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The good, the bad and the “Hungry” Maryland Ensemble founding member returns home with new film

by Nathan Oravec

Trent hasn't forgotten where he comes from.

He lives in L.A., boasts a one-word name like industry elites Madonna or Sinbad, and his latest short film, "Hungry," has proved a festival darling, most recently landing a spot at this Saturday's 4th Annual Utopia Film Festival in Greenbelt, MD.

But he hasn't forgotten his roots — or when they first grabbed hold.

In fact, he can tell you the precise date and time: Oct. 2, 1995, 7:30 p.m. And the location — The Maryland Ensemble Theatre. Before it was The Maryland Ensemble Theatre, actually. Before it was even an ensemble, really — just four actors striving to perfect their art. And, with Trent's audition for "Lost in Yonkers," a fifth.

Before the acting bug bit, though — Trent had been a techie. "I had a computer business in Frederick," he said. "I had numerous clients, was making good money, and living high off the hog."

Then he saw "Fiddler on the Roof" at the Weinberg and everything was brand new.

"It was the first play I'd ever seen," he said. "I was blown away. It was as if they were doing this play just for me. All of a sudden, I had tunnel vision. I thought, 'Oh my gosh, this is what I'm supposed to do.' From that point on, I was poor."

He responded to an advertisement for the Maryland Ensemble, and enrolled in Ensemble School classes. His relationship with the troupe seemed preordained. He had the business savvy the fledgling company required. They had the dramatic knowhow he so desperately sought.

"I became part of the fold," he said.

He begged founder Tad Janes to be knighted a Comedy Pig and was given his chance as a sort of understudy one New Years Eve.

"I was kind of half of a pig," he said. He would later be invited to dive in — whole hog.

"But this whole time, I knew I would leave," Trent said of his tenure with the theater, noting a conversation with a colleague in which he divulged his overriding goal: To make films.

"He said, 'You can't do that here,'" recalled Trent. "Within a few months I was off to Chicago."

In Chicago — "the Holy Grail of improvisation"— Trent took classes with industry launch pad, Second City, but the lure of film continued to draw him in a different direction. Movies, by and large, were made in L.A. And, so, he was off again.

"With each little step, things seemed to be growing to fruition," he said.

The City of Angels is a dog eat dog world, however, and Trent soon discovered the inherent difficulties in making it as an actor on the West coast. But he also discovered an alternative.

"You can do your own thing," he said. "You can make your own stuff."

"Hungry" grew from this revelation. Originally an assignment for a Los Angeles City College course, the eight-minute short was devised as an homage to the silent filmmakers who came before: Chaplin, Keaton and Lloyd. And while many in his class trudged through simply to meet quota, said Trent, he had somewhat loftier aspirations: "I wanted to make it show-able," he said.

And he wanted to make it funny.

"All I want is to make the world laugh," he said. "To make the whole world smile. Like I experienced [watching my first play]. To sit down in a theater and see a film and not worry about bills, or the economy, or your sick uncle too much. I think if the whole world were that way, it would be a happier place."

Shot in flickering Keystone Kops black and white, "Hungry" charts the travails of an apartment dweller attempting to satisfy his appetite – and finding he's not alone. The idea, said Trent, stemmed from a lesson learned from old MET mentor Janes: "Nothing is funnier than the truth."

"Any creative person can make claims to this – You wake up one day, and there's no food in the house. There's also no freaking money. So what do you do? You look for spare change and work with what's at hand," said Trent. "Hungry just happened."

It continues to happen. The film's running in the Greenbelt's Utopia Film Festival is just the latest in a string of accolades. And whether or not it takes the blue ribbon on Saturday, on Sunday, Trent will return to Frederick to drop in on some old friends.

A special screening of "Hungry," and a previous short, "The Smelly Janitor," will be held at the Maryland Ensemble Theatre at 1 p.m. It's a reunion the filmmaker is grateful for.

"It all goes back to the MET, the Ensemble School and Tad and the gang. There are very few days when I don't use those foundations they taught me. The principles are the same [in L.A.] as they are there," said Trent.

That's why every Oct. 2 Trent makes an anniversary call to the MET. "I scream at them for ruining my life," he joked. "No. They changed it forever. If I could change one person's life like that through my films, I could die a happy man."

'Hungry' will screen at 3:30 p.m. on Saturday as part of the 4th Annual Utopia Film Festival at the Greenbelt Community Center, 15 Crescent Road, Greenbelt. The film will also screen along with an earlier short, "The Smelly Janitor," beginning at 1 p.m. Sunday at The Maryland Ensemble Theatre, 31 W. Patrick St., Frederick. A Q&A session will follow. Visit www.trentertainment.com.