

DC Film Office Speakeasy Shorts Interview

Leslie Green: Hello, and thank you for joining us at Reel Talk with Film DC. I'm Leslie Green, Senior Communications Manager at DC Office of Motion Picture and Television Development, also known as the DC film office. We have here today Jon Gann, who's the executive director of the DC Film Alliance, and Amy Saidman, who's the artistic executive director of Speakeasy DC. They're here to talk to us about a very unique film competition our organizations have partnered on and it will combine film making with the art of storytelling.

But before we get into that, let's talk a little bit about your respective organizations. John, can you talk a little bit about DC Film Alliance and what you guys do there?

Jon Gann: The DC Film Alliance works to make sure that all film makers in the DC Metro region have the resources they need to make films, whether it's industrial films, commercial, personal films, stuff for festivals, whatever. We want to make sure that their resources are available. Our website has a great Twitter feed with job postings and events listed all day long. We have information about all the screening venues in town that you can download easily. We help you figure out who to talk at the different permitting offices, if you need permits. We have some other educational components throughout the year to help teach film makers better practices.

Leslie: I know that you also run DC Shorts, which you just completed last month. Tell us a little bit about what DC Shorts does.

Jon: The Film Alliance sponsors the DC Shorts Film Festival, which is now the largest short film event on the East Coast. Last month, we showed 140 films from 27 countries. We had more than 85 film makers show up from around the world, from as far away as Australia and Argentina, which is great. About 8300 audience people, members came to watch the 18 different showcases over the course of 11 days. It was a lot of fun, it grows every year, and we're slated for next year, which will be our 10th year, and we're hopefully going to expand even more. We'll see how that goes.

Leslie: Very cool, congratulations.

Jon: Thank you.

Leslie: It's awesome. Just talk a little bit about some of the projects that you're working on currently and maybe for the 2013 year.

Jon: We're reorganizing our group a bit and branding more things under the DC Shorts moniker since people know what DC Shorts is. We have, of course, the Speakeasy Shorts coming up next month. We're going to be doing some events in February, probably, we're still working on that one. But our big May event will be DC Shorts Laughs, which is when we show some of our funniest films and have live standup comedians in between the films. That always does very well, people like that.

We're working on a project for March called Mentors, which would be weekend long workshops for film makers of every skill level to better learn their craft. One weekend would be in writing, in storytelling, one weekend will be on producing and directing. Another one can be on camera equipment, and one's going to be on post production. We're hoping that we have lots of people should sign up for those.

Those are going to be taught by area film makers as well as people we're bringing in from around the country.

Leslie: Amy, tell us about Speakeasy. What do you do there?

Amy Saidman: Speakeasy DC is dedicated to the art of autobiographical story performance. What that means is we have about 25 performances a year. In those, there's always a theme and about 8 to 10 people get up on stage and they tell their true stories. In addition, we have a whole bunch of training opportunities. Anybody who gets up on our stage goes through coaching or rehearsals. But for that, we also have classes, we have a five week class we call Storytelling 101. You do three hours for four weeks and then on your fifth week you get to do a student showcase.

We have a one day class we call "Boot Camp." We have other levels of classes and other one on one coaching opportunities and things like that. We're really dedicated to taking anybody. Taking the grassroots and saying, "If you have a story..."

Maybe you don't even know that you have a story but you want to tell your story, whether it's on stage like ours, in front of a couple hundred people, or it's just at work, or you're a teacher, or whatever you're doing. An advocate.

We'll help you take your array of thoughts and pull them together so it's compelling, it's entertaining, and has a narrative arc. That's what we do.

Leslie: That's really cool. How long have you been around?

Amy: This program started in 1997. We actually have a monthly show on the second Tuesday of every month. That's been going on since 1997. Since then, we've added all these other things, these partnerships with DC Shorts we're super excited about. We've been in INTERSECTIONS several years now. We do an annual show at Sixth And I, we call "My So-Called Jewish Life." That's during Hanukah. It will be our fourth year of that. We used to do the French festival. We try to add these things on. We just did a partnership with Washington Improv Theater. We keep ourselves busy connecting with other organizations and following the holidays. "Sucker for Love." We'll be in our sixth year doing a Valentine's show and things like that.

Leslie: You guys clearly have teamed up for this film competition. First of all, before we go to the film competition, I know you guys have worked together in the past, maybe over the past couple years or so. How did you guys link up?

Jon: We met through some mutual friends. We met because we were both arts leaders and we were kind of in the same boat all the time. I think that we just became friends over the years.

Amy: Yeah.

Jon: I know I've always wanted to work with Amy.

Amy: I think it also unfolded, really, because we do an annual Top Shelf, which is the best stories of the year. We have a panel of judges that we take from outside of the community so they can be unbiased. And so, we invited Jon to be part of that panel last year. And then, from that, I know he saw one story. He was like, "I want to make a film for that story."

Jon: There was one story that I really loved. I talked to the filmmaker and we negotiated how we could write a script about it because I really thought it was...It played in my head like a beautiful little short film. I was too busy to actually make it. I think that's the one time like..."You know, you guys have these great stories. They're fun to watch in front of an audience but wouldn't they be great to watch in front of bigger audiences where you don't need the storyteller, necessarily."

Amy: Yeah, and it sort of made my wheels turn, too, thinking this will be an awesome little collaboration. Why not? Also, I will say this, too. I've done the 48 hour film festival a couple times. It's hard on the spot...I think one of the biggest problems with a lot of those films is they don't really always have a fully developed story. There is not a clear beginning, middle, and end. I thought, "Well, maybe the storytellers and the art that we do, we can bring something to the table for these filmmakers, and we'll see." But that was another thing that I think drew us to one another.

Jon: Yeah, I agree. I've been participating and I've won 48 Hour a few times, and Mark is a dear friend. As much as I love the competition, I think that storytelling is one thing that the films lack a lot of. And so, I thought maybe if we gave them a story, they'd at least have something to start with and hopefully create something from there.

Leslie: Tell us about the film competition. What is the premise behind it? How do people participate? Give us the details?

Jon: Well, it's a two Friday night event. The first Friday night is the storytelling...you talk about the storytelling.

Amy: There will be eight stories told live. Actually, one might be a video. The film teams will be in the audience, but they have not heard the story. They'll be hearing it for the first time and then we'll send them off. Then you can speak more about what they're going to do...

Jon: Right. If they are in the second show...we're giving them space where they can write, and they're going to sit down with the storytellers and hopefully write out their stories and shoot. They'll have five days to shoot the film. Then they have to hand it back to us by that next Wednesday so we can have time to string them together. On Friday night, the 16th, we will show them in front of the audience for the first time. No one will have seen them until then. We will have some judging from the audience as well as a jury. The overall winner will win \$1,000 for the film team and \$250 for the storyteller. We're probably going to have two other awards, one for the film that is most creatively told as a story.

Maybe the story was a horror movie but they tell it as a comedy. Someone mixes the genres up. And then we're going to have another award for the one that is most true to the story, which I think is actually going to be the most difficult one of all. Because I think the one thing that we've

discovered while doing this is I thought this was going to be so easy. "Amy's got hundreds of stories and it will be easy to pick eight stories."

It was really difficult because I realized that storytelling, because it's so personal and autobiographical, a lot of the stories, they are fabulous tales, but there is nothing visual about them. About self-discovery, and self-discovery doesn't show well up on a screen. It was really hard trying to find eight stories that really worked well.

Amy: The other thing I think we didn't think about also is with storytelling we can go anywhere. The flipside of that problem is if it was a story about being on an African safari or in the middle of the White House garden, or whatever, we can't go there in film, or at least on our budgets. I think two sides. We encourage in storytelling that you share a lot of your internal thoughts. And that doesn't always play so well on a screen. So, a couple of challenges.

Leslie: Yeah, that was one my questions. How'd you go about choosing the stories to select for this particular competition?

Jon: We watched dozens. Probably close to 100 stories to see which ones we could pick. Part of it also was for this inaugural competition, we also wanted to pick film teams. I wanted film teams of people I knew in the district who made good films. We wanted the inaugural batch to be of a certain quality. And so, knowing the levels of what each of these filmmakers is good at. Finding stories that sort of fit their personality was another big issue of it, too. Because like, "Well, this is a great story, but I don't have a filmmaker who could possibly make this film." That was another big issue.

Amy: In the end, I think we picked ones that have simple, doable locations and there are some action based that, if nothing else. It, at least, is a good jumping off point for someone to be creative with visually. Because we think that there's some that might be different than the actual story but still might be a good sort of marriage between the two anyway.

Leslie: What do you think it's going to take for a filmmaker to actually win this competition? What are you guys looking for in a winner?

Jon: I don't know. We haven't really come up with the criteria. We're still working on the jury. You want to be on the jury?

Leslie: No. [laughter]

Leslie: I will definitely be there, though.

Jon: For me, I've always thought that the focus of a short film should be the storytelling. Amy works on the ability to tell a story in front of a group of people in a public setting. To me, filmmaking is storytelling to the masses through imagery. It's visual storytelling. If you can combine those two into a really wonderful-to-watch product, I think it's great. I think it's about the entertainment value. It's about being true to what that story is really about.

Amy: I also think that that film will stand out. Is it well scripted? Is it good acting? Is the technical lighting, sound, editing, is that strong? I feel like the strengths will stand out.

Jon: We picked teams that have a great deal of skill level. They can definitely bring it to this competition.

Leslie: Who should come to these events on November 9th and November 16th? Why do they have to be there?

Jon: Everyone.

Amy: Everyone who has the capacity to get there.

Jon: I think there's something for everything. Even in the stories, they're so varied. There's something for everyone. Even for people who have been patrons of Speakeasy DC in the past and have maybe heard some of these stories before, to hear them again is always unique. Some of the stories have been worked over so they'd be a little more cinematic so that they maybe could hear a slightly different version of that story. The fact that you can come one Friday night and then come back a second Friday night and actually see these films. I think that second Friday night is going to be fascinating. I think, though, that if you don't come to the first one, you might lose something because I think knowing, seeing both parts of it, I think, is a big part of it, which is why we have a discounted ticket if you buy both Fridays.

Amy: Yeah, I think there's a definite appeal for the storytelling community. I know my storytellers are so excited, they're so excited. There's, I think, an appeal for the film community. It's a challenge, and I think that's where creativity blossoms, when you're given some parameters, some constraints and you have to try something new. I think that'll be exciting. Also, I think DC's a great place for that kind of experimentation. For instance, you have the Source theater that does these mashups where they pick a variety of artists with different artistic backgrounds and they just have to figure something out. I think it's a little bit like a mashup.

I think, just seeing, there's a lot of people in this area that just love to see that creative process and to see what comes out of it. The good, bad and the ugly, whatever it is, it's just being part of that process. The effort, the experimentation and the exploration, I think, is exciting.

Leslie: How can someone register to attend the event? Or the events, I should say.

Jon: You can go to dcshorts.com and it's right there on the home page, you can click through to the page about the Speakeasy Shorts. Click through to tickets, I think tickets are what? \$15 a night?

Amy: Yeah, it's 20 for a single ticket for one night and 30 for both, so if you go to both, it's 15 each.

Leslie: Anything more you want to share?

Amy: I will just say if you do want to know more about other programs at Speakeasy DC, you can go to speakeasydc.com. There's lots going on.

Jon: I think that for film makers, especially budding film makers who might have issues with storytelling and writing, to be involved in the storytelling community, I think, is really important. If nothing else, it teaches you the skills of how to tell a story, what a proper story arc is and how to tell that and do real character development.

Amy: Yeah, thanks for that pitch, we actually have had some film makers and I've done some presentations for Thoughts in Progress and Stone Soup Films and stuff like that. Really break down the pieces of the sort, what is a story really, a narrative story, in particular. What do you need to have that build, that tension, that emotional connection, all those things that you really want. It is nice, yeah.

Leslie: Thank you again, Amy and Jon, for joining us today. Thank you, listeners, for joining us for another segment of Reel Talk with Film DC. We look forward to seeing you at Speakeasy Shorts on November 9th. Please be sure to follow us on Twitter at DCFilmOffice, like us at Facebook at facebook.com/filmdc. Check us out on the web at film.dc.gov. Once again, this is Leslie Green with Reel Talk with Film DC.

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