and facets of entertainment, such as editing, writing, radio and documentary and seizing technological opportunities.

"Today there are so many really imaginative distributing outlets that didn't exist in my era," Shea said. "Today my students can make

films, and they are on YouTube within minutes, or make a Quicktime and post it on their Web site; these are great chances to get your work out and develop a personal, core audience. It is very liberating."

Aptly so, Shea imparts advice from one of his favorite directors.

"I love Woody Allen's approach in life. He says 'Showing up is nine-tenths of it.' Just always be there and be on time. You'll have your opportunity, but you just need to be very persistent and dedicated and always show up."

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