

Los Angeles Times

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2003

SCREENING ROOM

The truth sinks in

By KEVIN THOMAS
Times Staff Writer

THE New York International Independent Film and Video Festival, which will present a whopping 100 features today through Sept. 28 at the Fairfax Cinemas and Raleigh Studios, is a no-frills showcase of films of widely varying quality and type in need of a distributor.

One of the best offerings has got to be Max Borenstein's **"Swordswallowers and Thin Men"** (Sept. 26), which ranks among the best first features of 2003. Borenstein captures the pain and fear that accompanies that awful moment of realization that strikes all college seniors that the real world lurks ahead. The film's title suggests how seniors can start feeling a little like sideshow freaks as they are hit by increasing uncertainty. Zak (Peter Cellini, a real find) is a smart, good-looking nice guy whose heretofore charmed life starts coming apart as his long-time romance with Samantha (Zoe Kazan), a painter whom he finds increasingly intimidating, begins to crumble; impending graduation makes it clear to her that that she's ready to move beyond Zak.

Borenstein is a writer-director of wit and tenacity, zeroing in on the rueful — sometimes ruefully funny — truth of each moment and situation. He reveals and implies instead of stating and declaring, and does so with subtlety and grace.

An English major at Yale and not a member of its film studies program, Borenstein commenced his independent project on an \$1,800 grant last fall at the beginning of his own senior year. At his recent graduation both he and his film won the Arts Prize.

Suspense scenarios

Another impressive work is Adrian Keys' moody, increasingly ominous **"Stillwater"** (Wednesday), which glues attention from Frame 1 as a young man (Andrew Hulse) in a quiet rural Georgia town accidentally discovers his true parentage. His attempt to track down his birth mother has disquieting consequences for the young man himself. Very elliptical but stylish and commanding.

Mark Lester's **"White Rush"** (Friday), which C. Courtney Joyner adapted from a novel by Mark McGarrity, is a cleverly plotted escapist diversion directed with finesse by a genre veteran. Some friends are camping in the woods when they hear a blast of gunshots from what



COMING OF AGE IN 1969: Oliver Hudson and Dominique Swain navigate America's dark currents in *"As Virgins Fall."*

Screenings

New York International Independent Film and Video Festival

"White Rush," Friday, 8 p.m., Laemmle's Fairfax Cinemas, Beverly Boulevard at Fairfax Avenue, Los Angeles

"La Petite Morte," Friday, 11:15 p.m., Fairfax Cinemas

"As Virgins Fall," Monday, 8:10 p.m., Fairfax Cinemas

"Stillwater," Wednesday, 8:10 p.m., Fairfax Cinemas

"Swordswallowers and Thin Men," Sept. 26, 10 p.m., Raleigh Studios, Charlie Chaplin Room, 5300 Melrose Ave., Hollywood

Info: (310) 562-0596 or www.nyfilmvideo.com; tickets: www.ticketweb.com

proves to a drug deal gone bad. One of the friends, a policeman (Louis Mandylor), sees the chance of lifetime, grabbing drugs and money, believing everyone involved is dead. As tough and shrewd as Mandylor's cop is, he and his pals immediately are in way over their heads. Crisp performances from Mandylor, Judd Nelson and Tricia Helfer.

Families in the '60s

Natalie Barandes, a TV writer-director-producer specializing in comedy, has taken a sharp departure moving into film with **"As Virgins Fall"** (Monday), a provocative 28-minute dramatic vignette. A jolting coming of age drama, it takes place on Aug. 8, 1969, when a pretty, intelligent 18-year-old

(Dominique Swain) has a traumatic experience at the very moment the Manson Family is slaughtering actress Sharon Tate and her friends just around the corner from her parents' posh home. That horrendous event gives Swain's Ellen Denver's own ordeal larger meaning.

"As Virgins Fall" captures the not only the look of the moment — in the Denver's home and in the clothes of their guests — but more significantly of their attitudes as the Swinging '60s drew to a close while the quagmire in Vietnam worsened.

Ellen describes her father as "the best accountant in Hollywood." Her parents' party is a boozy affair during which Ellen fends off the family dentist and confronts her mother (Jennifer Coolidge) over her father's infidelity. The joyless evening all too credibly slides from dreary to far worse.

Barandes has effectively managed to capture all the dark currents at loose in America in a nutshell.

With contempt

Emmanuelle Schick's 40-minute **"La Petite Morte"** (Friday) takes a murky look at the porn industry, French style, that centers on Raffaella Anderson, a former porn actress who worked for years in an industry she had long come to hate.

Anderson co-starred in the notoriously graphic 2001 release **"Baise-Moi,"** in which she and Karen Bach played women who love sex but hate men and team up for a savage rampage during which they combine sex and slaughter.

Both Schick and Anderson have too much contempt for porn, its makers and its audience for their tedious film to have much significance.

get it...pictures presents
AS VIRGINS FALL

Written and Directed by
Natalie Barandes
Produced by Steven C. Ward
www.asvirginsfall.com