

"Hate Crime" Resonates With A Vengeance

By Louis Weisberg, Staff writer

Movie audiences have always had a special affection for revenge fantasies. When Charles Bronson took the law into his own hands in "Death Wish," the public cheered so loudly that a new movie genre was born. More recently, the Bride's bloody thirst for vengeance in "Kill Bill" carried two films to box office success.

But some movie critics have taken exception to the revenge element in "Hate Crime," a new indie feature in which a gay man bashes back against a basher who destroyed his life. Co-producer Ebony Tay smells homophobia in the criticism.

"(The critics) are very upset that a gay man could do this," says Tay, a composer and musician who also wrote the film's score. "There's this sense that gay men shouldn't have a gun or go butch." Not surprisingly, however, GLBT audiences have found the movie hugely cathartic. Tay said GLBT people are hungry to see gay characters stand up for themselves.

At panel discussions following screenings of "Hate Crime," audience members have described how the film gave voice to their experiences with anti-gay discrimination and violence. "Some of these people see exactly what they've gone through in the movie," Tay said. "They're dying to see this issue addressed."

One of the most powerful personal testimonials came after a screening in Dallas. A lesbian in the audience who said she'd been gang-raped because of her sexual orientation shared her struggle with unresolved rage since the attack. For her, the movie's ending provided an emotional release: "She said, 'This movie stopped my anger,'" Tay said.

"Hate Crime" has been cathartic for Tay as well. She has two gay brothers, one of whom lost his partner to suicide. Tay said her "brother-in-law" was despondent over his family's rejection, which she described as an emotional hate crime. Her involvement with the movie has been gratifying because it's allowed her to help bring visibility to the devastating effects of homophobia.

In every city where "Hate Crime" screens, Tay includes her brother-in-law among the names of the hate crime victims that are read aloud at the premiere. "It's the hardest thing I have to do," Tay said. "His picture sits on my meditation stand every day. His spirit, Gwen Araujo's spirit, Matthew Shepard's spirit—these are with me every day."

The emotional toll of the project, however, has been outweighed by its success, Tay said. The project has enjoyed good fortune from the start.

"Hate Crime" is an unlikely project in Hollywood terms. It was conceived and written by Tommy Stovall, owner of a small Dallas video-production company. Not only had he never written a screenplay, he'd never even stepped foot on a film set. "I was totally intimidated," Stovall said. Stovall's goal was to create a suspense thriller with real-life gay characters as opposed to Hollywood versions. "I didn't want to do the 'tragic fag' movie," he said. "That had been done a million times before, and as a gay person I wanted to portray gay people the way I wanted to see them portrayed."

Despite his lack of experience and ties to the film industry, he somehow managed to attract top-name talent to the project, including actors Lin Shaye, Chad Donella, Seth Peterson and Bruce Davison (who received an Oscar nomination for his portrayal of a gay man in "Longtime Companion"). The star cast guaranteed the film would get visibility.

Stovall's executive producers—his life partner Marc Sterling—was also a movie neophyte. By tapping friends and business associates, Sterling, an accountant, managed to raise the cost of filming (about \$500,000) in just three weeks. That's an incredibly paltry sum by Hollywood standards, but it was enough to get the cameras rolling.

Although mainstream critics have been less than enthusiastic, "Hate Crime" has been a clear hit on the indie film festival circuit (it sold out at Chicago's Reeling 2005 Lesbian and Gay International Film Festival). It won awards for best supporting actor (Chad Donella) and best supporting actress (Lin Shaye) at the Breckenridge Festival of Film, where Stovall also won best director.

"Hate Crime" was featured at the prestigious Palm Springs Film Festival, garnered the best feature/audience choice award and best feature/executive director's choice award at The 2005 Sedona International Film Festival and also won the audience choice award at the 2005 Q Cinema in Ft. Worth.

While "Hate Crime" isn't going to make anyone rich, it's doing well financially by small indie standards. With no money for advertising or marketing, Tay hit on the strategy of enlisting the help of GLBT groups in various cities to generate word of mouth for the film. In each market where "Hate Crime" is shown, the premiere is staged as a benefit for a local organization, which, in turn, promotes the event. The premiere is followed by a short limited run.

The strategy has worked well. At a Landmark Theater in Dallas two weeks ago, "Hate Crime" took in the fourth largest per-screen average in the country, despite - or perhaps because of - a protest staged outside the theater by a fundamentalist Christian group.

Anti-violence projects and the Human Rights Campaign have been among the groups participating in local premieres. The Chicago sponsor is the Gay Liberation Network - Tay's favorite of all the groups involved: "It's got the most balls," she said.

"Hate Crime" will screen in seven markets this summer before going to DVD in the fall.