

INTERVIEW: David Elkins, Interim Dean of the School of Filmmaking, North Carolina School of the Arts

BY ELINA SHATKIN



Interim Dean
David Elkins

Tales Out of School

Located 25 miles west of Greensboro in Winston-Salem, the North Carolina School of the Arts is one of the 16 campuses in the University of North Carolina system. NCSA has been celebrated for its dance, design, drama, and music programs since 1965, and in 1993, the school decided to expand the university's artistic horizons by launching an undergraduate filmmaking program.

In the environment of an arts conservatory, the School of Filmmaking offers rigorous professional training in the craft of filmmaking with a strong emphasis on hands-on learning. All students in the film school begin their freshman year as generalists, studying producing, directing, editing, cinematography, screenwriting, and production design. Midway through the fall term of their sophomore year, students make a preliminary decision about the two disciplines they will focus on. For the rest of the year, they take classes predominantly in those areas.

At the end of each year, all students must undergo a portfolio review, regardless of what discipline they have chosen. The students appear before the faculty and presents their work for the year. At the end of the second year, the faculty then choose the students they will accept into their individual disciplines during the students' junior and senior years.

"It's a very competitive program," explains David Elkins, interim dean of the School of Filmmaking and chairman of the cinematography department, adding that it is also quite prolific. "We produce approximately 200 short films per year," he says. Prior to his tenure at the school, Elkins worked as a camera assistant and camera operator and is the author of *The Camera Assistant's Manual*, published by Focal Press, which is now in its fourth printing.

"There are two unique things about the film school,"

Elkins says. "One is our fabulous facilities and the other is our wonderful faculty. The entire faculty comes from the industry. They're working professionals. Faculty members who teach directing are working directors. Faculty members who teach editing have worked as editors. Faculty members are encouraged to continue working in their field, and most of us are still active in our chosen areas. With a 10-to-1 student-to-faculty ratio at the School of Filmmaking, students have the opportunity to work closely with their instructors."

As for facilities, the school boasts three sound stages, grip and camera trucks, editing suites (both Avid and Apple Final Cut Pro), an ADR/Foley stage, mixing facilities, a recording stage that can accommodate a full orchestra, and three motion picture theaters. For their first two years, students shoot on digital video, but junior and senior projects are shot on 16mm film using either an Arriflex SR2 or SR3. All production costs for junior and senior films are paid for by the school. Every production receives the same budget, the same equipment, and the same schedule.

The North Carolina School of the Arts School of Filmmaking graduates 40 to 50 students each year. Since the first class graduated in May 1997, NCSA students such as Cinematographer Tim Orr and Director David Gordon Green have been proving they can compete with filmmakers trained at the most high-profile institutions in the country. ■



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