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LOCAL FILM DEBUT

N.C. native takes reverse route into films

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Would-be filmmakers traditionally get jobs as waiters, save like misers and never look back after they knock out a feature.

Hickory native Sidney King inverted the process. He wrote, produced and directed "Pearl Diver," *then* took a job as a server/bartender. And he loves it.

You can find his body at Crook's Corner, the respected eatery on the border of Carrboro and Chapel Hill. As of Friday, you'll find his spirit at the Manor Theater, which will give "Pearl Diver" a full-week run -- something only a handful of Carolinas filmmakers have gotten locally.

The movie deals with Mennonite sisters in Indiana who handle their mother's murder differently after 20 years. King, who just turned 30, knew his debut would never get wide theatrical distribution. But until a few years ago, he didn't expect to have a debut at all.

He majored in German and music at the Mennonite-affiliated Goshen College in Indiana, where he went back to shoot the film in 2004. Then he studied folklore at UNC Chapel Hill -- "I'm about 20 pages of thesis away from an M.A." -- before acting on his long-cherished dream.

"I thought about making a short or working on crews to learn about production," he said. "Then I thought (a feature) would open my eyes to what it's all about. If I'd had any idea what I was getting into, I'd probably have had greater trepidation!"

"I went the friends and family (financing) route. It was good to have people who weren't going to break my kneecaps if I didn't have 100 percent return on investments. Then there was some credit-card maxing as I tried to get it through

post-production." (He describes his budget as "less than most studio films spend on designing a poster." Pressed, he'll admit to "low, low six figures.")

King worked with producer Daniel Lowe and learned the intricacies of casting, scouting locations, negotiating equipment rental and production insurance.

Happy accidents were crucial. He met John Rotan at a Greensboro film festival; after seeing a short that Rotan shot, King hired the Morganton native as his cinematographer. Then he hired the star of that short, Yevgeni Lazarev, as the male lead in "Pearl Diver." (Lazarev played Stanley Kowalski in the first Soviet "A Streetcar Named Desire.")

King already knew his way around a camera: After living in a Goshen dorm named for Clayton Kratz, he and other students shot a documentary about that Mennonite missionary, who'd disappeared in Ukraine in the 1920s.

"We bought a Canon XL-1 and shot guerrilla-style," he says. "A Shroud for a Journey' played to packed churches, and people bought videotapes. We made our money back on that one."

But "Diver" has been a different story. Though it was happily received at film festivals in 2005 and found small distributors -- Panorama Entertainment domestically, Shoreline overseas -- King is still recouping costs. "I knew it would be rough, but it's *really* rough," he says. "The field is saturated. I heard 3,000 features got produced last year."

Not that this prevents him from wanting to add a few. He hopes to adapt a comic play by Hickory's Molly Bass this summer and has two scripts in limbo.

But even if he never makes another film, he still has one that "didn't go through the ringer: no test audiences, no marketing people, none of the machinations that tend to suck life out of films. Just a story we worked really hard on, with an integrity to it."

What Is 'Pearl Diver'?

Hickory native Sidney King wrote and directed this story of Indiana siblings forever scarred by their mother's murder decades earlier. Memories of that botched robbery resurface when one of the criminals becomes eligible for parole. Marian, who has stayed on the family farm, wants him to be released and spend his last days with his family; sister Hannah, a writer who moved to Chicago, convinces the board not to free the convict.

Hannah writes a memoir to clear the air. Marian, who has suppressed memories of the event in her Mennonite community, opposes her. When Marian's daughter is injured, book sales could be the way to pay for surgery, though family privacy will be violated. An old farmer named Isaac, who unwittingly affected events 20 years ago, now comes back into their lives.