

Q&A with Leo Lunser and Derek Brigham - Film weaves web of innocence, violence

By Leslie Bridgers

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Derek Brigham, 22, and Leo Lunser, 59, are admittedly an unlikely duo. But their differences in age and style, they said, enhanced the process of writing and directing their independent film, "Altering Conclusions," and made for a better final product.

The Sanford men first met when Brigham was just 7 years old, and Lunser was his director in "A Christmas Carol." Their roles switched when, as a senior at Sanford High School, Brigham asked Lunser to act in a film he was directing. At around that time, the two formed Gold Shoe Productions and started writing "Altering Conclusions."

Brigham, who graduated from Sanford High in 2006, has since moved to Portland, Ore., where he works at a restaurant while pursuing an acting career. Lunser still lives in Sanford and works by day at Servpro, a cleanup and restoration company.

Their film, which they described as edgy and dark, premieres on Sunday at the Sanford Maine Stage Theatre in Springvale. Last week, Brigham and Lunser talked about the movie, their careers and the actors who would play them in their biopics.

Q: What is "Altering Conclusions" about?

Derek Brigham: It's sort of like "American Beauty" meets "Reservoir Dogs." The characters weave a web of innocence and violence. It's a very dark piece. It's definitely not for everyone. But it does tell a very gripping story that doesn't let go until the end.

Leo Lunser: In a nutshell, it's revenge. It's about the kidnapping of a corrupt official's daughter and the resulting chaos.

Q: How did you come up with the idea for the movie?

LL: I think it was Derek's idea. I said, "Boy that sounds good. Let's do this." It evolved into something much larger than we originally anticipated. It started as, why don't we write a really nice screenplay about eight characters in a really character-driven plot? It morphed into

56 characters and a 140-page script. It seemed like every time we thought of a new scene it involved new characters, new locations and new problems that we tried to solve with no budget.

DB: The story just sort of came as a result of us playing off each other. The ending was his idea. We kind of worked backward. It was a very long process of us throwing ideas back and forth until we had a script.

Q: How was the movie funded?

LL: Through Derek and I, out of our own pockets. We have had some outside funding from one of our actors, and she is listed as an executive producer because she gave a nice sum of money.

DB: It cost about \$10,000.

Q: Where did you do the filming?

LL: Ninety percent of the filming was done in Maine. We filmed in Sanford, Kennebunk, Biddeford, Acton. We also shot down in Portsmouth, N.H., and at a location in Massachusetts.

Q: What landmarks will people from the area recognize in the film?

LL: They will recognize the mill buildings that we filmed in, in Sanford. Certainly people will recognize downtown Portsmouth. There's a travel sequence coming across the big bridge there. It's right in the opening montage.

DB: The Home Plate Diner. They were very generous to us. We filmed there once and things sort of fell through the first time because we had to recast the actor in that scene, so we had to re-film there a year later.

Q: How long have you been working on the film?

LL: About three years. That's from the inception of the writing up until today. The script took us about two months to write. We had an open casting call, and then we started filming the idea. We had some students who were at the New England School of Broadcasting who were able to borrow cameras for weekends. We started shooting in April 2007, and we were hoping to finish by the time they were done with school in June, and we weren't even close. So, we bought our own cameras at that point. And then it became winter and we went from this nice, beautiful weather to snow. So, we said let's do the interior shots and when it got nice we went

outside again. Independent film making at it's best. It's just the way it goes.

Q: What were some of your biggest hurdles in getting it made?

LL: The biggest hurdle was, since people were not being paid, what we had arranged with people was deferred pay. It doesn't usually work out for the actors. So we don't have any real leverage over our actors. If one actor said we can't be there that day for any reason, the scene wouldn't get shot.

DB: When you're not paying actors they're really doing you a favor by being there. We were trying to be as hospitable as possible and still get the film made. Budget restraints were a big issue. We had the toughest time trying to get a school to shoot a few scenes. Everybody wanted money, everybody wanted liability insurance.

Q: Were there any memorable hijinks on set?

LL: Always. People, obviously, just cutting up on camera. One time, we were filming away and the specific line from the actor was supposed to be, "When we got there we found a blood bath," and the actor said, "When we got there we found a bubble bath."

DB: We had an actor try to bribe us to get a part. He said, "I might have a substantial amount of money I might be able to donate to this movie." We gave him a very honest audition, but ultimately he wasn't right for the part, and we didn't cast him.

Q: Where did the actors come from?

LL: We had three actors from Massachusetts, two or three from New Hampshire, and all the rest were Maine residents. Several of them had extensive stage acting, some of them had acted already for film and some had very little experience at all. The larger percentage had some sort of acting experience. We were really happy. One big downfall of independent films is often the acting. I think that films suffer because the acting falls short.

Q: What do you hope will happen with this movie? How would you consider it successful?

LL: The ultimate desire of any independent filmmaker is to obtain distribution rights - to enter film festivals and a distributor will see

it and say, "Yes." That's the dream. The reality is that percentage is probably 5 percent. I've talked to many filmmakers and, boy, it's tough. When you do pick up a distributor, it's like hitting the jackpot. We'll be entering into film festivals. It's not going to be Sundance or anything of that magnitude. But there are hundreds, maybe thousands in the country. I'm expecting a call from the Bangor Film Festival. That'll be our first one. I'm looking at maybe 20 film festivals we'd like to enter. You have to pay a fee. It can be as low as \$25 and up to \$200. It can become very costly.

DB: I want the movie to be seen by people, and I want to gauge honest reactions because the film is very stunning, it's very controversial. I want the opportunity to make more films. We're hoping this film will be seen by someone who might be able to help us out with that.

Q: Have you directed or written films before?

DB: The first independent film I've written and directed was a collaboration with Leo in 2006, when I was at Sanford High School in the media communications class in the vocational wing. It was the first film Leo and I worked together on. The film ended up being about a half an hour and received mixed reviews.

LL: I'm more of a stage actor and stage director. I've been doing that for 40 plus years. In fact, I directed Derek in his very first play when he was 7 years old.

Q: Where have you directed and acted on stage?

LL: All over the place. Sanford Maine Stage Theatre, Seacoast Repertory in Portsmouth, City Theater in Biddeford, Windham Center Stage, and, trust me, just many, many more. I've been at this game a long time.

Q: If there was a movie made about your life, what would you call it and who would play you?

LL: Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy. I think I would call it, "The Complete, Unabridged Chaos of Leo Lunser." I go back to the wild '60s. I'm just an ancient hippie. But it got me where I am today, which is cool. For a younger version of me, I think Brad Pitt. An older version of me, Dennis Hopper.

DB: I don't think I would want it made for a very long time. I think I have a lot of life in front of me. At least, I hope so. It sounds

conceited, but I would like to play myself. Looking at yourself in the mirror is one of the hardest things for an actor to do.