

Cash prizes and introduction for aspiring screenwriters

Three win city/state script contest

Screenplays about "Miami Vice" Chicago style, a fantasy where fairy tales become real, and a drama based on a 1922 miners' strike were the three winning plots in the 1996 Illinois/Chicago Screenwriting competition.

Winners from among 170 entries were attorney Robert Sherwin, educational and corporate scriptwriter Sara Caldwell and Arthur Andersen producer/director Thad Vassmer.

Each received a \$1,500 cash prize and a commemorative crystal at the Jan. 30 reception hosted by Planet Hollywood.

In presenting the awards Chicago Film Office director Rich Moskal said, "I trust this relationship is just getting started. We're pleased to award the winners trophies today and sincerely hope to give them permits tomorrow."

This is the second year the city/state film offices have sponsored a screenplay competition. Offered exclusively to Illinois residents, the story had to be set in Illinois. Scripts were judged in three tiers over a two-month period.

Besides the cash award, the three winning screenplays will be circulated among Hollywood studios with the endorsement of the Chicago and Illinois Film Offices. A synopsis of the 50 semi-finalists and contact information is available through the film offices.

Ironically, two of the three winners—Sara Caldwell and Sherwin's writing partner, Lee Anthony Smith—recently moved to Los Angeles.

"Revise, revise, revise," was Sherwin's winning credo. "Delay is not defeat," he said referring to the fact that last year his "Chicago Jam" script was a semi-finalist, but the judges didn't like the ending.

Sherwin, a criminal and personal injury attorney, and writing partner Smith rewrote the ending until they liked it and resubmitted it in the '96 competition.

"Chicago Jam" is the story of a burned out vice cop who uses the girlfriend of the criminal he hates to trap him, but falls in love with the woman along the way. "But we have lots of subplots, too, like attempting to throw an NBA game," he said.

Not content with the legal profession, Sherwin has become an actor and has appeared in several Chinese soap operas.

"It was just me and the Chinese actors. We're very popular in China right now."

Sara Caldwell, a freelance corporate/educational writer since 1991, drew from a true Illinois story. "Bloody Williamson" is an historical drama based on the 1922 miners' strike in Downstate Herron, when miners were bought off the strike with promises, only to be murdered when they left the mine.

Caldwell has written another screenplay, "Shelter Me," a dramatic thriller set in a women's shelter. Former Chicago filmmaker/director Jerry Vasilatos, who also moved to L.A., and producer Nicole Franklin plan to produce Caldwell's script.

Considered one of the most original plots, Thad Vassmer's "Caldron Jilvves" is a fantasy about fairy tales becoming real in Galena. "Caldron Jilvves" is the name of a little elf who plays a part in the plot, "but it is also the turn involving his name, like 'Rumpelstiltskin' has two meanings," he explained.

"I started to notice in high school English class how really rough the original fairy tales actually were. They had lots of blood and murder in them."

During a trip to Galena in May the story struck him and Vassmer finished the script in a little more than four weeks. "I

guess I've whittled down the process," he said.

Vassmer, a Marengo resident, has "always written," but they were short stories. Graduating from film school at Columbia College in 1987 still didn't motivate him to write screenplays.

"I finished my first screenplay about four years ago after writing on and off for quite a while," he said. "It's sitting on a shelf right now and I'm thinking about revisiting and reworking it."

Vassmer has started another script, "a family fantasy set in the city, but I have to research some cultural places and zoning before I continue."

His writing philosophy is, "If you are passionate about something, you have to find a way to do it. Don't give yourself excuses not to do it."

The seven finalists were Edward Bernero for "First Watch;" Robert Bundy for "The Columbian Expedition;" Mike Kelly for "The Secret Sin;" Phyllis Magida for "Prairie Flower;" Michael Nesler for "National Pastime;" Walter Oleksy for "The Stolen Smile," and Jim Stevens for "The Pied Piper."

Robert Sherwin can be reached at 312/822-0833 and Vassmer at 630/444-4667; Caldwell at 805/260-1195.—Kitty Hopper ★

UP, UP AND AWAY. On location in Phoenix, Ariz., are DP Charlie Peich and director Susan Hope, of Hope Productions, shooting part of an eight-spot package for DeVry Inc., Oakbrook Terrace, via Chicago's BrownMC (neé E.H. Brown Advertising).

Filmed in Chicago, Minneapolis, and Phoenix, the spots show how a degree from DeVry Institute can send a technical career flying.

Monica Fox produced for Hope; Dennis Schrage produced for BrownMC. ★

