



Screen Angst

Judging the DC Shorts Festival means knowing you'll be overruled.

By Sam Kean

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When I tell people I judged films for this year's DC Shorts Film Festival, their first reaction is, "Cool!" Their second reaction is more circumspect. I don't own a television. Or any movies. Why was I qualified to judge?

I wasn't. They let me anyway.

May 5

I came to critique movies. Instead, I've got my arms tucked under my shoulders like chicken wings, playing paper-rock-scissors with strangers.

This is "egg-chicken-monster," one of numerous icebreakers that festival director Jon Gann has us judges play. We're in a black-walled room that looks like an experimental theater space and doubles as Gann's foyer; he lives above the room in a condo on G Street NW. We've gathered to allow Gann to imprint his vision of cinema on us, the way wolf mothers imprint their young. I don't mean this pejoratively, because Gann certainly knows films. But he runs this festival autocratically. DC Shorts "interns" pretty much just collect paper and stack chairs. And while we judges—who merely had to send e-mails to qualify to judge—review films first, the festival lineup is an unfurling of Gann's vision.

Gann wears a Vandyke beard, has a rotund belly, and styles his hair in a studiously gelled mess. He soon relates to us the tale of how he founded DC Shorts.

"I used to be a graphic designer, but I hated my clients," he begins. So he enrolled at the New York Film Academy and made a GLBT film, *Pezheads*, that played all the big GLBT festivals. But other festivals sucked, he decided. He met few directors and had to pay for amenities. DC Shorts provides a different experience: Directors get free lodging and meals; even crappy, rejected entries get real feedback (from, um, real judges) on ways to improve their films. DC Shorts truly celebrates film and filmmakers.

Of course, there's another side. Almost first thing, Gann informs us, "Film festivals are all about money."

After lunch, we split into teams of three judges. Gann passes out scoring sheets on how to rate films on content, style, originality, and technical acumen. For practice, he's going to show three example films from last year, then tell us what to think about each.

First is *A Period Piece*, a musical about a girl's menarche. Aside from feeling squirmy, I'm gun-shy: I don't want to look stupid and grade it low. Eventually, my group rates it 63 out of 100. Reassuringly, as Gann calls on other groups, we hear lots of 60s—except for the pair of middle-aged women behind me. Ninety-six.

Gann giggles, but it's a teachable moment. "You'll see lots of films like this," he explains. "It's one joke and goes on too long." One judge suggests the lighting was "hot." Gann nearly applauds. "Good! That's something helpful to tell them. They need to know that." I make a note to watch for heat.

The second film is about bicycle messengers. Despite what one judge called heavy-handed "Nat. Geo. narration"—a big insult, apparently; I heard *oooohs* from other judges—this five-minute short rules. There's humor, scary traffic shots, a near-fight. My group rates it high. One brilliant moment starts on a skyscraper ledge and swoops down to the street like a peregrine falcon.

Gann sums up our feelings: "The first time I saw that, I was like, 'Frickin' cool, man!'" He rewound it "15 times" and called the directors to discuss how the hell they shot that.

Then the other shoe falls. The bike-messenger film got cut from the festival last year. When someone asks why, Gann expounds on filling pre-defined slots for each shorts screening: animated films, women's films (Luna is a sponsor, after all), and especially local films, which equal crowds, which equal money. Gann later calls it a "pu pu platter" lineup. The bike film didn't fit a slot, he says. I don't get it, but it's another lesson.

I learned yet another lesson watching *Davy & Stu*. In this movie, two gay Scottish teenagers meet in a bog, wrestle homoerotically, blather on about some swamp monster called "Jenny Green Tooth"—and despite about a million chances, never frickin' kiss and get it over with. Still, the film looks gorgeous. This buoys my team's score to average. Other teams corroborate this. Except for the middle-aged women. Nineteen.

We giggle. Gann reddens. Lips terse, he threatens us: "No film deserves a 19. I will personally watch any movie that scores below a 30."

With that, orientation ends. My group picks up 31 DVDs and—after making sure, per Gann's instructions, that we know no directors in our stack, to avoid conflicts of interest—agrees to meet next Sunday at one judge's home.

May 13

Shorts may take months to film, but Gann has instructed us to spend only two minutes scoring any entry. And if we don't like how the scores for content, style, originality, and technical acumen add up, we should manipulate the total up or down, he says, to match our feelings.

Except my team's unsure about its feelings. We've lost our (rather Gann's) confidence in one week. Our first screening, a five-minute documentary about a Los Angeleno who throws away his marriage to run a bagel shop, has no faults. But it's not good either. It takes 10 minutes to decide this.

Luckily, *Moon Over New York* disabuses us of goodwill. It features clumsy flashbacks, a 30-year-old named "Grandpa," a child barfing, and a mom flashing her bare ass (the "moon") to her astigmatic daughter. It ends with "outtakes"—something else Gann warned us bad filmmakers do. A 62.

After that, we settle into a groove. There's iced tea, sliced pineapple, and pita chips, and I almost feel happy about irrevocably shortening my attention span by watching five-minute amateur movies on Mother's Day. Most fall into the meaty portion of the bell curve between not-so-great and not-so-bad, but two exceptions almost make us applaud.

Girls' Room, shot in gothic green hues, follows little girls going to the bathroom. It sounds creepy, but it isn't a

documentary and is actually sweet. Our favorite is *Detroit Unleaded*, a 20-minute film about Muslim cousins who run a Detroit gas station. The characters and camerawork thrill us, and the jokes (unlike its obvious inspiration, *Clerks*) are touching. After movies about Genghis Khan and incest, we celebrate with a 92. One judge later tells all her friends to see it.

May 20

It's the nicest spring day possible. But because we got through only 11 films last Sunday, we've got to scramble to meet Gann's deadline.

Our "critiques" are marginalia. We toss out 17s unthinkingly, pausing only to rip apart the crapfests. A documentary about the first post-Katrina Mardi Gras crushes us: The director mangles a brilliant opportunity. We score one film that looks like a D-minus high-school project—featuring an animated, psychotic Mr. Potato Head on 'shrooms who kills campers—a 28, so Gann has to watch it.

And despite promising Gann not to, we stop watching one movie. After six minutes of an 11-minute film pieced together from thousands of clips of women screaming in schlocky, hands-on-face horror poses—with some sine-wave modulator thingy at the screen's bottom, to make it "experimental"—we get the idea. Even my fellow judge's dog left the room.

One of the few films that engender debate is *Signage*, a short about a gay, aging Washingtonian and his unsatisfying encounter with a nubile, deaf, gay Gallaudet University student ("About Face," 9/28/07). The story is semi-sweet, but the acting and editing and camerawork never rise above mediocrity. Plus, it has a joke about Ally McBeal (referring to a zero-calorie vodka Fresca as a "Calista") that would have been dated in 2001.

After a powwow, we judge *Signage* a 62—below the threshold Gann cited as his cutoff (75) for taking second looks at films. Then we notice something in the credits: a thank-you note to Jon Gann.

June 22

An e-mail from Gann warns us we might get angry letters from filmmakers about our rejection slips. He tells us in capital letters, DO NOT respond to them ourselves.

I wait and wait, but no budding Kevin Smiths flame me.

July 21

Between May and July we morph from esteemed judges to "vollies"—volunteers. Gann e-mails to remind us that, in exchange for being judges, we now must provide free labor to run the festival. We send our available times and shirt sizes to Bruno, the volunteer coordinator.

The festival lineup is posted online. I scan the 89 films, checking off "my" movies: *Girls' Room*, the hilarious one about the poker-playing serial killer, the weird European one where the girl's on a couch in a lake (and carries her dead father to Davy Jones' locker on an unhinged door). Check, check, check.

I miss *Detroit Unleaded*, so I scroll through again. Hmmm. I search for it, command-F. Nope. I check each film one by one.

And there it is, playing at prime-time Friday night: *Signage*.

Months later, I ask Gann about the film's resurrection. He admits knowing its lead actor/director, donating \$100 to help make it, and suggesting edits after seeing a rough cut. (The filmmakers ignored his advice.) He confesses that his name being in the credits makes him uncomfortable. He also points out he had a hand in three or four films in the festival and rescued at least one other movie from the judges' reject pile. Plus, as a local film with two built-in audiences—gay and deaf people—*Signage* has big advantages over other entries.

"I'm sure someone will come back and yell at me," Gann says, lightheartedly. "But someone yells at me about everything I do."

Sept. 10

I came to learn to usher. Instead, I've got my arms tucked under my shoulders like chicken wings, playing paper-rock-scissors...

We've gathered at the foot of the staircase inside E Street Cinema, which houses the festival. Ice re-broken, we sit captive on the steps as Gann repeats his founding-father story for the newbies. Half the judges, including one good-looking girl on my team, have ditched volunteer duties. My ears only perk up when he mentions an exclusive opening-night party at the Gibson Guitar Room.

Afterward, Gann shows us around the theater, which seems unnecessary. (It's a theater.) He hints he'll show us a projection booth but doesn't. He also alludes to some crazy hidden space in the building's bowels, with an anarchy 'A' painted on the floor—like a satanic crypt—but doesn't show us this either.

Instead, we head upstairs to assemble goodie bags for filmmakers. Fifty adults line up to stuff canvas totes with matches, maps, schedules, light-up toys, and reams of promotional material. Noting the prominent ads, Gann gushes, "We love, love, love our sponsors."

He qualifies himself, devilishly. "We love our sponsors when they write a check."

After an hour, we get the shirts promised us—snazzy dark-blue tees. Then Gann orders Bruno to re-collect them. Only people who show up for their shifts will get one.

Sept. 13

"What film did you direct?"

It's opening night, and I'm at the vollie check-in station. I turn to find Gann in a pleated black kilt, riding knee-high, and a collared, long-sleeved, silk-looking shirt with white squiggles.

I explain I'm volunteering. Gann laughs. "My head is out of it. I just went home for five minutes and played with my dog, and I'm like, 'Can I stay, please?'"

He doesn't mean it. Gann lives for opening night.

Downstairs, I meet other ushers in a velvet-rope "lounge" with fluorescent, block-shaped beanbags and, oddly, a Vespa. Ushers from Japan, Brazil, England, and South Dakota are present.

After handing out golf pencils and instructing viewers how to vote for their favorites ("Remember: Vote for three, or your ballot doesn't count!"), I slip from my post to hunt for the Anarchy room. The secret door exists. It's taped open. I slip inside. Nothing but gray drywall. I go up some stairs, try other doors. Nada. It looks like a

well-lit boiler room. No chicken blood.

Afterward, I hang around to hear directions to the Gibson party—and hear instead that it's VIPs only.

Sept. 14

As consolation, vollies can attend the Friday night party at Poste Moderne Brasserie. Ten minutes in, I wish I hadn't.

A white-haired man in khakis and a black mesh hat—naval warfare special operations: seals—corners me. He tells me about his incipient script, which appears to be crumpled in his armpit. Aliens abduct a pregnant woman or something, and he hesitates to reveal the ending—as if he doesn't want to spoil it, in case I see it someday. Later, he gushes about Josh Hartnett.

We're on a concrete patio, and behind Mr. Seal, a woman bangs bongos. An impressively large number of filmmakers and producers, about 200, stand under umbrellas, waiting out the drizzle. Wet upholstered couches with pillows sit empty.

Abruptly, Mr. Seal changes topics. "Heard about this movie *Signage*?"

"What?"

"Everyone here's talking about it."

An hour later, I find out why. I'm conversing with a local director who made a film about a Virginia man who collects whistling memorabilia. Suddenly, the bald, goateed protagonist from *Signage*—the man who wrote, directed, and delivered the Calista Flockhart joke—strolls by. Turns out he's a minor legend in local theater, Rick Hammerly. Ignorant, and with a stiff double-Jack-and-Coke (\$10) in me, I break off and introduce myself.

"I heard about *Signage*," I say. "Sounds like it's been playing a bunch of festivals."

"Hi. Yeah, we've been overwhelmed."

"Why did you combine the deaf-gay thing?" I shout over the music.

"Well," he struggles, "I dated two deaf guys. I thought people who didn't respond to one"—he has his hands apart, and here pulls them together—"would respond to the other."

He nods. I nod. At this, a friend calls Rick to come to the bar and take a shot, I think. To ditch me, Rick turns, shakes my hand, and winks.

"So nice meeting you."

Half an hour later, at 8:30, the party breaks up. The girl on bongos is whaling on a cowbell. A lean, dark-suited, 50-year-old egghead has a 28-year-old floozy on his lap, and they make out on the soggy couches. My buzz has dried up.

Everyone else departs to E Street Cinema for the Friday prime-time screening.

Sept. 18

Two days after the party, *Signage* wins Best Local Film. Two days after that, I sit down with popcorn and an Odwalla to watch it in one of the two-hour best-of screenings that wraps up the Shorts festival.

I walk into the theater thinking, *It's me*. I pigheadedly misjudged the movie, like the women who gave *Davy & Stu* a 19.

Sorry, no. Though I'm not a preeminent critic, I know weak acting and bad jokes. Quaintly, people feel compelled to clap after movies during the festival. I hear only tepid applause for *Signage* as the credits, with Gann's name, roll.