A Year After the Big Blackout, a Film Festival Flickers to Life

Rooftop Screenings Inspired by the Dark

By MELENA Z. RYZIK

Like everyone who experienced it, Tom Keefe has a story to share about last year's extensive blackout. His involved a missed job interview, an eccentric new landlord, several East Village bars and a chin covered with stubble.

Now Mr. Keefe, an aspiring filmmaker, can add another twist to his tale. Tomorrow, on the first anniversary of the blackout that knocked out power in New York and across much of the Eastern seaboard, he will be the host of the Blackout Film Festival at Office Ops, an arts space in East Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Weather permitting, the free screening will take place at 8 p.m. on the roof at 67 Thames Street. (Information: officeops.org or 718-418-2999.)

Mr. Keefe's original story has an unexpected happy ending: he found the job interview in a bar and, sweaty and stubbly as he was, landed the job, as a production assistant on the remake of "The Manchurian Candidate." The festival's story is equally serendipitous.

At first, Mr. Keefe, 25, considered making a film set during the blackout with a friend. But then of course, a light went on. "I said, 'Why not? I know I have so many friends who are filmmakers, and if we threw a party and had a little party and try to get a bunch of people to make movies.'"

On six weeks' notice the Blackout Film Festival—a fittingly make-shift ode to the anything-is-possible bonomie of that night—was born. The guidelines were simple: 10 minutes or less, blacked-out related. "I wanted the films to capture the feeling from that night, and I also wanted people to make the films kind of quickly with that same spirit," Mr. Keefe said.

He commissioned a Web site (blackoutfilmfest.com) to spread the word and used his tax refund money, about $800, to pay for a post office box for submissions and stylish postcards to advertise the event. And then he waited.

"We were all nervous that it wouldn't really work out because we were throwing it together so fast, but people's response was just the basic idea was so positive," Mr. Keefe said. "So they kind of gave me confidence to spend the money and push ahead with it."

He collected about a dozen digital videos. Most are from other young filmmakers; a few came from VisionFest, an earlier festival that explored similar ideas. Ever the film school grad, he aimed for a balance of narrative and experimental work, and then sought out a friend, filmmaker and comedian, Morgan Gold, to make something obscene and vulgar to lighten the mood.

Mr. Gold's two-minute film, "Blackout," didn't disappoint (think frat boys, not electricity). In an e-mail message, Mr. Gold, 24, of Hartford, explained: "One of the things I've noticed about people during times of crisis is that there's often a lot of confusion and a lot of excitement, but very little actually happening. A lot like a keg party."

The alcohol theme surfaces often. "The only establishments that were open were the bars," said Ilya Chaiken, recalling her walk from Manhattan to her home in Park Slope, Brooklyn, that night. "There were no horror stories that we experienced, really. There were just bad hangovers."

Ms. Chaiken, 34, who made the well-received indie feature "Margaretta Happy Hour" in 2001, explored the consequences of an ill-advised post-bar breakup in her comedic short, also called "Blackout." Details from her own four-hour trek over the Manhattan Bridge, like people wearingספיד-עפ ג-ו המים, made into the film, which makes a point of addressing the specter of terrorism and Sept. 11 in a wry and funny way.

"I think the reality of the blackout experience comes through in the details, like those funny headlamps, and the hotel key cards not working, and the guys who jumped at the opportunity to direct traffic," Ms. Chaiken said. "But for me these were ornaments for the story I wanted to tell."

The story that Martin Glenn wanted to tell was of his East Village neighborhood. Mr. Glenn, 28, submitted a documentary-style short, "Sometimes It's Fun to Be Left in the Dark," which features actual film from the blackout—most strikingly, of a pitch-black Tompkins Square Park with a raging bonfire party going on.

"I just wanted people that don't live here to see what our night was like and experience it without having been here," Mr. Glenn said. "It ended up being a really positive, good vibe in the city that night."

Of course, it's not easy to shoot a blackout. Ms. Chaiken had to resort to flashlights to light some scenes. And Aron Epstein and Daniel Stedman had to create a blackbox, block out light, to house their actors.

Luckily, their actors are not very big. Mr. Epstein, 25, and Mr. Stedman, 26, are cousins and co-directors of "The Moth and the Firefly," a four-minute film about a moth who becomes attracted to a firefly after the blackout robs the moth of its beloved light source.

As with any epic, casting the hero was the main problem. "We found that there were plenty of fireflies in Prospect Park and Central Park, but there were very few moths," Mr. Epstein said. They contacted an entomologist at North Carolina State University, who sent them some packets of moth larvae, which hatched in a cheesecloth covered bucket in Mr. Stedman's Brooklyn apartment.

"It was actually ideal because we had 20 or 25 duplicated moths," Mr. Epstein said. (Hollywood's dream come true.)

From insect love stories to gross-out comedies, the backdrop of a common experience as large as last year's blackout was inspiration enough for most filmmakers. "The dramatic possibilities are endless," Ms. Chaiken said. "Anything that inspires that many stories is going to inspire the storytellers."

And like so many stories from that night, the festival tomorrow will culminate with a party. Except this time, the festival's Web site notes, the beer will be cold.