

SCHENECTADY

Students put finishing touches on films

Productions to be shown this week at Proctor's, high school

BY MARK ROBARGE *Gazette Reporter*

Ryan Leichenauer could be spending his summer like many other recent high school graduates — hanging out with friends and preparing for his first year of college.

Instead, he spent Thursday hunched over a computer in the John Sayles School of Fine Arts at Schenectady High School, working feverishly to edit more than 20 hours of video in time for the premiere of his short film, "I'm Old!" as part of the school's sixth annual Summer Film Festival.

Leichenauer is one of about 30 students working with three district teachers to produce four short films that will be screened at 7 p.m. Thursday at Proctor's Theatre and again at 7 p.m. Friday in the Black Box Theatre at Schenectady High School.

"A lot of us have graduated, but it was so much fun last year," said Leichenauer, who will attend Tufts University in suburban Boston beginning this fall, but isn't sure what he'll eventually study. "We thought it could be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity — let's make it twice in a lifetime."

In addition to directing, Leichenauer also co-wrote "I'm Old!" The film looks at the plight of a retired man who lives with his son and his son's family until being moved into a retirement center, where he encounters an exasperating cast of characters both on staff and among the other residents.

"Student films usually have to be restricted in age limits because everybody's a student," Leichenauer explained, "so we decided to get a lot of makeup, buy some wigs and do a film about a nursing home."

Leichenauer is also director and co-writer of "Sidewalk," which focuses on a single street corner and four different characters approaching that corner from different directions.

"The fun part is starting off with something in my head and then, a month and a half later, I get to see it on the big screen at Proctor's," Leichenauer said. "It's magical."

Leichenauer spent Thursday morning piecing together a single scene from "I'm Old!" using computer editing software, meticulously viewing shots from several angles of Walter, the main character (played by student Tim Huth), being shown around the retirement center by another resident, Oscar (portrayed by Justin Friello), and their encounter with an entertainingly peculiar resident played by Jessica Hunter.

Hunter is another recent Schenectady High graduate who begins her freshman year at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in the fall, studying nuclear mechanical engineering. She is also involved in "Sidewalk" and Tara Baron's production of "Tales of a Bus Ride," which looks at three people sharing a bus ride and their stories of the adventurous, cynical and comical aspects of love, and is the assistant director, researcher and narrator working with Evan Russell on "Under the Marquee," a documentary focusing on the history of Proctor's Theatre.

"You'll see a lot of me," she said.

While Leichenauer was editing video at the high school, Hunter and Russell, along with Melissa Woods, another recent Schenectady High graduate who will be studying engineering at RPI, were filming Thursday morning at Proctor's. With no budget, the trio have to be ingenious to create effects common in professional productions. Lacking a camera dolly to use for a rolling shot of the historic portrait in the theater's lobby, Hunter instead rolled Russell in a wheelchair as he used a small camcorder to get the shot.

"We ended up getting all this crazy good information on the history of Schenectady, all the pictures of old Proctor's and old Schenectady, all this illustrious history," said Hunter, who recently moved to Troy. "That's what I like the most, that's what I find cool, and hopefully we'll capture that in the movie."

"Under the Marquee" has added personal significance for Russell, who will be a senior at Schenectady High this fall and has been volunteering at the theater since age 11.

"I've been going to Proctor's ever since I was little, and I love everything about it," said Russell, who plans to study theater in college. "I just want to show everybody why I like Proctor's and why it's special to me."

The crew at Proctor's is supervised by Joe DiCaprio, a fourthgrade teacher at Pleasant Valley Elementary School who is in his second year supervising the program.

DiCaprio was recruited to help supervise the program last year and quickly found that the summer project is as much a learning experience for him as it is for the students. He admits it doesn't take much to supervise these students, though.

"They have the energy, they have the motivation and they have the thought process to be able to think three steps ahead and to do it all on their own with very, very little guidance from myself," he said. "As far as content and creativity, that's all student driven, and it's just so refreshing."



Evan Russell, left, and Jessica Hunter shoot a scene from their short film "Under the Marquee" at Proctor's Theatre on Wednesday.

MARC SCHULTZ/ GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER



MARC SCHULTZ/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER David Jones, left, and Ryan Leichenauer edit video Wednesday morning at Schenectady High School.