

Independent film honestly reflects inner-city Tucson

By Phil Villarreal
Arizona Daily Star

At the behest of his alarm clock, Brandon Quihuis flips out of bed, grabs his gear, and heads out to shoot some hoops. It's midnight in South Tucson, and while some kids his age sleep and others are on the streets, looking for trouble, Brandon (Manny Vidal) clings to basketball because it's the only positive thing he's got in his life. It's a ticket out of the despair that surrounds him in "Runnin' at Midnite."

At the gym, he'll meet Darryl King (Michael Clark), a college basketball player who's trying to prove his career-ending injury won't end his career. Brandon won't see his best friend Carlos (Alexis Levario) there tonight. He's out risking his life to avenge the death of a gangster pal.

Basketball is central to the film, the feature debut from independent Tucson filmmaker Pablo Toledo, who drew from his experience with midnight basketball programs in Tucson.

But this isn't exactly a sports movie. "Runnin'" is more about life's choices and the repercussions that follow. This is a dark drama that's as harsh and unforgiving as the ghetto.

Youth gangs have been given a thorough treatment in the movies, but rarely, save for "Boyz N the Hood," has there been such an honest, unglorified portrait of street life. Toledo isn't preaching, not is he telling fairy tales. He's showing you inner-city Tucson and forcing you to look into your back yard.

Toledo introduces each of his characters in scenes without dialogue, showing us where each player draws his motivation. Each sees basketball as a last chance to rise out of the cycle of violence that surrounds them.

Hoping to keep kids off of the streets, a golden-hearted police officer (Miguel Ortega) operates a midnite basketball program to hone their skills and shape their lives with workshops and lifesaving advice, which the kids take with a groan and a roll of the eyes. A memorable scene shows players filing into the gym, checking their handguns at the counter.

"Runnin'" is a beautifully filmed, tension-packed drama that nails its message with realistic dialogue and several strong performances from first time actors. Toledo hired three professional thespians: Ortega, Clark and Daniel Chacon, but hit the streets of Tucson to fill out the cast, most notably Chris Glenn Romero, who oozes personality as Carlos' surly pal, Flipper.

Toledo shot the film at 20 locations around town, operating on a shoestring budget of \$35,000.

Narrated from the point of view of a reporter doing a story on the midnite basketball program, the story reveals the racism and poverty that lurk in the city. The film's many Tucson references are priceless. Carlos' love interest works at Micha's Restaurant, local news anchor Guy Atchley makes an appearance, and Brandon's and Darryl's names are the same as two former Pima Community College basketball players. Basketball usually looks fake in the movies, but here it looks genuine because Toledo had the actors take part in real games against one another.

Don't walk, run to see this film at the Screening Room this week. It's the kind of movie that lingers in your mind.

Tucsonan hopes film uplifts youths

Michael Chihak

Tucson Citizen

A first-time filmmaker. Three professional actors. Dozens of eager but inexperienced volunteers. Loads of donated or deeply discounted film-making equipment. Professional expertise in cinematography and musical scoring.

Most important of all, a vision, not for a film, but for a better Tucson for young people. Combined, that list of people and assets adds up to “Runnin’ At Midnite,” a film that will premiere in Tucson later this year.

Tucsonan Pablo Toledo is the dreamer behind the project. His story is about a group of South Side youths struggling with peer and societal pressures and a police officer trying to steer them right with midnight basketball at a local gymnasium.

Toledo, a 28-year-old graduate of film school at the University of Southern California, said he sees the film as one that can help lift young people out of difficult, even life-threatening, situations.

“I wouldn’t have put over eight years of work into this if I didn’t think it would make a difference,” he said this week before giving me a preview of the 106-minute movie.

In fact, Toledo’s work already has uplifted some young people. He works with youths in Access Tucson, a cable television operation set up with a federal Youth Opportunity grant. Many of the young people he became acquainted with in that program worked with him on the film, including several who played key acting roles.

“These are at-risk kids whom I work with for three hours a day,” Toledo said. “Most are school dropouts. Most are from impoverished backgrounds. I try to inspire them to tell their own stories.”

In “Runnin’ At midnite,” many complex elements—the lure of gangs, inattentive or missing parents, stereotyping news media and a big-hearted but tough cop—combine to tell the tale of Brandon and Carlos, talented young basketball players trying to stay on the straight and narrow.

The message is strong and clear, and the language and images in the movie will disturb those who don’t want to know what’s going on with young people or who may be in denial about it.

“This is not a film about gangs,” Toledo said. “This is not a film about the inner city. This is a film about kids who have to make choices. When society fails them, where do they turn? Where do they run? It’s about choices.”

The Tucson native attended Wakefield Middle School and Salpointe Catholic High School. He conceived “Runnin’ At Midnite” when attending Pima Community College and began serious work on it at USC.

A short version of the film was his senior project, and it was among those cited for its high quality. Toledo’s instructors encouraged him to turn it into a feature-length film.

Since college graduation in 1997, that’s exactly what he’s been doing, raising money through operation with his father, Lawrence Toledo, of Hope Street Productions.

He also has been working with Access Tucson and teaching an Introduction to Media Production class in the media arts department at the University of Arizona.

For the film, Toledo hired three professional actors, but the rest of the players and behind-the-camera crew are Tucsonans, young people with whom Toledo has become acquainted

through his work. A college professor from USC, who is a cinematographer did the filming for Toledo, and the music was composed by Sharon Farber, who has done several movies.

The film was shot on the streets and in the alleys of Tucson and South Tucson. The basketball playing scenes were shot at the old Sunnyside High School gym.

“Runnin’ At Midnite” will premiere at the Screening Room downtown October 26 and run for one week in the 140-seat theater. Daytime screening for high school students are already booked.

After that, Toledo hopes for a wide theatrical release, but nothing is definite yet.

Meantime, he is completing on the film, improving the sound and adding the musical score. And, he is working daily with young people in his Access Tucson project.

“That’s been a great complement to my work on “Runnin’ At Midnite,” he said. “It almost feels like we’re starting a little movement here.”

If it’s on behalf of real-life young people such as the ones portrayed in the film, then movement is what we as a community need.

HD Post-production

By Amy Stodghill

Post Production

Pablo Toledo, a USC film school graduate, is a Tucson-based filmmaker who is completing his first feature-length film, *Runnin' At Midnite*, in HDTV. I followed up with Pablo recently to find out how post-production was coming along.

Give an overview of the post-production process for HD.

Well, it started in pre-production, when we faced the question “how do we see our HD tapes once we shoot them”? Well, we started hustling...

During the production we had a HD downconverter, which was graciously donated to us from a firm in LA. We could take our HD signal to anything, from PAL to NTSC to some formats I'd never even heard of before! This is a necessary evil because there is no way to run HD through an NTSC system. It's like apples and oranges. So, as we watched our “dailies” (somewhat outdated term in this digital age) we downconverted at the same time to BetaSP. After production we archived our HD masters, as well as our DAT Backup masters, and went into post with Beta dubs.

Our first session was on a discreet logic *edit 5.0. We compressed most of our downconverted footage at 5:1 and it still looked amazing coming from HD, and the discreet system was a workhorse. Our second offline begins next month, where we'll take our EDL from the first session and recapture uncompressed to give us an amazing offline copy to begin to present to festivals and distributors.

Currently we are comparing various HD online suites. It can get pretty expensive so we are doing a lot of research. Most everything else is the same as far as post. In HD, save the process of downconverting and finding a shop that specializes in HD. The rest of the process, such as audio, titles, scoring, is pretty much the same as a film post process. The downconversion process, however, is something that shouldn't be overlooked. The best quote we got prior to production was 100/tape, and with each HD tape running 80 dollars and a corresponding Beta for each HD running in the 20-dollar range, you can see how the numbers start to add up. There is no way around downconverting, so you have to have a good plan going into production to handle it smoothly. If not, you'll be stuck with a bunch of tapes you can't watch, and that is a filmmaker's nightmare.

What are the drawbacks of shooting HD from a post-production perspective?

The downconversion process is somewhat cumbersome and it adds a hefty price tag to your stock. Also, the high price tag of HD online makes it tough, from an indie filmmaker's perspective, to cut your HD footage before your online. For example, I would love to cut a short HD trailer to show people how amazing this format is, yet it is cost prohibitive. It can be frustrating. On the other hand, even our downconverted BetaSP footage for our online looks spectacular. I've cut some low rez trailers on a firewire system and people still comment on the great resolution and latitude. Remember, once you have the downconverted footage you can cut away on any edit suite out there and go back to the masters when the time is right.

Even though finishing on HD is our ultimate goal, the quality of the downconverted footage is far superior in every way to every other digital format out there. So, if you don't want to spend the coin on the HD online I would still consider downconverted HD better than anything else out there.

Did you run into any problem with the downconversion?

Since we didn't send the tapes out to a post house to do the downconversion that job fell on our shoulders. The downconverter box, which is about as wide as a beta deck but only about 6 inches high, was brought down from LA to our shooting site in Tucson, Arizona. It's a very expensive machine, around 44K for the low end model is what we were told. Anyhow, like any machine, it can take awhile to make, especially when you're downconverting after 17 hours on the set. The technology didn't seem to be as seamless or user friendly as most digital devices out today, especially something that costs 44K to buy! Nonetheless, it provided us with a beautiful signal to pipe our Beta deck. There were a few artifacts in the downconverted images but I tend to blame our unfamiliarity with the machine rather than the box itself. It was a blessing, however, to have it donated.

The artifacts are something we decided not to worry about. After all, the downconverter footage was for an offline anyhow. Everything else went smooth.

Would you shoot on HD again?

I absolutely love HD. It does not remind me of film, nor does it scream "video." It is its own monster. I am thankful my DP and I saw eye to eye and decided to let "HD be HD." No filters, no schemes to mimic a "film look." The latitude of HD allows you to compose shots and do things you just couldn't do with any other format, period. If your lighting scheme is right, it will handle anything you throw at it, and most of all it has an "emotional" quality I think every filmmaker wants to capture. As a director I felt HD gave me unlimited options when it came to my compositions and choices in our cinematography.

I would caution, however, that HD needs to have a DP who can bring out the format's qualities. So many times I hear of these digital filmmakers becoming "one man bands" and saying "we'll just use natural light." If your DP doesn't understand lighting then you will be disappointed in HD, and probably any other DV format you choose.

I would only shoot HD again if the story or subject warranted it. I am a firm believer that the format you choose should compliment and highlight your story.

Pablo expects an October completion for *Runnin' At Midnite* (www.runninatmidnite.com) then he hopes to premiere it at various festivals. He is currently in pre-production on his next project, a feature-length drama set in the hills of Nogales, Mexico. Pablo is looking into shooting on HD again or possibly experimenting with 24fps progressive camera.

HDTV Introduction

By Sharon Streams
24fps Cinematography

Pablo Toledo, a USC film school graduate, is a Tucson-based filmmaker who is shooting his first feature-length film, *Runnin' At Midnite*, in HDTV. I recently spoke with Pablo, asking him to discuss why he made this decision, and what impact it will have on his production.

Why did you decide to shoot in HDTV?

We've been asked that question a lot lately. When I sat down with our director of photography, Mr. Robert Ballo, we quickly decided to shoot on a digital format rather than film. This was a decision based mainly on the screenplay, rather than budget concerns or being "trendy." Although the obvious advantages of digital (higher shooting ratio, quick post-turnaround, etc.) are great, the aesthetic of digital is not suited to every story. Our film, *Runnin' At Midnite*, is a character study of several kids growing up in the barrios of South Tucson and the midnight basketball league they turn to for salvation. The film is full of thematic contrasts (such as cold days and warm nights; sanctuary in a closed, dark gym, and danger on open, bright, warm places such as parks, alleys and vacant lots). It's these types of "thematic" story contrasts we felt would benefit from the inherent nature of digital, which is high-contrast. We both feel that story and format must benefit each other, and that was our main concern when choosing a format.

Once we settled on digital, we had a lot of choices to make. Originally we felt miniDV would be our choice, since I have a great XL1 package and miniDV editing suite in my office. Still, as we began exploring the pros and cons of not only miniDV, but DVCAM, digibeta, Digital-S and JVCPro, it soon became apparent that all the digital formats suffered from a tremendous lack of resolution. Naturally, when we began to explore HDTV, we were amazed at the advantages it offered over all other formats and how easy it would be to integrate high definition into an NTSC post. Through the process of down-conversion, we will be able to get a high-quality NTSC dub from an HDTV master with relative ease (and the dub will still be better than any NTSC original) and archive our HDTV master for an HDTV online and possible "blow-up" to 35 mm. As a filmmaker, this essentially allows me to create a "film" for the present, but assure my format for the future. Also, as we move closer to DTV, there is a tremendous lack of HDTV-originated programming, thus creating a possibly very lucrative market for an HDTV film after a theatrical run (or in place of one). My main concern was the market. All of a sudden you have a huge flood of XL-1, VX1000 digital films saturating the market. As an indie filmmaker, you need to look at your budget, your script, and style, and always look to set yourself apart from the pack. HDTV gave us such an opportunity without too many compromises. In using HDTV, I'm not too worried about it looking too "video"-HDTV is what it is: it has its own look, feel, etc.

Is there a significant difference in resolution with HD in comparison to miniDV?

Yeah, there is a huge resolution difference. 1080 x 1000, I think for HD, whereas NTSC is around half that. Plus that, resolution is covering 16 x 9, closer to film, and NTSC has less resolution on a different aspect ratio. A downconverter was donated for the shoot- a \$44,000 machine! You can send in your HD tapes to a lab, but this way we save on that cost. The downconverter is a big ol' box that takes the signal to whatever we want- NTSC 625, 525, 720I, etc. We are going out to Betacam. Even if we sent it to a lab, it would be 100/HD tape, whereas

you're talking thousands of dollars to get the same amount of minutes processed. The savings are remarkable.

What about the cost of the camera?

Now, there is no comparison between the cost of an HD camera and a miniDV. To buy, you're looking at \$100,000 versus \$5,000—a big, big difference. To rent a HDCAM, with some help and some connections and some favors, you could get a \$5,000/week rental. For all the up sides, I'd rather spend \$15,000 on a rental for a three-week shoot than \$5,000 for a miniDV camera. Tapes run expensive for HD—\$77—yet miniDV runs in the \$20, so your looking at a \$50-a-pop difference. The way I look at it, miniDV is much more affordable. But hey, if you're making a movie, you are putting it all on the line. You have one chance to shine, and then it's over. I can't imagine why anyone would skimp on the capture format. Everything else you can somehow work around, but resolution and bit depth and all that camera stuff is either there or it's not, period. My advice: go HD on complicated projects that you want to be the cornerstone of your career, and use miniDV on documentaries and small intimate projects that don't require a lot of other resources. This project has over 15 locations, over 30 characters, etc., so we're making sure we're coming correct and getting the best picture we can.