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Film students with a Cannes-do attitude

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THE numbers are against it. Only nine films are selected worldwide to compete at the Cannes Film Festival for the Golden Palm for short films. The festival's Critics' Week, a separate side-bar presented by French film critics, chooses only seven short films to run before its seven features. Both programs are showing films made by students at the Victorian College of the Arts and Music's film course.

Edward Housden is tall, slightly stooped and stringy; it is hard to imagine anyone less likely to make a film about teenage bodybuilders.

Muscles, which he directed as his graduation-year film in bush around Eltham and at a bodybuilding competition in Camberwell, was produced by Nick Sherry, who did VCAM's producers' course. *Muscles* is one of the nine films in the official competition.

"I had this idea of a young person bodybuilding to extreme levels, and I wondered if that could be true and started searching on YouTube," said Housden.

"And I found these young kids who were just ridiculously ripped and doing these narcissistic poses. I just thought that would be an interesting subject for a film."

In the film, a teenaged girl is nudged towards bodybuilding by her gym-nut parents, forming a cosy trio of pumped-iron togetherness that excludes her uncomfortably quiet younger brother.

Bridget is played by Den Kamenev, an actress they found on a casting website who had incidentally built up her muscles by swimming; the boy is played by Max Bergh. "He loved to talk, which is interesting for a character who doesn't say anything."

Ariel Kleiman, who was director of photography on *Muscles*, has his own film *Deeper than Yesterday* screening in Critics' Week.

Set in a submarine, it explores the dynamic in a group of hard men half-crazed by cabin fever.

As if finding a submarine - which Kleiman eventually did, near Hastings - and shooting in its small spaces were not difficult enough, he also resolved to make his 20-minute film entirely in Russian.

"I couldn't picture the story with Australian accents," he said.

"My parents were born in Odessa so I've grown up around Russian men my whole life and my gut feeling was it should be in Russian. The passion in the language and the way Russian men wear their emotions on their sleeves are all part of it."

After endless searching they found the submarine, which had been bought from the navy by enthusiasts hoping to turn it into a museum and has been sitting in the water for years.

They found Russians from acting classes and handing out flyers, but the lead is played by a nurse.

"We tried to find tough guys," said Kleiman. "It was a bit of a daunting task filming them in tight spaces. They're not small. But I was amazed by how dedicated they were to the film."

Both films go to dark places; both filmmakers were exploring subcultures far from their own lives.

Housden says the bodybuilding scene surprised him with its warmth. "I was expecting it to be really aggressive and competitive, so I was interested to find it was almost exactly the opposite: a real community, with everyone supporting each other and very friendly."

Both also faced more than their fair share of production problems.

Shooting in the submarine's small spaces - many too low to allow anyone to stand upright - was complicated by the fact there was no power there: everything, including generators, had to be ferried across on dinghies. "The whole process took a couple of hours," said producer Ben Gilovitz. One of *Deeper than Yesterday's* Russians regularly arrived drunk.

On *Muscles*, the hired camera malfunctioned and the footage for two days was streaky and unusable.

"That's what makes it even more bizarre to be here in Cannes," says Housden.

"Watching the footage ruined and wondering if we would be able to finish the film at all. And it's a big step up from sitting in class last year to having a film in the world's biggest competition."

Gilovitz says he submitted *Deeper than Yesterday* to Critics' Week and Directors' Fortnight in Cannes because it was too long for the official competition.

"I pleaded with Ari to cut out 10 minutes, but he had that whole artistic choice thing," he laughs, "and we just got an email back one day saying we'd been selected for Critics' Week.

"I thought it was a joke at first. We'd only just got back from Sundance where *Young Love*, the film we did in second year [at VCAM], screened and we were on the top of the world from that, but then to get this email as well didn't seem real."

Nicolette Freeman, who convenes the undergraduate film program at VCA and was officially supervising producer on both the films in Cannes, was looking justifiably proud at Screen Australia's welcome drinks on Thursday night.

"I think it's fantastic - but there must be something good about our assessments too, because these were the top two films on the course," she said.

"I'm completely proud of them and very happy that they're both here."

The school's students and graduates have had a remarkable showing in Cannes over the years, which she puts down to tough selection procedures and a competitive atmosphere, "which makes them raise the bar".

Most importantly, she said, the students write and direct their own projects. "That's different from AFTRS [the Australian Film, Television and Radio School], for example, where they are training as writers or directors. VCA has always been spoken of as the auteur school, by comparison."

With Glendyn Ivins winning the Palme D'Or for a short film with *Cracker Bag* in 2003, and Julius Avery winning a Jury Prize two years ago for *Jerry Can*, 16 projects by VCA students and alumni have been invited to Cannes in the past 20 years.

"It's pretty good for a small school on the other side of the world," Ms Freeman said.

Deeper than Yesterday screens for the first time on Tuesday, and *Muscles* has its official screening next Saturday.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/movies/film-students-with-a-cannesdo-attitude-20100514-v4ij.html>