

# John Hanshaw

of the **Guerrilla Filmfest**

Interview by Russell Nohelty



I was jotting down some notes at a coffee shop in downtown Silver Spring, when I received a text message from John Hanshaw, saying he was five minutes away. Of course, in this business, you always double anyone's estimate; so I felt I had some time to continue those little memos on one of my favorite underground filmmakers.

John Hanshaw has touched almost everyone influential in the D.C. film community. His Guerrilla Film Festival, now in its seventh year, is an undeniable success. The Guerrilla Film Club holds semi-monthly networking events for film professionals and film lovers. And his tireless campaigns, for the independent films he so loves, continue to have an impact on the D.C. scene.

Ten minutes later, John burst into the coffee shop with all the fervor you would see watching him at an event. He offers to buy me a drink, I accept, and he's off again – no doubt glad-handing with the barista. But that's John: an unassuming guy, cordial, funny, and candid. Sit with him for five minutes, and you understand why everyone loves him. It's hard to believe this regular Joe, with such humble ambitions, is one of the most instrumental figures in the D.C. independent film scene.

RUSSELL:

In thirty words or less, what is the mission of the Guerrilla Film Festival?

JOHN:

To screen films that are independent or foreign, and therefore not receiving the full attention they may deserve.

RUSSELL:

That was definitely less than thirty words. Why do you do the Guerrilla film festival?

JOHN:

Well, the festival basically started as a way to screen films from a local contest called, "The 48 hour film project." A bunch of friends and I had teams for that contest, and I decided it would be fun to screen the films from that contest.

RUSSELL:

Is that where the name came from?

JOHN:

That was the origin of the idea. I thought it was a cool name. I wanted to show stuff that was from guerrilla film makers. People doing stuff that was a little alternative, a little bit challenging, a little bit outside the Hollywood paradigm.

RUSSELL:

But you show Oscar winning films...

JOHN:

The thing about the Oscar winners that I screen, is that they're short films, so they're not Hollywood productions. They are just recognized by the academy as being fine production. But they can be very experimental, fairly low budget, and fairly alternative because they're in the shorts category.

RUSSELL:

How do you pick films?

JOHN:

I have a screening committee. I used to pick films by myself but I found I can't trust my own judgment anymore. (Laugh)

RUSSELL:

Do you get a lot of local stuff?

JOHN:

You know, I don't, because I don't have an open call for entries. Basically, what I do is cruise around the web. I look at who won which festival. I look at who's in the festival for x-y-z, and I'll just approach the director and say, 'I heard you won this festival, it sounds interesting, send it to me.'

RUSSELL:

Do you ever plan on expanding it to an open call?

JOHN:

I might do that, if I had a bigger staff. I know a lot of festivals, even smaller ones, they'll get 7000 films and if you have a call for entries, you have a responsibility to look at everything. That's a big time commitment, so I'm not quite there yet.

# I know a lot of people who spent years in New York or L.A., and they're coming back to D.C.

RUSSELL:

I think I know the answer to this one, but just to clarify: which came first, the film club, or the film festival?

JOHN:

The film festival came first. I was trying to do that every six months, but it became too much. So, I created the film club as a way for people to get together more often than once a year, or once every six months, and appreciate independent film.

RUSSELL:

So the film club came from the film festival. Was there a big demand for it?

JOHN:

People kept saying 'when is the next film festival?' and I'd say, 'maybe six months, maybe a year.' [They'd say,] 'a year, I can't wait a year!' So that's why I created the film club. And I think there's a lot of demand for it. 150 people are showing up for each one now.

RUSSELL:

I've definitely seen it expand. It used to be every couple of months, but now it seems to be happening monthly or bimonthly.

JOHN:

I try. I'm trying to make it something to sustain the festival.

RUSSELL:

What can we expect from this year's festival?

JOHN:

This year some stuff I'm going to show is going to be more aggressive, politically. To date, I've shown a lot of films that are interesting stories, but they're not necessarily in-your-face political. And I think you're going to see a bit more of that.

RUSSELL:

Do you have the program set already?

JOHN:

No. I'm still pulling it together. It's guerrilla, organizationally, as well. There's going to be a flurry of activity soon.

RUSSELL:

What is it about the process that gets you excited enough to keep doing this?

JOHN:

I think after the last festival, I got probably 20 e-mails from people saying that, '[it] was a fantastic event. I love

what you're doing. D.C. needs more of it. I'm glad that you're making the effort.' And for me, that is a big charge.

RUSSELL:

You are one of the people to know in this city. You're on the ground. What do you think of D.C. Film?

JOHN:

I think it's moving in some interesting directions. Because, I know a lot of people who spent years in New York or L.A., and they're coming back to D.C.— for personal reasons or otherwise—and they still want to do production stuff, but they want to do it in D.C. So, you're finding line producers and directors who've shot feature films that have gotten distribution nationally, who are now here and they're interested in new projects. So, that's really interesting to me. In the past, people, everyone, would just head off to New York or L.A., and we'd never see them again.

RUSSELL:

You're speaking of established people, what about new independent filmmakers?

JOHN:

I think it's a good thing I'm seeing, because these people have experience, and D.C. being the kind of place it is, they're willing to share their experience and knowledge. It's not as competitive as New York or L.A. So, I know these people with these great experiences, and they're willing to talk to anyone about their projects, or give feedback on scripts. So, if you have a great idea, these guys are at least willing to give you some feedback.

RUSSELL:

Why do we film?

JOHN:

Well, I think it's the same reason people paint or they write; they want to create something. They have a story to tell, and they want to tell it to other people. And, if they have that energy and that drive, and the right kind of equipment, and technical support, it's one of the greatest creative outlets you can find.

The Guerrilla Film Festival runs on June 1 and 2.

Visit: <http://www.gfilmfest.com/>

*Russell Nohelty is the executive producer of 100Dimension Television. He has worked in production for five years and has excellent relationships with the D.C. film community.*

**All photos: Armand Emamdjomeh**

