

Teens' film on the Cube does rounds of festivals

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Jackie Burrell/ STAFF

Prestigious indie film festivals, such as Robert de Niro's Tribeca Film Fest and Austin's SXSW, usually feature a mix of big name stars and quirky directors. But it's a rare director who has to juggle film premieres and prom.

Last summer, four East Bay film students set their cinematic sights on the Bay Area's passionate Rubik's Cube subculture. The result, a quirky 15-minute documentary called "Piece by Piece," just aired at the South by Southwest Film Festival -- not in the student film division, but along the pros.

Next up, the film is headed for Tribeca in New York, where it was one of 200 films selected out of 4,500 submissions. And its young directors -- students at Carondelet and Acalanes high schools, and recent grads from Miramonte and Albany High who met last summer at Jeff Castle's West Side Filmworks workshop -- are madly juggling schedules in the hopes that they can go.

"We got an e-mail from Jeff about SXSW," said Carondelet junior Emma Thatcher. "I couldn't even finish it -- I was running around my house. This great thing, this great opportunity, and something amazing came out of it."

It was exactly 30 years ago that Hungarian inventor Erno Rubik first unveiled his maddening, multicolored puzzle, with more than 43 quintillion possible configurations. The fad may have faded in the late 1980s, but it's made a dramatic comeback in recent years.

Today, more than 50,000 Web sites are devoted to the mighty cube. San Francisco's Exploratorium hosts the National and International Rubik's Cube Championships. The University of California, Berkeley offers classes in speedcubing. And Sweden's 1982 national speedcubing champion, Lars Petrus, works at Google. In fact, that's how "Piece by Piece" began -- Sachi Schuricht's best friend happened to sit next to Petrus at a concert.

Schuricht (a Miramonte grad), Thatcher and fellow filmmakers Grace Rathbone-Webber (an Acalanes senior) and Isaiah Allekotte (who graduated from Albany High last spring) were all veteran amateur moviemakers. They'd done the requisite home movies and taken video production classes, but nothing quite like Berkeley's West Side Filmworks. It was there that they were challenged to come up with an idea, formulate a script, find sources, film, edit and produce a festival-ready film -- in four weeks.

"We move pretty quick," says Castle, an Albany High film teacher who launched West Side last year with video producer Jigar Mehta. "Day one or two we started throwing out potential ideas. Then I sent the kids home with the charge to follow the leads."

Schuricht threw out the Rubik idea at the first brainstorming session.

"We were all pretty interested from the start," said Allekotte, now a Chapman film major. "It was one of those things that everybody wants to know more about, and besides that, we could find some interesting and quirky people."

Schuricht went online to do some research and an entire subculture began to unfold.

"As soon as I realized how intense and prevalent it was," she said, "I was hooked."

When the month was up, they had it all -- a tight, 15-minute narrative about speedcubers and their culture. Male and female cubers talk technique, Cal students solve the cube while driving, eating or lounging by Sproul Hall, and Petrus mulls the cube's addictive qualities as he sits in his backyard, casually solving the puzzle as he chats.

"If I have a mixed cube, I'll solve it," he says in the documentary. "If I have a solved cube, I'll mix it. The entire day can pass that way. ... If you want advice on how to get really fast is to have no job, no friends and the cube."

Castle and Mehta served as creative advisers and supervisors, following the filmmaking team out into the field, providing moral support, and laughing over the filmmakers' attempts to solve the cube.

Earlier this month, Castle, Petrus and Schuricht flew to Austin for the film's SXSW debut. And when all the professional filmmakers went up on stage afterward, Schuricht was right up there with them, answering audience questions and meeting with distributors.

"It was extremely, extremely exciting," she said. "Real theaters with real audiences."

"If you had to pick a culminating experience that would say we'd totally arrived," Castle paused. "It was so gratifying."

Next month, they're Tribeca-bound.

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