

Front page of
The Oregonian
March 1, 2007



Two-wheeled sitcom might have legs

"Web-isode" - "The Bicyclist" a new show with a uniquely Portland flavor, is coming today to a computer screen near you

Thursday, March 01, 2007

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Fuse Portland's thriving cycling scene with its tech-savvy citizenry and a growing covey of young creatives, including a burgeoning indie-film scene, and what do you get?

How about a sitcom with an ensemble cast set against PDX's unchained bike culture?

Sure enough, "The Bicyclist" debuts on the small screen today.

But squeeze the brakes before you program the TiVo. Portland independent filmmakers Sharon and Carl Jameson haven't landed a spot on network TV. The show's going straight to blip.tv and Revver, Web sites that pay video creators based on number of viewers.

In keeping with the show's ever-spinning nature, the Jamesons haven't quite figured out how to describe their new comedy series. "Friends" on bikes, he says. She cringed. "Well," she offered, "a gritty version of 'Friends.' More Portland than Hollywood."

The Jamesons, who co-wrote and directed "The Bicyclist," pay the bills with marketing videos for clients such as the Western Culinary Institute and Kaiser Permanente.

But last summer, Carl Jameson won directing and editing awards for "Tooth and Nail," an eight-minute mockumentary about a vampire running for state Senate. Carl, a 45-year-old fascinated with the rise of Portland's bicycle culture, started mulling a shift to quick, creative flicks. "It's fun to shoot video, and it's fun to ride bikes in Portland," he says. "Why not put the two together?"

A dozen video sites now allow filmmakers to post their work in exchange for a cut of advertising revenue. With the Internet, the Jamesons can post a Web episode and possibly begin making money days after it's shot. Shopping a script around to television studios would likely take months, without generating a dime.

Blip.tv already hosts hundreds of Web-based series, paying as much as \$15 for every 1,000 views. Revver sends money to producers whenever a viewer clicks on an ad.

Many viewers tune in on work computers during breaks or download episodes for their iPods from iTunes, which has a syndication agreement with blip.tv. Some video junkies watch their computers screens more than their TVs.

Most videos are snippets, lasting five minutes or less. The first episode of "The Bicyclist" clocks in at under four. Carl Jameson envisions serial shorts, one episode every two weeks, each ending with a cliffhanger.

Popular blip.tv shows such as "Alive in Baghdad," an indie news magazine reported by Iraqis, attract specific advertisers and bank 50 percent of ad profits. Some content creators are earning as much as \$10,000 a month, says Mike Hudack, CEO of blip.tv. Meanwhile, he says, the creators of the comic series "Goodnight Burbank" have a deal to develop an original series for HBO.

"This is where television is going," Hudack says. "We probably have 100 shows on the blip right now, shows that I would categorize as hip, well-filmed, well-produced, well-acted, that are on the road to real success."

In Portland, bikes aren't just about transportation. Midnight mystery rides, bike polo, Zoobombers rocketing down the West Hills, bike breakfasts on city bridges -- the range of bike activities opens a multitude of sitcom possibilities.

Despite its high production values, "The Bicyclist" pilot has its share of wooden acting and groaner lines ("Every day's a good day for a bike ride," declares an earnest cyclist rolling through a downtown downpour). A huge benefit of the online medium, Carl says, is the ability to read what viewers are saying about the show, gauge what's working and tune up the next show accordingly.

"The Bicyclist" unfolds before the eyes of Conrad Miller, a young creative transplant from Middleton, Wis., played by Portland actor Jayme Hall.

Jobless despite his English degree, Miller gets by as a bike mechanic and finds himself surrounded by a host of eccentrics, from the bike deliveryman with superpowers (constantly doing battle with the faceless "SUV Demon") to the Super Deluxe Guy, who rolls through the city on high-priced gear and in Spandex that's more than a little tight.

Carl admits that some of the characters are drawn from his own experiences. The SUV Demon was inspired by the driver of a red pickup who nearly ran Carl off the road as he biked in the Columbia Gorge a couple of years ago. He admits that he made the situation worse by flashing an obscene gesture.

More than 50 actors, some from as far away as Olympia, answered the Jamesons' Craigslist casting call. Nine of them signed contracts for 24 episodes.

Portland actress Elle Poindexter, who plays a twentysomething bike mechanic aspiring to design her own clothing line, concedes that the pay -- \$50 a day -- isn't great. Last weekend, she made \$100 shooting three episodes over two days. "But this is something I've never done," says Poindexter, who holds a day job as an administrative assistant in Lake Oswego. "A Web-isode. I guess that's what we're calling it. I see a lot of my friends, my bike friends, in the script." Poindexter, who just wrapped up a series of roles in dramatic plays, says the opportunity to co-star in a comedy attracted her.

The episodes are produced on a handlebar-tape budget of \$1,500 each, drawn from the Jamesons' personal savings. Despite their independent spirit, the Jamesons admit they wouldn't turn down a TV mega-deal.

Robby Fenstermaker, owner of the Recyclery in Southeast Portland, offered his shop as a set for the series. He loved the concept. "They said they were filming an online show about the subculture of Portland bicycling," he says. "I thought it was awesome. Most of the stuff I watch, I watch on the Web. I don't even own a TV."

What if the series eventually rolls onto television screens? That's cool, too, Fenstermaker says. "I think a lot of people still watch television."

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