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Thursday, May 03, 2007

News:

Thursday, May 3, 2007 8:39 PM US/Western

Artists on the rise
By Patrick Carlson
staff writer



Central Washington University film studies major Noah Layton plans to be a cinematographer after finishing school. Layton is currently editing a project, which he shot with a fellow film studies major, about the dangers of pornography. *Photo by Joe Whiteside/Daily Record*

ELLENSBURG — Central Washington University is helping earnest young auteurs sharpen their cinematic eyes.

Before he came to college, senior film student Brandon Wasserburger had always been tinkering around with cameras. While at CWU, he's made films about topics as varied as Hurricane Katrina, the dangers of pornography and a 97-year-old local woman named Margaret.

"These are the stories I like to tell," Wasserburger said.

He's up front in acknowledging the power that visual media can have.

It's an influence he hopes to use to show people a different side of life, religion or addiction.

"It's important to entertain your audience in order to engage them, but you need some substance," Wasserburger said.

He pointed to the 2003 documentary, "Invisible Children," as an example of this kind of purposeful filmmaking. The film depicts the plight of child soldiers in Uganda, and was part of a recent increase in awareness worldwide about the decades-long civil war that raged there.

"That film changed Uganda," Wasserburger said. "If I could make films that could do that..."

For years, film-focused students pursued individual studies majors, but starting this year, CWU began offering a dedicated film degree. The program lets them concentrate on either film production or criticism.

"The power of this type of storytelling is its ability to connect emotionally with the audience," said CWU professor Michael Ogden, director of the film and video studies program. "Because we are such a visually-oriented culture, there is something in our DNA that makes us want to interact with a visual story, well told."



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Junior film student Noah Layton feels most at home behind the camera, helping craft the shots through the art of cinematography. He's collaborated recently with Wasserburger.

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"It's huge, it's what determines what the overall look is going to be," he said. "I think that's what I'm best at."

Referencing the visual style of famed Italian director Sergio Leone, Layton sees the Roman's work — "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," for example — as an inspirational artistic benchmark. His goal is to work as a cinematographer on major motion pictures.

But there's a definite technical side to filmmaking. Software, tutorials and books dot Layton's workstation in his Stephens-Whitney campus apartment. Your education is what you make of it, he said, and admitted with a smile that it's hard sometimes to get out and see very many movies.

"I'm learning a lot," Layton said.

Learning through experience allowed senior Steven Schultz the chance to see what he's best at. During a tough moment on a shoot last year, the senior film major found that persistence is perhaps one of the best talents to cultivate.

While at the ocean, his primary camera was swamped in a wave, ruining it. Rather than give up, he went with a backup that he happened to bring and soldiered on. The end result maybe wasn't what he had originally envisioned, but he got the job done, he said.

"Really, when you learn, it's when you fail," Schultz said. "If you can't accept failure, don't be a filmmaker."

But that experience has let him realize where some of his strengths lie as well. He recently collaborated with punk band MxPx, and has some more music video work lined up in the near future. Music videos offer him the kind of expressive tools and visual effects he can use to make an impact on the audience, he said.

"You're completely free to do whatever you want as a director," Schultz said. "It doesn't always work, but when it does, it's a very emotional experience."

Through the Internet, increasingly inexpensive equipment and Web sites such as youtube.com, the possibilities to make a name for yourself have grown, he said.

"It doesn't even matter what camera you have," Schultz said, "what matters is who you are and the ability you have to make your ideas real."

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