



DEAR ABBY

Man's torn after finding out his fiancée works as a paid escort: she sees nothing wrong with it, but he does. Is there any compromise that can be made?

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Director of photography Lon Stratton (left) mans the camera as Carrie LeZotte directs "The Stretch Marks," which is being produced by LeZotte's One of Us Films.

Women. *behind* the camera

Filmmaker wants to show females can make great movies, too

By SHANNON E. PAUL
Special to The Oakland Press

It's no secret that Oscar — and the rest of his filmmaking buddies — have always preferred the company of men. Movie-making has always been a male-dominated art form, and Carrie LeZotte is painfully aware of how women and women's issues are generally sidelined in the film industry.

"No woman has ever won the Oscar for best director, and only three have been nominated in the Academy's history," says the Franklin-based filmmaker. "The statistics don't improve much when you look at roles like producer, editor, cinematographer, or pretty much any position that works behind the scenes."

If you go

Lunafest takes place 4 p.m. Sunday at the Main Art Theatre, 11 Mile at Main Street in Royal Oak. The event will feature nine short films made by women, plus a raffle. Admission is \$15, with proceeds benefiting One of Us Films' efforts to produce the independent film "The Stretch Marks." Call (313) 300-8233 or visit www.lunabar.com.

Unlike other film production companies, LeZotte's One of Us Films is a nonprofit organization — one that, she says, recognizes the importance of community involvement in the arts and encourages exploration of social issues through

narrative film of importance to women.

The group's latest project, a feature-length film called "The Stretch Marks," is currently in pre-production. It's scheduled to begin shooting later this year after the necessary organizing and fund-raising is completed.

The film is about a group of 40-something moms who form a rock band after one of them is diagnosed with breast cancer. Ann Arbor resident Sara Snyder wrote the screenplay and local singer-songwriter Jill Jack stars in it, along with her daughter.

"Men in the film industry just don't seem to be interested in bringing this type of story to production," LeZotte, 36, explains. "Although the issues that the movie deals with impact men as well, this is a story that deals very honestly with relationships between women when one of them is faced with something like breast cancer."

Variety of volunteers

The phenomenon of male dominance in the film industry has been dubbed the "Celluloid Ceiling" by Martha Lauzen, a San Diego State

University professor whose work includes numerous studies on the lack of women in behind-the-scenes roles in the film industry.

The fact that LeZotte's latest project will include women in almost every facet of production is a big draw for local talent. Kim Simms of Royal Oak is the cinematographer for LeZotte's project, and has a résumé that includes production and administrative roles in features including "Polish Wedding" and "Hoffa," in addition to music videos for Ozzy Osbourne, Kid Rock, the Cure and Aaliyah.

"Usually in movies women are such a small percentage of the crew," Simms, 41, says, "so it's nice — just being able to work with a group of mostly women."

Part of what may keep women out of the filmmaking enterprise altogether is the cost associated with producing a movie. According to the Motion Picture Association of America, the average cost in 2005 to make and market a feature film rated by the MPAA was \$96.2 million.

Granted, that statistic includes blockbuster films that spend millions on special effects, but according to LeZotte, it's common for low-budget, independent films to

WOMEN

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run in excess of \$1 million.

One of the ways that LeZotte intends to cut costs is through the help of volunteers.

"I've been delighted by the amount of support that this project has already generated," she says.

"Most of the people involved, from camera operators to people who have agreed to help with fund-raising, have been really inspired by this script. Because all of these people are genuinely vested in bringing this story to life, our budget is well below the \$1 million mark."

Community matters

And, as a nonprofit group, the filmmakers intend to seek support from philanthropists and members of the community, a change from the typical venture capitalists that front money to film projects in hopes of receiving a return on their investment.

"Films in general are made to make money," LeZotte says. "This project is for the community, not for commerce, and not just for the artists."

The film's first major fund-raising event will be a film festival, featuring works made by independent women filmmakers. Lunafest — a national traveling festival of women's short films that's named for the event's sponsor,

LunaBar — is set for March 4 at the Main Art Theatre in Royal Oak, and LeZotte says it "will be the first major barometer of our ability as a team to get this project off the ground."

So far, everyone involved is optimistic — among them, Elizabeth Colburn, an Ann Arbor makeup artist who's worked on "8 Mile," "The Island" and "Escanaba in da Moonlight."

"Fund-raising is always the most difficult aspect of making a film, nonprofit or otherwise," Colburn says. "It's just so expensive, but if anyone can do this, it's Carrie."

Filmmaking is a labor of

love for LeZotte, who works as the manager of video communications for Comeria.

"I love that I am able to use my skills as a director in a professional capacity," she says, "but I still feel the need to express myself as a creative person outside of the work environment."

"Somehow, (LeZotte) has managed to assemble a group of highly intelligent women together that all have day jobs and families," Colburn says, "and yet, they are all committed to seeing this thing through — to make it a full-fledged film project. It's just remarkable."

Making it matter

LeZotte's past projects as a director include several short independent films and fund-raising pieces including a recent video project for Boys Hope Girls Hope Detroit, a group that provides residential and educational support for at-risk youth. She and Simms previously collaborated on "Small Beautiful Hands," a short film produced by One of Us Films that deals with one woman's ability to overcome childhood sexual abuse. Simms looks forward to the opportunity to work with LeZotte again on "The Stretch Marks."

"It's an important script," Simms says, "and I like working with Carrie. It seems like a great opportunity to be able to put this story out there — especially when there are so many ugly stories being told. This is a story that is worth telling."

Many of those involved in the project are touched by the script's treatment of breast cancer. Colburn sees the film's potential for helping people cope with illness.

"Something like breast cancer doesn't just hit you physically or intellectually," she says. "It hits many levels of a person's existence. This script shows that there are many different ways that people experience and cope with illness, and that they are all right."

"I have a lot of experience as a director for other types of film projects," LeZotte says, "but I chose this story specifically for my feature debut, because I believe that this is the kind of movie that lets people know that they are not alone in their experience."

On the Net

www.oneofusfilms.org