



HE'S MOTIVATED: "Turning 40 is a real eye-opener for a directing career when you're not where you want it to be," says teacher and filmmaker Andrew Wagner. "You want to remedy it starting today. Serendipity is how this film came to be from there." GEORGE WILHELM *Los Angeles Times*

Family entertainment

In need of an entry for the Sundance festival, filmmaker Andrew Wagner took his parents and sisters on a cross-country trip with his camera rolling.

By CARL KOZLOWSKI
Special to *The Times*

Andrew Wagner is like thousands of other struggling filmmakers in Los Angeles, working a day job — in his case, teaching high school — that might prove to be the only career he ever knows, wondering if his proverbial big break will ever come.

Yet Wagner's solution to these dilemmas was unique: He turned to his family. Not for the usual monetary or moral support, but to have them star as fictionalized versions of themselves in a seriocomic feature film that

That opportunity came about when his mother and father ran into two of Andrew's former high school teachers, who mentioned that they would love to have him come back and teach at the school. When his mom called about the offer, Wagner remembered an idea he had concocted a dozen years before about a woman who seeks to reinvent her life and reconcile her relationships with her children, and "Talent" was born.

"I just wanted to do something immediate and raw and from the gut. About what if my mother decided to come across the country with the rest of my family to find me and tell me about a job and have me move back with them?" says Wagner. "Turning 40 is a real eye-opener for a directing career when you're not where you want it to be. You want to remedy it starting today. Serendipity is how this film came to be from there."

So Wagner dug out his 12-year-old screenplay, rewrote it to fit the new plot line and then set about the unusual task of asking his

Three films, a trio of Sundance dreams

Andrew Wagner is one of many aspiring local filmmakers who submitted entries to Sundance. Here are three others who attempted to follow their dream — one who submitted a feature, one a documentary and one a short.

■ **Andy Johnson** was so committed to making his debut feature, the mockumentary "Chuck Gordon: Professional Juror," that he sold his house and moved to a smaller one to free up the \$10,000 budget. In addition to his 60-hour workweek as an assistant line producer on the NBC sitcom "Friends" and his duties as a married father of four, Johnson wrote, directed and starred in his tale of a lovable

...the memory of a moral support, but to have them star as fictionalized versions of themselves in a serio-comic feature film that would wind up taking them on a 37-day road trip across America. The resulting movie, "The Talent Given Us," wound up costing Wagner the \$30,000 he and his fiancée had saved for their wedding, forced his family to face the uncomfortable truths of his father's past and ultimately gave him the confidence to pursue his dream of entering a film in America's premier venue for new filmmaking talent: the Sundance Film Festival.

Wagner has been but one of 2,426 directors worldwide nervously awaiting word this week of whether his efforts paid off with one of about 130 berths in the festival's prestigious competitions, slots that can lead to greater distribution in theaters, video and television outlets and sometimes the births of entire careers. Judging by the support Wagner is already receiving from the likes of Oscar-winning screenwriter Bruce Joel Rubin ("Ghost"), he might be another in the parade of discoveries.

"I used to be a curator of the New American Cinema series at the Whitney Museum in New York in the early '70s, and I have to say I rarely saw a film as alive as this one," says Rubin, who met Wagner several years ago when Wagner joined a weekly meditation class he teaches. "To me it's the kind of film that Sundance was created to champion, and if they don't get it, it's a sad sign for Sundance."

A New York City native, the 40-year-old Wagner has wanted to make films all his life. Currently an English teacher at Middle College High School in South L.A., he graduated with a creative writing degree from Brown University and was studying film at New York University's prestigious Tisch School of the Arts in 1987 when he was hired by United Artists to write a screenplay for a family drama called "Waccabuc." Although "Waccabuc" was never produced, the deal to write it motivated Wagner to move to Los Angeles. He finished his master's degree at the American Film Institute, where in 1992 he won a \$15,000 prize for his film "The Last Days of Hope and Time," about a playground basketball player whose unrealistic dreams of making the NBA threaten to destroy his family life. Recurring themes of frustrated dreams would resonate when Wagner made "The Talent Given Us" a decade later.

"Like a lot of filmmakers, I had a lot of opportunities come and go in the past decade, including getting to take part in the Sundance Writers Lab," says Wagner. "I was six days away from directing my first feature when the financing fell apart. Then the chance to shoot a feature just presented itself, organically."

So Wagner dug out his 12-year-old screenplay, rewrote it to fit the new plot line and then set about the unusual task of asking his non-actor parents, Judy and Allen, to play his parents in the film, using their real names and genuinely painful issues as launching points for serio-comic storytelling that is now about to become very public — albeit entertaining — family therapy.

"I knew that my mom had a long-suppressed actress in her and that if awakened after 70 years, she might be up for the task. My hunch about my father was that he would be completely indifferent to the presence of the camera and therefore the chance of authenticity would be intact," Wagner recalled. Wagner's sisters, Emily and Maggie, were easier marks, since they are both professional actresses. (Emily has played the recurring role of paramedic Doris Pickman throughout "ER's" 10-year run.) He also roped in longtime family friend Judy Dixon, a veteran independent-film publicist and former actress, as well as other former family friends and girlfriends.

Relying only on his Panasonic DVX100 24p mini-DV camera, and employing sound man Tommy Hines as his entire crew, Wagner was completely dependent on natural light for the film's striking visuals, and on the kindness of strangers for many of the film's locations and incidental characters. For a comic scene in which Emily is treated for hysterical paralysis in the middle of rural Iowa, the seven-member filming team showed up at an Iowa town hospital's emergency room and asked if the staff would play along for a couple of scenes. They did, for free.

"My feeling was that I didn't want to do it, I didn't want to be on the screen because it was very personal to me, but I gave in and made a commitment," says Judy Wagner, by phone from her New York City apartment. "We were all traveling in a Honda Odyssey, seven of us trapped inside for 37 days, but though it was hard, it was a great bonding experience. Who gets to spend that much time with their family after they're grown up — and without killing each other to boot!"

In the end, there was more than 100 hours of video footage to edit down to 100 minutes, an arduous process that Wagner conducted inside his apartment with editor Terri Breed. Once again, after all these years, Wagner could only play the waiting game.

This past Monday afternoon, he encountered disappointment again when the Sundance festival announced its list of accepted films in the dramatic category and "The Talent Given Us" was not among them. Yet Wagner soldiers on, buoyed by his champions, such as Gary Winick, whose feature film "Tadpole" was the sensation of the 2001 Sundance festival when it sold for \$5 million and

the NBC sitcom "Friends" and his duties as a married father of four, Johnson wrote, directed and starred in his tale of a lovable loser who's obsessed with jury duty. Johnson learned Monday that his film didn't make the Sundance cut.

■ **Melody Murray** teamed with Casandra Wasaff to co-write, co-produce and co-direct the black-and-white, silent Buster Keaton homage "Cozy." A staffer at the entertainment newsmagazine series "Extra," Murray made the lighthearted short partly in reaction to arriving in L.A. just two weeks before Sept. 11. As of press time, Murray didn't know whether the short had been accepted for Sundance.

■ **Todd Felker** directed the documentary "Made in Amerikkka: Say Somethin'" after finding himself in a clash of cultures — a white Christian from Oklahoma mixed in with black Muslims in South L.A. Felker used footage he had shot while filming an unreleased documentary about a group of L.A. rappers preparing an anti-gang song and video. That experience gave him what he believes is a vivid window into a violent part of the city struggling to become more peaceful. The documentary was not accepted by Sundance.

— CARL KOZLOWSKI

The Sundance slate

The Sundance Film Festival announced the rest of its lineup Tuesday, releasing the list of titles in the Premieres, World Cinema, World Documentary, Frontiers, Native Forum and Midnight Movies categories.

Director Stacy Peralta (whose "Dogtown and Z-Boys" won audience and director awards at the 2001 festival) will open the 2004 event with the world premiere of his surfing documentary "Riding Giants." Other premieres include Walter Salles' "The Motorcycle Diaries" and Stephen Fry's "Bright Young Things." The Sundance festival runs Jan. 15-25 in Park City, Utah.

enabled him to co-found the InDigEnt production company.

In fact, Winick was able to give Wagner a happy ending before his Sundance announcement by offering him the directing assignment on the next InDigEnt feature film.

Noted Winick: "He has used his family to make a piece of work that... not only will do well itself but will do well for him to start his career. I hope this film gets out there because it's a great example and it's a great story."

How to reach us

Subscription Services:
(800) 252-9141

Calendar Section
Phone: (213) 237-7770

Fax: (213) 237-7630

E-mail:
Calendar.letters@latimes.com

Mailing Address:
Los Angeles Times

Calendar's Calendar

First chances, last chances and what not to miss today

POP

Ray of light: After two albums and an EP of songs that sound like night diary entries, with shadowy ambience and vocals barely above a whisper, **Azure Ray** — a duo of singer-songwriters Maria Taylor and Oren-

relocating from Athens, Ga., to Lincoln, Neb., where they've become part of the vibrant Saddle Creek Records family? Troubadour, 9081 Santa Monica Blvd., West Hollywood, Wed., 7:30 p.m. \$10. (310) 276-1158. Also, Glass House, 200 W. 2nd St., Pomona, Fri., 7 p.m. \$10. (909) 629-0377.

Latin icons: **Café Tacuba** is the band the Beatles would have been if they were Mexican. The 12-year-old quartet is an icon of the alt-Latino movement that reshaped pop throughout the Spanish-speaking

Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood, Wed., 8 p.m. \$30. (323) 848-5100. Also, J.C. Pandango, 1086 N. State College Blvd., Anaheim, Thu., 8 p.m. \$40. (714) 758-1057.

DANCE

Global troupe: **Déjà Donné**, the celebrated pan-European and Asian dance troupe, founded in 1996 in Prague by Simone Sandroni and Lenka Flory, presents the Los Angeles premiere of "In Bella Copia" (Fair Copy). The aggressive work explores the