

A NEW WAVE
of
FILMMAKERS

WRITTEN BY: COLLEEN THOMPSON



Kristi Ray and Erika Edwards

At the Cuccalorus Film Festival this year, three Wilmington film makers—Nick Westfall, Erica Dunton and Kristi Ray—showcased their new feature films. Their work is raw and scrappy, urgent and intense, and driven by a keen sense of place. The filmmakers have all followed their passion, making do with very little money to produce compelling stories that focus on the vast, diverse identities that make up an often overlooked North Carolinian culture.



Erica Dunton

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8 Slices directed by Nick Westfall.

Nick Westfall's 8 Slices was filmed in Holden Beach, Brunswick County, where he started out as an elementary PE school teacher. The story of Westfall's latest film takes place at Patronies Pizza, where a stranger named John turns up at the pizzeria and endears himself to a group of locals. The group are well read by any definition and well versed in American novels and European philosophers, and each of them adopts a moniker based on their authors' name. As John finds his way into the 'family' it becomes clear he has a motive behind his travels and did not just stumble into Patronies Pizza searching for a job.

"I really tried to make a movie with something to say about what I was going through as I transferred careers from the selfless job of being a teacher to the very self-focused job of being a full-time filmmaker. So, in a way, '8 Slices is a 'personal-pizza movie,'" says Westfall.

The original inspiration for 8 Slices started with the idea of building a great resume versus the virtue of building a great eulogy. "I knew that the movie was going to be about the American dreams of trailer park kids who wanted to be like the writers and philosophers they loved. I had a list of characters already laid out for me. I chose all my favorite existential philosophers and punned them: Jack Berouac, Cimone de Beauvoir, Ann Rann, Wendy Wittgenstein, Schopenhauer, Albert Kamoo, Oscar Wild, Knee Cha. Every single character takes on the nom-de-guerre of their respective writer."

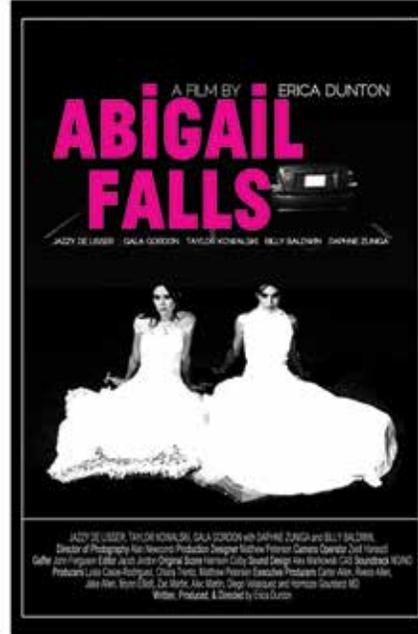
Westfall first grabbed attention with his movie Finding Home, a deeply compassionate and beautifully-crafted film with a central theme around adoption that he had written for his post-grad thesis. Since then, life has been increasingly busy for the filmmaker—he has found himself an agent, written seven screenplay adaptations, directed a few PBS documentaries and several music videos, and launched 8 Slices. Finding that elusive life balance that runs through the theme of 8 Slices is something that Westfall says he is still trying to achieve.

"I have the capacity to forget everything around me and fully focus on writing, filming and editing a movie. You need that in order to successfully do this crazy thing called filmmaking. I've had to create some machinery inside me to help me switch it off," he says.

"Filmmakers are remembered for their work, not them. There's a line in 8 Slices where the character Wendy Wittgenstein says in reference to all the writers she's read, 'All of these writers were great because of what they created; not who they were. Most of them were pretty disturbed people. Hypochondriacs, estranged parents, self-absorbed, and even suicidal.' I think that sums up at least the romanticism I had for all of my favorite writers and filmmakers."



Nick Westfall



Feature film *Abigail Falls* directed by Erica Dunton.

Westfall who now lives in L.A. still believes strongly in the North Carolina film industry that has shaped both his writing and film craft and compels him to tell stories about the people who live here. “Mountains and the sea. Big cities and the country. Lushness everywhere. Friendly people. I’ve always secured locations in NC with no trouble and all of our extras (who are all credited by name at the end of *8 Slices*) volunteered their time to help make the movie; the best crews with great attitudes. I want to make my third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh movies here,” says Westfall.

As for future projects, Westfall’s production company Dockstreet will be shooting two cooking show pilots that are currently in post-production, a YouTube docu-series called *Breaking In*, and a third feature film called *Hornets and Honeybees*, that will be shot in downtown Wilmington in summer of 2019.

Erica Dunton graduated from Durham University with a law degree and then went on to the UK’s National Film and Television School (NFTS.) Her first feature film, *Find Love* premiered at *Slamdance*, where it was picked up for distribution by Lionsgate/Maple and won several awards including ‘Best Independent Vision’ at *Sarasota Film Festival*. She went on to make several other feature films including the acclaimed *The 27 Club* and *To.Get.Her*.

Dunton’s latest feature film *Abigail Falls*, explores a complex relationship between friends just out of college as they navigate their relationship set against the cityscape of New York and the rural mountains of North Carolina. “I wanted to explore the idea of female friendship, how complicated it can be—how one minute your best friend can be the most exasperating person on the planet and you kind of never want to see them again, then the next, they’re calling you stuck on the side of the road somewhere and without hesita-

tion you say, ‘I’ll be right there,’” says Dunton. “I love those colors we have as women—we are constantly making connections, seeing all the invisible layers in every room—but it can hurt sometimes. In this film there’s a boy in the mix; it’s a love triangle of sorts, and the best friend has recently been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, so she’s finding her way.”

Dunton has taught at UNCW as part of the Film Studies faculty, and after working with students it became very clear to her that because of the easy access to technology, everyone can make a film and tell their story. “It’s really important to me to advocate that filmmaking is and always will be a team sport, and just because you can now hold the camera in your palm doesn’t mean you can do it alone,” says Dunton. “Filmmaking is a group of artists in front of and behind the camera coming together to bring to life a world and a story on the big screen, and even if that camera is a phone, you will always need those artists to create a picture worth an audience’s time.”

She chose to shoot *Abigail Falls* entirely on an iPhone because she felt it could capture the immediacy of the characters and allow the audience to feel as though they’re right there with them. “In truth, our phones are with us every day, essentially recording our lives, so choosing this way to tell the story really works. It was not a case of technology dictating the content but rather the content dictating the technology,” says Dunton.

Although the film was shot on an iPhone, Dunton emphasizes that she worked alongside a team of highly skilled people from cinematographers to sound engineers to achieve her vision for the film. “We also worked directly with Apple and tested a prototype recording app called MAVIS. Apple has been relentless in the pursuit of advancing mobile cameras, with the latest generation rivaling even

DSLRs. By giving cinematographers access to these cameras, via manual controls and features such as focus peaking and zebras, MAVIS gives filmmakers the power to define the visuals that they want for their film.”

As a teacher and advocate for young filmmakers, Dunton believes strongly in the future of Wilmington as a filmmaking hub. Citing the advice of her own father, BAFTA winning cinematographer and camera technician Joe Dunton, “You have to show an audience something they haven't seen before. It's always a balance—as an indie filmmaker you have to know your limitations, but you also have to reach for the stars. More than anything you just have to do it.”

As for why she loves making films in Wilmington Dunton has a few reasons, “The crew, the light, the actors and vendors, locations, 23rd Street, Dino, dad and Cucalorus. To me this is one of the best places in the world to make a film or TV show. I hate that we've had to fight so hard to keep the film industry here. The trickle-down effect is real; a show comes to town and yes it can feel a little like the circus has arrived, but it is a circus that will spend a lot of money. I genuinely believe that Wilmington would not be the Wilmington we recognize today without the film industry and the families that call it home,” says Dunton.

Co-founders Erika Edwards and Kristi Ray head up the all women leadership of Honey Head Films, sharing the entire creative process from director to actor. Since 2016, they have made 8 short films and a feature length documentary, along with several commercials and music videos. With a passion for igniting and nurturing the North Carolina film community, they believe strongly in supporting, encouraging and collaborating with as many local artists as possible.

Their first feature film *Lorelei* centers on two impoverished sisters who are reunited after the death of their mother to decide what will become of their family property in rural North Carolina.

“*Lorelei* came about from a visceral need to create more dynamic and challenging roles for young women in film. Erika wrote this script in the summer of 2015 for the two of us to act opposite each other and stretch the boundaries of our generic industry typecast,” says Kristi Ray. “The characters were conceptualized through a curiosity, fascination, and empathy for the people existing in small Southern towns you drive through on your way

to somewhere else. We wanted to bring awareness to the diverse and complex fabric of our shared human experience,” says Ray.

The film gives a voice to rural North Carolina as it explores a socioeconomic status that isn't often represented in mainstream cinema. “We feel people in North Carolina can relate and connect to these characters because, in a sense, they live right down the road from us. Perhaps more importantly, viewers in a distant country could catch a glimpse into what happens outside stereotypical depictions of “American” culture—Texan cowboys, posh uptown Manhattan socialites, or plastic Los Angeles reality stars,” says Ray.

A passion for the local filmmaking drives Ray to encourage others to go out and be a positive force in the industry. “The opportunities we've created for ourselves don't necessarily make sense from a formulaic standpoint. We aren't the ladies with the laundry list of credentials, the best gear or the most experience in town, but we approach each new project with a bright-eyed perspective and choose to collaborate with artists who share in that vision,” says Ray.

“I don't think either of us ever imagined when we wrote *Lorelei* that in a few short years we'd be directing, producing, casting, shooting, editing and acting as a team full-time. Believing in yourself is half the battle. You're not going to always like what you're doing, but what scares you today could be what indirectly creates the next biggest opportunity of your career when you jump in with two feet and go for it.” ¶



Feature film *Lorelei* directed by Kristi Ray and Erika Edwards.