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Justin's 'challenge' -- Germantown moviemaker's short film makes finals of 'On the Lot' online contest

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One local moviemaker is doing all he can to get his film career rolling on its way to Hollywood. But the aspiring big-budget director could use a push - clicks actually - from Memphis movie lovers.

Justin Gullett, 26, of Germantown has been chosen as one of the nine finalists for the online "Movie Making Challenge," part of the Fox TV show "On the Lot." The American Idol-esque reality show, produced by three-time Academy Award winner Steven Spielberg and reality TV pioneer Mark Burnett, is in the midst of its first season. The show, which airs Tuesdays on WHBQ-TV Channel 13 at

7 p.m., features a dwindling group of filmmakers competing for a development deal.

Gullet is not a contestant on the TV show; rather, he is participating in the at-home competition that allowed anyone to enter his or her own videos online through TheLot.com.

His short film, "Distortion," won week five - horror week - of the online challenge in which anyone could submit a two- to three-minute film for that week's genre or theme.

"It's ironic. I've never been a huge horror movie buff," said Gullett, a 2000 Houston High School graduate . "But, sometimes it just feels! good to be drawn back by a good thriller."

Online viewers' positive feedback put "Distortion" in the finals of the contest, where it will go up against the best of the best films of other genres such as action, comedy and suspense. According to Gullett, there have been as many as 12,000 entries posted to the site. The ultimate winner will get a chance to air this fall on national TV during the actual show.

"It felt great knowing that I won (that week) because people voted for it, not just critics," he said. "It means a lot that the viewers enjoyed it as much as I did making it."

To keep the audience in suspense , Gullett centered the film on a disturbed woman who has an evil half that she has never faced. When the woman, haunted by nightmares, seeks a therapist, her suppressed secrets reveal her dark side, leaving everyone - including herself - shocked.

"Monsters and fictitious things don't really interest me," he said. "The scariest thing I! can think of is someone with two split personalities that are two com pletely individual sides that don't know the other. I've always been intrigued by the mind."

Gullett has been trying to entertain audiences since he was 6 years old. He has progressed from stop-motion films using action figures to establishing his own film company, Perception Films, in 2001. For the past few years he has been writing screenplays, making film

shorts and churning out as much material as he can to build up his portfolio. To keep himself afloat, he produces corporate films for area companies.

Although captivating an audience in only three minutes "is a challenge in itself," Gullett said putting the entire short together in just five days was the real test.

"You are in charge of everything: lighting, sound, actors, editing and how it comes out in the end," he said.

With a small production budget and limited resources, Gullett and his four-person team had to be creative in making the film, which features the acting talents of his brother, Trent Gullett, and sister-in-law, Betsy Gullett, of Collierville

"I produced all the sound effects in my garage with whatever I could find, and then I ran them through a computer program backwards," Gullett said, describing how he made the eerie sound effects that help set the suspenseful mood of the horror piece.

Gullett used that same do-it-yourself approach for the film's lighting.

"The neighbors were confused at first why there were so many strobe lights outside the house until four in the morning," he said.

After days of filming until daunting hours in the morning at a house in Uptown and a Downtown studio, Gullett had the tough task of editing hours of film down to just a few minutes.

As the movie tightened up, Gullett had to make some important decisions.

"How do you cut a minute off of something that looked perfect?" he said.

After dumping a few shots and shaving small bits off others, Gullett managed to get the short to an acceptable length.

"I'm really excited about how it turned out," he said. "And I'm proud to be the only person from the South in the competition."

Now the public can log on and decide how "Distortion" stacks up against the eight other films. Anyone who registers at thelot.com/challenge/ can vote through Monday . The winner of the challenge will receive film equipment and be flown to Los Angeles Aug. 13-16 for a taping of "On the Lot" and a chance to meet Spielberg.

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Caption:
Nikki Boertman/The Commercial Appeal

Justin Gullett of Germantown is one of nine finalists for the online "Movie Making Challenge" for the TV reality show "On the Lot." His short film, "Distortion," won week five - horror week.

Gullett's "Distortion" is centered on a disturbed woman with a dark side. It will face films of other genres such as action, comedy and suspense. Photos

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