

What's It Like

HE OUGHTA BE IN MOVIES . . . AND NOW HE IS

Blade staff writer goes in front of the cameras as a movie extra

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This is the eighth in a year-long series we call "What's It Like?" giving readers a first-hand look at some interesting activities in the region.

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Everyone has a little movie star inside them.

When I was little, it was Ratman and Roebin, the superheroes my buddies created for home movies in middle school. They wore towels for capes and used couch cushions for the Ratmobile.

I never got to be in those movies - made with an old video camera in a basement - and I've been jealous ever since.

Perhaps that's why I was overjoyed to get a call one day that a couple of Findlay guys had decided to make a low-budget movie in their hometown and were looking for extras.

By Hollywood standards, their budget was tiny at under \$100,000.



Blade reporter Ryan E. Smith walks out of church in a scene from *Randomocity* being filmed in Findlay. (THE BLADE/TIM M. GRUBER)

"[The Screen Actors Guild] defines ultra-low budget as \$200,000," said Ellis Wilder, the 2004 Findlay High School graduate who co-wrote the screenplay. "We are below ultra-low."

Which meant I and the other extras wouldn't be paid. But what does that matter when you have the chance to be in a movie that will be submitted to film festivals and could one day end up on DVD or even in a theater?

The film *Randomocity* follows the lives of a young man, Ashley, and his best friend, Malcolm, and what happens to them when Ashley's girlfriend, Angela, is raped.

I signed up as an extra for some church and funeral scenes, filmed earlier this month at the First Lutheran Church in Findlay.

I was surprised to learn that a fair number of the nearly 20 extras - mostly women and children - had experience in commercials, local theater, or other projects. Some were friends and neighbors of the filmmakers or relatives of the crew. Some saw an ad in the paper.

MULTIMEDIA

[See and hear what it's like for Ryan Smith to be an extra in a movie.](#)

I haven't appeared on stage since junior high, so I sought a little guidance from Ross Clifton, 23, originally from Mansfield, who plays Malcolm. He went to DePaul University for acting and was an extra in the Michael Douglas movie *Traffic*.

"Be natural," he said. "An environment isn't real until you have people to fill it."

As I pondered this, I nibbled on some cookies that, along with some homemade spaghetti and other snacks, were set out for everyone.

"Food is really important," said Nancy Wilder, Ellis' mom and the movie's executive producer. She and her husband, Michael, who is general counsel and secretary for Marathon Ashland Petroleum, put up most of the money to make the picture.

We began filming a little after 6:30 p.m., starting with the easy stuff - walking out of the church and heading to the parking lot as if we've just left services.

"Ready for your time to shine?" joked Erica Roberts, 19, of Tennessee, who plays Angela. "Walking out the door, can you handle it?"

It's not as easy as you might think. One girl had to hold her breath to stop hiccuping. Another needed a glass of water to stop coughing.

It doesn't help when all you really want to do is stare at the camera recording you from the gas station across the street.

I took some direction from director Tyler Allen, a high school friend of Ellis who went to film school in Orlando. (He co-wrote the screenplay and stepped in to play Ashley after there were creative differences with the original actor, who was sent home three days before shooting started.)

His instructions to me: "You lead out the pack, man. Look out all casual."

Simple, right? Still, I wondered: Should I hold the door open? Should I turn left or right once I get outside?

I decided to wing it as we tried the scene several times. I nodded to everyone as they walked out. I put my hands in my pockets and looked nonchalant. Another time I furrowed my brow like I was thinking about the preacher's sermon.

After six takes lasting maybe a minute or two each, we changed clothes and tried it again to represent another day at church. Then we changed again and were filmed exiting again (this time for a funeral scene).

Tyler made one thing very clear: No shaking the head in that "Why, Lord? Why?" sort of way. "Everyone wants to do it in the movies," he said, shaking his head.

"Let's see your sad faces."

He stared at each of us. I looked sheepishly, seriously at the ground. Apparently we passed.

As daylight started to fade, we wrapped up that scene, changed back to our original clothes, and moved inside to film scenes in the church sanctuary. Films aren't made in the sequence you see them on screen. We did all the outdoor scenes first, then the indoor ones.

This was near the end of the 18 days scheduled to shoot the digital, high-def film. It was a typical indie flick - low budget, long hours - and Ellis will continue to work on it when he returns to Transylvania University in Kentucky, where he's studying business and English. He hopes it will be ready for a preview screening in late December.



Ryan Smith works on showing the proper emotion in a funeral scene. (THE BLADE/TIM M. GRUBER)

'Action'

As I waited with the rest of the extras - there's a lot of waiting in our line of work - I was surrounded by some middle-schoolers hopped up on Red Bull energy drink. They were reading song titles from the hymnals, adding "in the bathtub" to the end of each.

"When Love is Found... in the bathtub. Hee hee hee..."

One started humming Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger" and talked about making a movie, Snakes in a Church.

I was a little scared of them and they knew it.

Once everything was set - the lights, the jib that moves the camera around, the preacher (Tyler's dad in real life) - I moved to my seat. Then a young crew member came out.

"Quiet on the set, please."

I just knew someone would say that!

It got better. A guy grabbed a clapboard - one of those things you always see on movie sets, with the scene and take numbers written on it - and clapped it.

"Action!"

Pretty much we just had to sit there and stare at the preacher as he gave his sermon, but it still took five takes before everything went perfectly.

Then came the climactic scene of the evening: the funeral. For this they had borrowed an actual coffin from a local funeral home for an actress to lie inside. Some found the spectacle pretty creepy, but not the person playing dead.

"I'm gonna sleep. That's my plan," she said.

It was after 11 p.m. by this time. Everyone was feeling pretty tired, and I had a bit of a headache. It was painfully slow going, but at least I had the other extras - including a 9-year-old girl who kept calling me dad - to amuse me.

"I'm reading Hollywood," said a little boy holding a book in a nearby pew.

"That's 'Holy Bible,' " the woman next to him explained.

Tyler asked me to take my glasses off for the funeral, even though I had my glasses on earlier when we walked out of church from the funeral. He was OK with it, and I was happy to provide one of those inconsistencies that careful moviegoers delight in discovering.

I sat in the front pew, next to the woman playing the deceased's mom. As we sat there, looking sad, I was amazed when the woman spouted actual tears, as if on command. I heard people sniffing behind me.

Me? I looked down, gulped, sighed deeply, bit my lip, wrung my hands - but no tears came. I decided to aim for somber, not inconsolable.

We stayed in character for several scenes. Midnight came and went.

As the end approached, I was rewarded for my hard work. They needed people walking up to the casket and saying their goodbyes. For the final shot, I got the call.

I slowly shuffled up to the casket and looked down. No words could convey my sorrow, my regret at a young life snuffed out in its prime.

So I took my right hand, graced the polished wood of the casket with a brief, light touch, and walked away into movie history - in just one take!

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[< previous](#)

[next >](#)