Written by Mike Schulz
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Years before he became a filmmaker, writer-director David Riker worked as a photojournalist, and found himself especially haunted and moved by the plight of immigrants in Manhattan's Latin American neighborhoods. Yet despite the proximity to real people and real events that photojounalism allowed, Riker found that – as an artistic medium – photography alone wasn't expressing what he felt compelled to express.

"I had a sudden epiphany," Riker said in a phone interview, "that all the people I was photographing were mute. My photographs were only telling one part of the story, and photographs can be misleading."

His desire to tell the *whole* story led to his enrollment, in 1991, at New York University's Film School, which subsequently led to a Student Academy Award for his short film, *The Puppeteer*; a feature-length expansion of said film (1998's award-winning *La Ciudad [The City]*); and, now, his area appearance as part of Quad City Arts' Literary Arts Residency Program.

On Wednesday, January 11, Riker will be at Augustana College for a question-and-answer session following the screening of *La Ciudad*, a gritty exploration of the lives of immigrant laborers in New York City and the first presentation in this year's Hispanic Film Festival. Then, on January 12, Riker will conduct a screenwriting/filmmaking seminar at Rock Island's Rocket Theatre, where he will discuss the role of the filmmaker as storyteller; give advice on writing, directing, and producing; and address the challenges that face budding filmmakers.

They are challenges that Riker – born in Belgium and currently living in California – is well-acquainted with. After winning a student Oscar for *The Puppeteer*, which follows a homeless Latin American as he struggles to survive in Manhattan, Riker was, he says, "catapulted into Hollywood." He met with studio executives who, like Riker himself, were interested in turning *The Puppeteer* into a feature-length work. Yet they balked at Riker's plan to film his project in black-and-white, with subtitles, and without established Hollywood actors.

And unfortunately for Riker, his advisors in New York agreed. "They didn't want me to make a 'foreign film,'" he says. "It was a very unhappy experience."

Yet despite a "very tempting" Hollywood offer to film – in color and with "name" performers – what Riker eventually titled *La Ciudad*, he instead opted to film independently; Riker received money for his low-budget, black-and-white endeavor through grants, and cast the work with actual New York immigrants possessing minimal, if any, acting experience.

Striving for *verité*-like believability, Riker searched for novice performers who, "like the greatest actors, almost go *beyond* acting. The challenge, really, in finding people with no acting experience," he says, "was in weeding people out ... finding out who is extremely shy,

who just wants to be famous. You just want people to be who they are."

The resulting *La Ciudad* was widely praised for its realism and attention to detail, qualities that Riker also hopes to inspire in fledgling filmmakers at his seminar at the Rocket Theatre.

Using clips from some favorite works as illustrations – including Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* and Jane Campion's *The Piano* – Riker will focus much of his seminar, he says, on "what is uniquely challenging about screenwriting ... finding ways to think *visually*, and to externalize the feelings of the characters." He will also deal explicitly with a filmmaker's passion, and how that passion often leads up-and-coming filmmakers to a genre Riker knows well: the documentary.

"If you are *driven* to make films," he says, "the mechanisms direct you to documentary films." And Riker admits that, despite recent box-office hits such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *March of the Penguins*, docs are often "ghetto-ized" as a lesser art form.

Yet Riker is pleased that "there are documentary films breaking through to a vast audience," and knows that his personal passion for truth in film is a shared one. "As a [Hollywood] filmmaker," he says, "I feel isolated. In documentary, I feel surrounded by friends."

La Ciudad (The City) *opens the Hispanic Film Festival on Wednesday, January 11 at Augustana College's Science Building, Room 102, at 7 p.m.*

David Riker's screenwriting/filmmaking seminar will be conducted at the Rocket Theater at 5:30 p.m. on Thursday, January 12. Admission is $15.

For more information on David Riker's local appearances, contact Quad City Arts Literary Arts Administrator Tracy Alan White at (309)793-1213, extension 114.