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A new cinematic experience

by Tony Lewis

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Here in America, we are often quick to poke fun at our friends from up north, the Canadians. Whether it is for their clichéd love of syrup and hockey or their absurdly clad Mounties, there are few occasions when we give Canada any recognition. Well, it just so happens that we actually have Canada to thank for playing a major role in starting up Wis-Kino, the most innovative, albeit relatively unknown, filmmaking group here in Madison.

Recently, The Badger Herald visited the home of Matt Sloan and Tona Williams to talk to the couple as well as their partner and good friend Aaron Yonda — the three helped co-found Wis-Kino and are former directors of the program — in order to get a better look inside this exciting community.

Kino is the Greek word for “movement,” and that is exactly what this community is all about. Their motto, “Do well with nothing; do even better with a little; do it right now,” encourages filmmakers across the globe to stop just talking about creating films but to get up and start shooting right now. It was this outlook on filmmaking that led to Kino’s birth almost 10 years ago in Montreal.

“It started because there were a group of filmmakers in Montreal who wanted to do stuff that was more fun and just for them,” Williams said. “They decided to challenge each other to see if they could each come up with a new short film every month, and they would show it at a public screening at the end of the year.”

However, by the time the year was over, they had built up such an audience that no one wanted to stop and, in fact, there were so many new interested filmmakers that several more local Kino groups were initiated. Soon, there were so many groups scattered across Montreal that Kino began to branch out to other cities across the globe.

Madison first encountered Kino at the 2002 Wisconsin Film Festival when Montreal filmmaker Philippe Falardeau showed a collection of Quebecois Kino shorts. Around this time, a friend who had attended the festival advised Yonda to go to Montreal and check out the Kino community there.

“When I first went to Montreal and my first Kino screening, I met the two guys who started it all and they said, ‘Yeah, it is really fun,’ and I responded, ‘It is really great; I wish there was something like this in Madison,’ and they said, ‘You should start one,’” Yonda recalled.

Although skeptical at first, Yonda came back home, met up with other local filmmakers and together they founded Wis-Kino. Nowadays, the group here in Madison is part of an international network that spans over 50 groups on six continents with upstarts in France, Russia, Brazil, Senegal and Australia and is one of two communities in the United States with Kino Louisville following Madison’s lead in 2005.

“Each of the local groups has a general structure but each has its own flavor too. You can basically do whatever you want, because people will keep themselves organized out of the respect for the movement and enthusiasm for what has already been done in the past,” Williams said.

One event that occurs within all groups no matter what city you are in is the ultimate filmmaking extravaganza and Kino’s grandest tradition — the Kabaret. Twice a year, Wis-Kino holds this fantastic, one-of-a-kind challenge in which participants are given 48 hours to complete a film that is under five minutes long.

“On the surface, the other type of 48-hour film challenges and festivals in the nation might seem pretty similar to Wis-Kino, but I think it is a pretty surface level of similarity because most of those other things are centered on a competition and not based on an existing year-round community,” Yonda said

“With ours it is more about just people having fun and learning from each other and helping each other

out," Williams said. "That really sets us apart from most of the other things in the U.S., and I always thought that was pretty cool about it."

Although each Kabaret is run differently depending on the group, these events are a popular form of international bonding within Kino. Visiting Kino filmmakers will often stop by and add their own diverse energy to the creative mix of films. Likewise, members of Wis-Kino will travel to other Kino cities to participate in their Kabarets. The result is an exchange program of sorts for filmmakers.

In order to encourage budding filmmakers to take part and to not hinder the creative freedom of its participants, the Wis-Kino Kabaret is a fairly wide-open challenge.

"We started out with no rules," Yonda said. "But we found it necessary at a certain point to say that your Kabaret film cannot be more than five minutes long, because we realized it tends to be a better screening overall."

"If you have one four-hour screening, you learn that lesson quick," Sloan remarked.

"We also had to enact a no pornography rule which we had always thought was understood but apparently it needed to be explicit," Williams added.

Wis-Kino Kabarets are also unique from those of other Kino groups in that they include what is called a secret ingredient, a theme or object, which everyone must use in their film in whatever way they wish.

"We tried to make the themes so they would stimulate people's creativity, not box it in," Sloan said, "Like the word 'light' can be interpreted in many different ways. Some themes are counterpoints like 'hot' and 'cold' where you could use both or one or the other."

When asked which past theme they remember the most, Yonda replied, "The first theme we did was sports and cheese curds as suggested by one of the people of Montreal who had never been here before. It was crazy, but a lot of people really used it creatively and came up with ingenious ways to include those things in their film to some extent."

"I think that was pretty much the first and last time we got the theme from the audience," Sloan quipped.

This past weekend, Wis-Kino celebrated its Fall Kabaret at Sundance Cinemas. Following tradition, the event started on Friday with a kickoff screening that featured open reel submissions from local filmmakers as well as a compilation of short films from various international Kino groups. Then it was off to the races as filmmaking teams headed out to spend the next 48 hours putting their films together. On Sunday, everybody got back together to watch a captivating set of films all dealing with the well-timed theme of "change."

As far as the future of Wis-Kino goes, things are only getting better. Next year, the directors will be adding another Kabaret to bring the total to three a year including a 72-hour challenge in July. Also, on Jan. 24 at the Mercury Cafe, there will be a free retrospective screening for people to come and watch some of the films that have been shown over the past year. You are guaranteed to be astonished at just what can be made in so little time.

"It is surprising how good of quality the films are," Yonda said. "It really is just an expression of that 48 hours and an expression of the moment. You do not have time to look back and say, 'Well, we should get rid of this and change that.' You have to make it as is, and that results in a more pure form of expression."

For more information on Wis-Kino and to find out how to become involved, visit www.wis-kino.com.