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Another World

By **JERI ROWE, Go Triad Editor**

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Emily Edwards loves going spooky. Ask her about her favorite director, and she'll name Alfred Hitchcock or M. Night Shyamalan (before "The Village"). Check out her books at home, and you'll see — beside the sweet, classroom pictures of her only child, Marissa Mokaren — two shelves full of stuff such as "Witches," "The Annotated Dracula," "Encyclopedia of Ghosts and Spirits" and "Horrors: History of Horror Movies."

But see her movie "Root Doctor," which will be shown Saturday at Carolina Theatre as part of the Carolina Film and Video Festival, and you'll realize what drives the imagination of this Alabama-born college professor with the sweet-as-honey drawl.

It's that backwoods magic of the rural South, the suspicious South, the hard-luck South. It's a place Southern novelists Harry Crews and Larry Brown love to tread. And now, so does Edwards, who teaches writing and filmmaking classes at UNCG. She explores the mystical world of the root worker, or conjoure, who uses herbs, rocks, stones and bones to change the course of human affairs in something folks call hoodoo.

Edwards, who wrote, directed and produced "Root Doctor," patterned her film after James Spurgeon Jordan, a round-faced, genteel-looking man from Murfreesboro who farmed, ran a logging operation, owned a baseball team and practiced hoodoo on the side.

But in "Root Doctor," her conjoure is no genteel-looking gentleman. He's what Edwards calls a "spooky uncle." Named Onzi Jack, Edwards' root doctor is an ancient-looking character with milk-white eyes, a craggy smile and a low gurgle of a voice.

On camera, Onzi Jack helped an abused young woman in trouble.

But off camera, that's where the real action took place. Edwards linked UNCG with GTCC, N.C. A&T and Piedmont Community College in Yanceyville and had students and instructors from those schools collaborate with the Triad's rich pool of acting and musical talent.

During the past year, four college instructors and more than 50 students and former students worked together to produce a 50-minute film that dripped with atmosphere, mood, real Southern accents and spooky blues.

The movie became a mobile classroom because all students worked to gain credits toward graduation. And for Edwards, that was the real reward.

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Scenes from "Root Doctor" (with Juan Fernandez as Onzi Jack and Gina Tate as Yolande) play on a computer in the office of Emily Edwards (left), a UNCG professor of writing and filmmaking.

Go!See!Do!

'Root Doctor' Part of the Carolina Film and Video Festival

When: 5 p.m. Saturday

Where: Carolina Theatre, 310 S. Greene St., Greensboro

Admission: Free

Information: 334-4197,
www.carolinafilmandvideofestival.org

"The job of the production first and foremost is to teach students the process of making a film," Edwards says. "They'll see the faculty out there struggling, and they'll understand that we don't have all the answers. That is the important part of our learning process: make a film, work together, not pass judgment and really know what that feels like."

Edwards started writing "Root Doctor" two years ago. The spark came when she was working on her film "Wondrous Healing," a documentary that explored the relationships among shamanistic ritual, belief and human health. It was then — as she did as a TV journalist two decades ago in Alabama — that she began looking into the mojo behind a root doctor.

She researched, interviewed people and collected stories. She wrote the script at home and came up with something she felt was honest to the supernatural South. She peppered her script with images of a two-pump gas station, a two-aisle country store and a rusty pickup truck and used it as a backdrop to illustrate the strength of female friendships. And she slipped in backwoods Southernisms such as "ugly trouble" and "snake-belly drunk."

She brought in Michael Corbett, director of film and video production technology at Piedmont Community College, with whom she had worked before. She also recruited her own students and held auditions to find local talent.

That's where she found Dauna Brown-Jessup, a veteran actor with a lengthy résumé that included "School Daze," "The Color Purple" and several episodes of "Matlock." She was cast as Lucy, the pickup-driving friend who was skeptical of Onzi Jack.

"You know, Emily always talks about her vision, and she put her vision on paper," said Brown-Jessup, who runs the Fine Arts Center of the Triad Inc., a spot where 350 students dance, play soccer and learn gymnastics. "I mean, she heard these stories about the roots, and she just dove in to decipher it for herself, and that took bravery."

"Most people would be skeptical and not want to pursue the unknown. For me, the unknown drives me crazy. But she wasn't afraid. She went for it."

Edwards coaxed Kodak to donate all the film they used, and she secured three grants — two from UNCG and one from Piedmont Community College — to help cover \$12,500 of her \$20,000 movie. Everything else was donated. Soon, "Root Doctor" took on the by-the-bootstraps work ethic of every indie film: do-it-yourself storytelling from a non-Hollywood point of view.

"It's so hard to get any kind of backing from a major or even minor studio around here, and anytime you can get that backing — and get it out there and be seen — that's so important," said Juan Fernandez, a local director and professional actor who plays Onzi Jack.

"It allows you to see different points of view that you don't see in the mainstream, and that keeps everybody's mind open and lets you know the possibilities of new ideas, sometimes risky ideas," he said. "You're not going to get that in a studio or TV production."

The filming took place during an eight-day period last March. The crew shot 12 hours a day in varied spots, including The Blind Tiger, a neighborhood bar in Greensboro, and a stretch of woods in Caswell

Jerry Wolford/©News & Record

The cinematography by Michael Corbett and his students also layered "Root Doctor" in light that ranged from the golden glow of twilight to the goose-bump eeriness of shadows.

Don't-miss films by Chad Phillips, director of the Carolina Film and Video Festival

"Big Enough"

9:07 p.m. Thursday

Elliott University Center Auditorium

Directed by Jan Krawitz

Independent documentary;
Stanford, Calif.; 53 minutes

In this intimate portrait, several dwarfs who appeared in Jan Krawitz's film "Little People" welcome the camera into their lives 20 years later. Through a prism of

County. There, the temperature hovered at 23 degrees, and the actors huddled in blankets or in heated cars between takes.

That finger-freezing shoot late at night helped give "Root Doctor" what Brown-Jessup calls the "heebie-jeebies." The cinematography by Corbett and his students also layered "Root Doctor" in light that ranged from the golden glow of twilight to the goose-bump eeriness of shadows.

But what really highlighted the movie's mood was the spooky music by two well-known Winston-Salem musicians: harmonica player Mike Wesolowski and guitarist Peter May.

Edwards knew she wanted a harmonica in her film. As a blues fan, she knew the man she wanted: a musician locals know as "Wezo." She wanted him to do, maybe, one song. He volunteered to do the entire soundtrack. He recruited May, and the two of them christened the impressive new studio at the Larry Gatlin School of Entertainment Technology at the High Point campus of GTCC.

Thomas Johnson, one of the community college's sound technology instructors, and his students recorded the soundtrack. And off to the side sat Edwards, in front of her laptop, showing them rough scenes from the movie and saying in her sweet Alabama drawl, "Now, I need a kind of spooky thing happening here."

And happen it did.

"It was so spontaneous," Wesolowski said. "Emily would say, 'Here is the kind of feel I need,' and Peter would go off on something. I'd follow, and we'd make it up on the spot and play as long as we wanted. Then Emily would say, 'That's it! That's the one!' and that ... worked out great."

It worked out great for some local students, too. Andy Wells, a recent UNCG graduate, handled publicity and directed a music video of Blues World Order, Wesolowski's band, singing Edwards' title tune, "Root Doctor." A.J. Lee, a UNCG senior, produced a behind-the-scenes documentary. And Tracey Eckley, a UNCG student majoring in business and minoring in theater, found the confidence she longed for.

Eckley once helped pay her rent by playing an extra in episodes of "Dawson's Creek." Now, after starring as Sister, the abused woman in "Root Doctor," she wants to work either in front of or behind the camera. So, she's off to California. She left last week, 11 credits shy of graduation, to see what Hollywood has to offer.

"Again, it all goes back to confidence," Eckley said. "You gain confidence when you can look at yourself and see different sides, ... and my goal is to figure myself out. I enjoy that kind of search, and I realize now that I can be anywhere in the world and do anything."

Eckley will miss Saturday's premiere of "Root Doctor." But not Edwards. She's feeling more excited than nervous.

"then and now," "Big Enough" provides insight into decisions they have made about creating families, raising children and dealing with life's daily challenges.

"Shelter"

7 p.m. Friday

Weatherspoon Art Museum

Directed by Benno Schoberth

Independent narrative; Brooklyn, N.Y.; 1 hour, 20 minutes

Filmmaker attending

Three inner-city teens find themselves stranded in a secluded beach house. In this strange and magical setting, they attempt to form a surrogate family.

"The Elephant's Egg"

7 p.m. Friday

Elliott University Center Auditorium

Directed by Sam Yousefian

Student narrative (University of Southern California); Beverly Hills, Calif.; 17 minutes

A genie will grant Joe's wish if he enters a Dali painting to break the elephant's egg.

"Bedford"

7:53 p.m. Friday

Elliott University Center Auditorium

Directed by Andres Sanz

Independent narrative (UNCG alumni); New York; 15 minutes

Upon leaving New York, Harry Bedford is horrified to discover that his shadow is missing. Finding it may be no easy task.

"Just Pray"

The reason: She did it. And so did dozens of students.

"The frustration of it is that if I forgot that I'm primarily a teacher, I'd get extremely grumpy," she said. "Footage would disappear, film would get trashed, whatever. Students are students regardless of where they go.

"But the joy is that they were excited about learning and they had the responsibility to show up, and you can't always get that from professionals. They're jaded.

"These students are so full of excitement, joy and passion. That is a priceless gift."

Contact Jeri Rowe at 373-7374 or jeri@gotriad.com

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8:30 p.m. Friday

Elliott University Center Auditorium

Directed by Tiffani Thiessen

Independent narrative; Studio City, Calif.; 22 minutes

Filmmaker may be attending.

Misunderstood yet wise beyond his years, a 9-year-old boy unknowingly finds hope and salvation in a beauty shop of his rural, Southern town.

"Allison"

7:17 p.m. Friday

Elliott University Center Auditorium

Directed by Jeff Drew

Independent narrative; Albuquerque, N.M.; 7 minutes

Jeff loves his wife, Allison. He has loved her since he was just a little boy. The problem is that Jeff is a grown man, and Allison is a 10-inch plastic doll.

"The Trial of Jack"

9:15 p.m. Friday

Elliott University Center Auditorium

Directed by Shari Berman

Independent narrative; New York; 9 minutes

Use 3-D glasses (provided).

Filmmaker attending.

A "just-so" story about a Jack-in-the-box in which a doll named Jack believes his stardom puts him above the law. However, the other toys in the playroom have different ideas. This film combines the style of the Expressionists of the late 1920s with the technology of the late 1950s to create "3-D Expressionism."