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Indie filmmakers Vaz and Berry getting creative

Passers-by would be forgiven for thinking that the location for *Blue Valentine*, the latest offering from indie filmmakers Joe Vaz and Damon Berry, was a rehearsal room for a troupe of lunatic comedians, as raucous laughter punctuated successive takes. But their unflinching sense of humour belies the passion and commitment that the team brings to their work. It is this infectious energy that inspired their crew and cast to work throughout the night over the course of the weekend.

"Making an indie film is the hardest work and the most fun you'll ever have," says Joe. His experience on the set of *Engage*, the two-man crew's short-film debut which was written and directed by Damon in 2000, brought him back from a video editing course in the UK earlier this year with a view to furthering the collaboration. The team believes that the best way to grow as filmmakers is by gaining the experience for themselves. "It's a see-saw partnership," says Damon, "whoever wrote the script directs the piece, and the other one crews, so we take on different functions in the production of each film." Joe grins in agreement, "Basically, whoever's not directing gets to be the brain."

The collaboration between Joe's company Inkless Media Productions, and the Scriptwright Production Alliance (under which Damon works on an ad hoc basis with Digby Young), has produced three short films to date. Their passion for film borders on obsession, and over the last 15 years they have explored every role from acting to writing, directing and filming. Although their different sensibilities as movie makers are evident in each director's work, they share a common passion for storytelling and the exploration of universal themes within a South African context. "The challenge for South African cinema at this juncture mirrors our society's search to find a national identity that goes beyond the apartheid struggle context. The production is totally South African and the movies are all firmly set in South Africa, but their investigation of human interactions is common to all people," says Damon.

Set in a residential hotel in Pretoria, the 33 minute

DV short *Engage* is a farcical tragedy that explores the desperation of human need and co-dependency in the nightmare scenario of bumping into an ex when you're at your worst. The movie is based upon *Room 306*, a one-act play which Damon wrote and directed for the Grahamstown Festival while studying. As co-producer on the Quickies project in 2001, Damon submitted the wry one-minute *Sex Drive*, which draws a satirical and brilliantly funny roadmap of romance.

Play by Heart, their second collaboration, was shot over six days at Hartebeespoort Dam, and for the first time Joe was in the director's seat. This semi-autobiographical piece is a comedic investigation of the fraternal and almost marital overtones of the relationship between band members, and the tensions that are brought into focus by the arrival of two strangers with their own set of baggage. "There's an increasing need for films which are simply about people, life is about people," says Digby, who served as DOP on Joe's second short film, *Blue Valentine*, this time with Damon on sound. "For this reason we've followed formal routes for casting. Good performances are the strongest element of the final product. We have an untapped goldmine of phenomenal character actors and comedians in this country, and we've been blessed to have access to unbelievably talented people who are really supportive of our projects," Damon says.

Blue Valentine is a comedy-drama that follows a couple of friends desperately fighting the urge to declare their love for one another. At once romantic, un-precious, pointedly funny and poignant, it avoids blatant eroticism in favour of the power that comes from restraint. "Relationships don't have to fit stereotypical definitions to be real," says Damon. "The mainstream media doesn't portray this kind of interaction, and yet every single person who read the script immediately identified with the human truth of the story."

With completion costs on their movies coming in at between R5000 and R20,000, the two feel strongly about the accessibility of indie film-making in South Africa at the moment. "There's no way you could self-finance and shoot a short film anywhere else on these kinds of budgets," says Joe. "The DV revolution has made movie making so accessible that you almost don't have an excuse not to do it." During the making of *Play by Heart*, the team decided to experiment with a motion control shot to show the passage of time. Joe says he had his laptop and Avid on set, so they shot eight or nine segments, dumped them to the laptop and edited them straight away, just to see if it would work. Digby, who was crewing on set that day, took one look at the results and commented that 10 years ago it would have cost you \$30 000 to even think about making the phone call to hire a motion control camera. They are very positive about the increasing presence of South African films at international festivals, and say it's also encouraging that we're starting to work with the rest of Africa. "But filmmakers need to take the initiative in finding intelligent, creative solutions that will improve the distribution platform for local movies," Damon says, citing the example of the Nigerian film industry which has been enormously strengthened by the placement of local movies on VHS cassettes sold for recording purposes. In creating a distinctively South African stylistic identity, Damon believes, filmmakers have to be willing to invest in their own products and fail where necessary. "It's very encouraging to chart the growth process through successive productions, so it's important not to become discouraged," Joe says. "The more films we make the better. You need quantity in order to get quality." The two believe there is a gap in the local market for genre films, and is hoping to experiment with comedy and horror themes on their future projects. "We keep hearing the question 'How do we save the South African film industry?'" Damon says. "My answer is 'we don't'. Just make movies. The industry deserves to get as much as we put into it. If we're prepared to put ourselves and our products out there it will save itself." Trailers for *Play by Heart* and *Blue Valentine* can be viewed at www.inklessmedia.co.uk.

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REG. NO. 2004/099356/23

115 Communication House
Table Mountain Motion Picture Studios
Platteklief Road
Milnerton 7441

Tel: +27 (21) 552 3762

Fax: +27 (21) 552 3587

SULAIMAN
083 703 7549

P.O. BOX 710, MILNERTON, 7435