

Section: SoundLife

Life into Limbo: Real-life tragedy becomes comedy

NIKI SULLIVAN; *The News Tribune*

Joe Rosati hit a new low when his mother wrote his name on his toothbrush. He was 33.

It wasn't just that. There was also the failed business, Ruston's Shoboat; the \$60,000 debt from trying to keep the business afloat; the impending bankruptcy filing; and, of course, moving back in with his parents in the first place.

But a grown man having his name written in permanent marker on his Sonicare detachable head so his mother and sister wouldn't confuse it with theirs?

Not funny.

At least not until nearly two years later, when Rosati and his friends used the scene in "Limbo," a semi-autobiographical movie shot in Tacoma and the surrounding area.

The 90-minute comedy, which is an exaggerated version of Rosati's dark days, premiered at Jazzbones in Tacoma the first weekend of February to a packed house. More showings are in the works for March, and Rosati and his partners plan to spend the remainder of the year promoting the movie and entering it in film festivals.

Rosati's breakdown – failed business, bankruptcy and unemployment – wasn't just the inspiration for the movie; it's the reason he got into making movies.

All the downtime of unemployment forced him to examine what he wanted to do with his life.

"I figured ... I have to start over, so I might as well pick out something I can enjoy," he said.

He'd been a counselor at an outdoor camp for at-risk teens in Idaho and a club owner, but neither of those careers seemed to be his calling.

Acting intrigued him, so he enrolled in a class at Pierce College.

He was initially anxious about how a 33-year-old community college student would fare, but he found the classes therapeutic.

"You have to be very vulnerable and open yourself up (to act), and I needed that," Rosati said.

Later that term, he met Mike Winfrey, a now-23-year-old Tacoma native who has dreamed of making movies since first grade.

The more he got to know Rosati, Winfrey said, and hear his tales of woe, the more he saw a feature-length comedy taking shape.

Along with friends and fellow Pierce College students Nick Snapp and Ben Warner, both of Tacoma, they agreed to make the bold jump to feature-length filmmaking.

There was just one small chink in the chain: The most experience any of them had with making a feature-length movie was Rosati, who was an extra in a brief scene in the 1983 movie “The Prodigal.” When he was 11.

Oh, and their budget was about \$2,000 – beyond paltry for a feature-length movie, even by indie standards.

They didn’t let it deter them. Instead, they used Rosati’s ties in Tacoma’s bar and restaurant scene to set up some shots, and they solicited classmates and friends for roles, essentially exchanging recognition in the credits for the actors’ services.

They set off with one miniDV camera, a force of more than 50 volunteer actors and dozens of Tacoma-area scenes.

At times it seemed like a pipe dream, but whenever Rosati, Winfrey, Snapp or Warner became discouraged, things seemed to fall in line.

They needed a lawyer to make sure the work-for-credits contracts were legally sound and ... what do you know ... Rosati ran into an acquaintance, who happened to be studying media law, while in line at Tacos Guaymas.

In their last chance to shoot a scene at the Puyallup Spring Fair, the rain stopped and “the sky opened up for 10 minutes right when we were on the roller coaster,” Rosati said.

“It really felt like there was some other force helping us to get off the ground and get this completed,” Rosati said.

Once the shooting was complete, Snapp, the movie’s primary editor, had about three months to put things together.

Their goal was to have the movie done by Feb. 1, the deadline for the Seattle International Film Festival, and Snapp finished just in time for Rosati to drive the movie to Seattle and drop it off.

The next night the movie premiered at Jazzbones to a crowd of about 200 people.

Winfrey described his experience watching the movie on the big screen for the first time.

“I was nervous until somebody laughed when they were supposed to,” he said.

The foursome – who formed New Empire Productions – are working on booking more showings for March.

And while Snapp, 22, said they plan to spend some time catching up on everything they pushed to the side during the last two years of work, they are also committed to spending the year promoting “Limbo.”

After that?

“This will not be the last thing to come from New Empire; this is our first step,” Snapp said in an e-mail.

Regardless of how the movie fares, the group was able to do something with the movie that Rosati had tried to do with The Shoboat – show off Tacoma’s trendy, artistic side.

“The movie showcases Tacoma, really shows it off,” Rosati said.

On the Web

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Making a film on the cheap

Cast Friends: Enlist friends, classmates and family members as actors. Ask them to work for nothing in exchange for the possibility of becoming the next indie movie star, a la Jon Heder in “Napoleon Dynamite.”

Be Flexible: If real life throws a wrench in your plans, which it will, go with the flow. In “Limbo,” several scenes were improvised or changed because of circumstances outside of the budget.

Work Connections: Joe Rosati’s contacts from his days as a business owner helped him secure shooting locations at Tacoma’s restaurants, bars and coffee shops.

Stick with what you know: Write about what you know and shoot where you’re at, Rosati said. Not only will it make for a better movie, it will be cheaper than an on-scene shoot in Katmandu.

Gotta love movies: “Just love filmmaking so much that nothing else matters. If you put your all into it and not let anyone say ‘You’re no good,’ then you will get somewhere,” Mike Winfrey said.

Gotta Love technology: “All you really need is a PC, editing software and a digital camera,” Nick Snapp said. Basic editing software programs are available for as little as \$20.

Start small: All four partners had experience making short digital movies before throwing themselves into “Limbo.” It’s practical and will give you an idea of what you’re getting into.

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