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Out-of-the-mainstream films are showcased at the Kalamazoo Independent Film Festival

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE**

Immigrants working as therapy bunnies. Death-metal bands singing about science-fiction authors. Heaven and mimes. And a disturbingly personal look at a serial killer.

All those subjects and more will be covered at 24 frames per second at the Kalamazoo Independent Film Festival, being held today through Sunday at the Whole Art Theater.

Kevin Park put together the festival partly as a fund-raiser for the Whole Art; he's a board member and an actor at the theater. "But my own personal goal is to test the waters to see if a fully incorporated film festival could exist in Kalamazoo," he said.

There are film festivals in Saugatuck, Muskegon, East Lansing, Brighton, Mount Pleasant and Ann Arbor, and Kalamazoo has had its festivals of shorts and animation. But judging by the positive feedback he's been getting, Park said the town is ready for its own independent film festival.

This is "the halfway house of independent films," he said, Kalamazoo being halfway between Chicago and Detroit, two sources for low-budget experimental and non-mainstream flicks. Kalamazoo has its own filmmakers, whose work -- "Dearest Mommy," "Smith The Gardener," "Trigger," "Mad At The World," "Abductees," "Swarm and Destroy" and "Questions of Protest" -- will take up much of the festival's schedule.

It started with 'Strangelove'

But it takes more than just local talent and support to get something like this off the ground: A touch of immersive fanaticism helps. Park, a 23-year-old Kalamazoo native and Stryker service technician, said he's a film fan from way back.

"I had 'Young Frankenstein' memorized by the time I was 8," he said. "I didn't get all the jokes, but I definitely knew it verbatim."

One night around that time of his life, Park snuck down to the TV as his parents slept "to see what cable TV was all about."

Flipping around the stations, he landed on "Dr. Strangelove," Stanley Kubrick's dark 1964 comedy about nuclear annihilation. The scene in which Slim Pickens rides an A-bomb like a cowboy as it descends on Soviet soil, Park said, was the moment he became hooked on non-mainstream movies.

"I thought it was just unbelievable, something I'd never seen before. And it became my mission to search for movies like that," he said.

Park ended up writing for the non-mainstream Film Threat magazine, for which he covered both the 2001 Toronto International Film Festival and, concurrently, the Planet Indie Film Festival.

With no formal training and just a portion of his video camera manual read, Park shot his first short, "Abductees," which won the grand jury prize and best short documentary award in February at the Western Film Society's Kalamazoo Short Film and Video Festival. It also will be shown at his festival.

Bunnies and 'Bloodhag'

Park is drawn towards unusual movies, the kind that are often difficult to sum up in a sentence. One could say that "American Wedding" is "American Pie" at a wedding, or "My Boss's Daughter" is "American Pie" with the boss's daughter, and potential audiences understand. But something like "Dr. Strangelove" -- Cold War paranoia leads to accidental nuclear war and dark comedy -- could sound intimidating to some.

Not to Parks. One of his favorite films and one of the highlights of the festival can't really be summed up in a sentence. It's Mia Trachinger's 2000 feature "Bunny," in which an immigrant couple leave their war-torn country for America and land jobs as "therapy bunnies." They dress as fuzzy rabbits and try to comfort strangers on the sidewalks of L.A.

It's partly funny, partly sad. The strangeness of the job conveys to the audience the immigrants' confusion in their new home.

Another Park favorite is "Up Down," an experimental film from Detroit filmmaker Julie Meitz.

"I'm not a large fan of experimental film, but she sent it in, and I thought it was great," said Park, who could only sum it up by saying, "It's like heaven with mimes."

Then there's "Much Ado," which Park describes in a way that only Kalamazoo residents familiar with a local playwright, actor, Shakespeare aficionado and cable access star might get. The film, about a group of filmmakers trying to shoot a "new-wave" version of Shakespeare, "kind of has a Chuck Bentley undertone to it," he said.

But Park's truly personal favorite, the one that makes him laugh just at the mention of its title, is the documentary short "Bloodhag."

"It's a real band called Bloodhag, and they were doing a tour of Puget Sound public libraries in Washington. And they play really short, quick death-metal songs about science-fiction authors," Park said. "I laugh every time I watch it."

The film is subtitled "The Faster You Go Deaf, The More Time You Have To Read."