

Headed in the right DIRECTION

Assistant prof's short film 'Positioning' shows at Cannes

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In a way, the comical movie "Positioning" practically wrote its way into the acclaimed Cannes Film Festival.

But its creators might've missed the idea for the plot - from setup to climax - if they'd followed their instincts instead of directions.

Mark Lewandowski had never written a screenplay. In his job as an assistant professor of English at Indiana State University, the 44-year-old Terre Haute resident

LOCATING 'POSITIONING'

■ To see a trailer of the short film "Positioning" - written by ISU assistant professor of English Mark Lewandowski - go to www.cinematrix.com/positioning.html.

had published short fiction and creative nonfiction pieces. But film scripting was "just not my genre," he said.

Then Lewandowski decided to meet up with an old college buddy at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival in France.

The friend, Hans Montelius, makes a variety of films for the Swedish production company Cinematrix. Ever since their student days in the mid-1980s at the University of Kansas, where they studied creative writing, Montelius kept urging Lewandowski to write a script. But Lewandowski was busy, and put it off. His reluctance faded on the trip to Cannes - the prestigious, cutting-edge festival, where careers of actors, writers and directors are launched.

With new movies showing in dozens of Cannes theaters, Lewandowski and Montelius rented a car to get around that resort town. The vehicle came equipped with a global positioning system. That device, commonly known as a GPS, uses satellite location signals to guide motorists from their starting point to their intended destination. Along the way, a recorded voice tells drivers when and where to turn.

"It was the first time I'd actually heard a GPS machine," Lewandowski said from his campus office at ISU.

The voice in their rental car was female.

"The GPS was like a third person in the car," Montelius said in an online interview from Sweden. "It was irritating when it wanted us to take a turn that we didn't want to take. But, of course, it was usually right."

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Direction: Prof came to ISU six years ago

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Brainstorming ensued. Analogies developed.

"We're two single men, and when two single men are together, you start talking about women," Lewandowski recalled, chuckling. "And the whole thing came together."

They found a connection between their GPS experience and a quest of another kind.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Lewandowski went back to Terre Haute and began writing a screenplay for a short film. He sent the script to Montelius, who offered suggestions, edited it and revised it a few times. Once finished, Montelius and the Cinemantrix crew filmed "Positioning" last spring in Stockholm. It features two European actors - Pontus Olgrim and Caroline Ilea.

In it, a couple rides through city streets, trying to find a location. The woman (Ilea), the passenger, reminds the man (Olgrim), the driver, that they're already an hour late. He didn't bring the directions, and stubbornly refuses to ask for guidance, insisting he remembers the route. When she pulls out a GPS device, he tells her to put "that thing away." Clearly lost, he finally relents.

As the smooth, sure female-voiced GPS tells him to "drive 150 meters, then turn right," he laughs derisively, convinced the instructions are wrong.

His exasperated companion snaps, "I swear, if you don't make that turn, I'm jumping out of the car and taking a taxi." He makes the turn, and, as the locator announces, they arrive at their destination.

The setting switches to their bedroom later. Once again, he's searching - this time, beneath the covers - for the location that will please her sexually. As he wanders, apparently off course, she imitates the female voice on the GPS. She redirects him to "turn left in one centimeter, forward one centimeter" and declares she is "recalculating." (Earlier in the car, when the GPS's use of that word confuses him, the woman explains that "it means you're going the wrong way.")

At last, with a smile, the woman declares that he is "arriving at destination."

The latter scene, modestly filmed with both actors well covered by blankets, serves as the punch line to a 7-minute movie. The clever storyline earned "Positioning" a coveted spot in the 2009 Cannes Film Festival last May - one year after Lewandowski and Montelius hatched the idea while following the orders of a female voice on the GPS to navigate the roads of that very same French city. Since its debut at Cannes, "Positioning" has also screened at five other film festivals, including the Verona Film Festival in Italy.

In the past, short flicks were rarely seen outside of film festivals. Nowadays, they're a staple of Internet sites such as *YouTube.com*.

Among friends and acquaintances of Lewandowski, "Everyone who has seen it has liked it," he said.

As for film festival audiences, Montelius said the reaction has been positive. "The greatest thing is to sit in the audience when it's played and hear people laughing," he said. "That makes it worth all the work of making it."

Lewandowski's screenplay fit the short-film format perfectly, Montelius said. Such movies must be "about one thing," he explained. "There is no time to cram all the stuff that you can put into a feature into a short film. And it confuses the audience."

Likewise, "Positioning" is a "very simple story, a joke told in film form," Montelius added. "Mark has written a great little script where everything leads up to that joke."

Seeing that concept evolve into a finished production, worthy of the big screen at Cannes, impressed Lewandowski.

"It's kind of a thrill to see your work transformed into that - to see how someone interprets that," he said from his ISU office. "When someone interprets your work, you really see it in another light."

MORE IN THE WORKS

Lewandowski's screenwriting could get more exposure. He and Montelius worked on a full-length movie script during a three-week session at a

writing colony in Arkansas. They honed the script, despite being an ocean apart geographically, through Skype - an Internet outlet that allows face-to-face conversations. In January, Montelius intends to travel to Los Angeles to gauge Hollywood's interest in the project, titled "How to Seduce Your Neighbor."

That latest film is "basically an R-rated romantic comedy," Lewandowski said. As Montelius added, "It's about a man and a woman in their 40s, single and still living the life they lived in their 20s. I think people can identify with that. At least I can."

Being single influences their film collaborations in different ways. They have more free time to work on projects, Lewandowski said. The storylines are affected, too. "The fact that we're both unmarried, and maybe a little bitter about it, has probably contributed to what we're writing about," he added, with a laugh.

Lewandowski grew up near Buffalo, N.Y., earned his bachelor's degree at Kansas and his master's at Wichita State University. Six years ago, he joined the faculty at ISU. He's always appreciated film writing, but doesn't consider himself a movie aficionado. "I'm an English professor, so I've always been interested in the narrative," he said, "in whatever form it takes."

Finding time to collaborate with Montelius, his former college classmate, allowed Lewandowski to write stories in another form, the cinema.

"Luckily, because he knows what he's doing, he's taught me a lot, too," Lewandowski said.

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