

Connellsville filmmaker's movie debuts at festival

By Mark Hofmann

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The world premiere of "Strange Girls," a movie shot and produced by a Connellsville native, brought in the big crowds at the 26th annual Three Rivers Film Festival.

The film was shot in Pittsburgh, New Kensington, Perryopolis and during one long Sunday in Connellsville in September 2005, in the home of Leo and Sharon Ruhe.

"That day was the worst day of shooting," said the film's writer, director and producer, Rona Mark, about the 19 hours spent filming that day. "It was really hard."

"Strange Girls" is a twisted tale revolving around dysfunctional twin sisters and how they drifted apart amid acts of violence, humor, sex and murder. Mark said the post-production work on the film also dragged on and on: She finished the sound mix a week before the opening night of the film festival.

"This was my deadline," Mark said, adding that she was happy with the final product and that some parts exceeded her expectations. "It looks like a more expensive film."

The film also premiered with a healthy buzz and a great turnout. It was shown simultaneously on two screens with a combined total of about 185 seats available. Even with that, organizers had to set up rows of folding chairs to accommodate the audience.

"This film is so popular," said Charlie Humphrey, executive director of Pittsburgh Filmmakers. "We're very fortunate to have the filmmakers here, as well as many of the actors."

In addition to Mark, the film's other producer, Julian Ruhe of Philadelphia -- originally of Connellsville -- attended the event with his wife, Jolie.

"I'm thrilled with this reaction," he said, adding that it was the first time he was able to see the movie and the reaction of the audience.

Julian Ruhe wasn't the only person from Connellsville to appear at the showing. Leo and Sharon Ruhe brought 18 of their friends from the Connellsville area to the premiere.

"This is very exciting," Sharon Ruhe said. "This is something new for everybody."

Leo Ruhe said he was eager to see the result of that long day of filming in his kitchen, living room and bathroom -- including one room where a character was "murdered" -- and to have family and friends see his home in an entirely different way.

He also was pleased that his son produced such a successful film.

"It's fun to see the kids do something," Leo Ruhe said.

"This is an alternative film," Julian Ruhe said. "I hope they (friends of the family) don't see me any differently."

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