



BRIAN LIBBY/SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

Eric Schopmeyer and Nora Ryan star in the musical "Yellow." Unlike most small-budget independent movies these days, director Nick Peterson still shoots on film and, in what Schopmeyer laughingly calls "crazy," shot the musical numbers live, rather than recording the audio later in a studio.

At home on the set

Turning his apartment into a film studio, a local director makes a movie that sings

By BRIAN LIBBY | SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

"Yellow" premiere

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursday
Where: Northwest Film Center's Whitsell Auditorium, 1219 S.W. Park Ave.
Cost: \$7 general admission
More information: 503-221-1156; www.nwfilm.org

"Sorry about the mess," writer-director Nick Peterson says, stepping into his apartment in Northwest Portland.

The dining room, filled with film canisters, lighting equipment and gaffer's tape, is dominated by a massive Steenbeck editing table. The chic thrift-store furniture and vintage cocktail set in the next room, however, will soon look familiar to Peterson's audience.

"Everything you see here is from the film," he says. "I live in my film."

Peterson moved into the apartment last year specifically so it could be the set for his feature-film debut, a musical called "Yellow," which premieres Thursday. Although the film's look and style are as beautiful and distinct as that of any Sundance winner, Peterson's production was exceptionally grass roots. He collaborates with a small family of actors and technicians who happily work at no pay. "I feel more

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Nick Peterson

Age: 25
Hometown: Portland
Education: David Douglas High School; Mt. Hood Community College
Films: "One, Two, Three" trilogy; "Contingent"; "Yellow"
Influences: Yasujiro Ozu, Ernst Lubitsch
Family: Single; no children

Portland's Nick Peterson has made short films that have garnered the admiration of heavyweights like Gus Van Sant.

KATY CANNATELLI

'Yellow': Musical's songs recorded live during filming

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comfortable working with my friends," he says nonchalantly.

Peterson has gained widespread praise at local festivals from admirers like director Gus Van Sant for a string of short films, such as his "One, Two, Three" trilogy (completed in 2003) and "Contingent" (2004).

"Nick just seems really in control, especially for so early in his career," Van Sant says. "I think usually, for a young filmmaker, the problem comes from there being any number of different things you can do. But Nick's films are completely disciplined in their focus."

Although self-taught, Peterson is a student of cinema. His first love is Japanese master Yasujiro Ozu, whose films of the 1930s through '60s chronicled tumultuous societal change with the restraint of haiku. More recently, Peterson has fallen under the spell of Ernst Lubitsch, the German expatriate who made a succession of classic Hollywood comedies and musicals from the 1920s and '30s such as "The Love Parade" and "One Hour With You," both of which screened at the Northwest Film Center recently

as a precursor to the "Yellow" premiere. The yin-yang of these opposite influences — one quiet and stoic, the other boisterous and witty — makes "Yellow" a breakthrough for Peterson far beyond his going from shorts to a feature.

Still, making a musical brought an extra-high degree of difficulty. Flash back to a typical shooting day last fall. Co-stars Eric Schopmeyer (who also composed all the songs in "Yellow") and Nora Ryan are in the bedroom with producer/art director Mary DeFreese attending to Ryan's makeup while Peterson loads his 16 mm camera in the hallway. Meanwhile, a host of musicians wait in the next room poised at their instruments. When Peterson calls "action," the actors break into song while, in the next room, players join in note-perfect on trombone, viola, drums, marimba and acoustic bass. Peterson is already old-school for sticking with celluloid in a film world now dominated by digital video. But recording all the musical's songs live?

"Nobody does it that way because it's crazy," Schopmeyer says with a laugh. He teaches music, including a popular kids' marimba ensemble, at Marysville Elementary School in Southeast Portland. But there was a method to the madness, he says — even if Peterson's neighbors in adjacent apartments were often infuriated.

"I can pretty easily suspend my disbelief when characters break into song, but not when the audio production was obviously created in some studio at a completely dif-

"Nick just seems really in control, especially for so early in his career."

Gus Van Sant,
director

ferent time in different acoustical conditions," Schopmeyer says. "That makes it even more unrealistic — it's too perfect. The sound becomes completely unconnected from the image."

"You can hear the echoes of the instruments in the room during the indoor scenes," Peterson adds. "And the one song we did outside, it sounds so beautiful because it's just out in the open air. You can't re-create those little idiosyncrasies."

The songs in "Yellow" are often sung imperfectly but with buoyant spirit and knowing wit, much like Woody Allen's "Everyone Says I Love You." And the story, which Schopmeyer describes as "boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy may be wins her back," is unabashedly romantic but with an existential underpinning.

Making a musical comedy gave Peterson a kind of genre template he never had before. That also brought the chance to subvert it. Some scenes, for example, are filmed entirely through a window. Thus, there's no audible dialogue, only physical gestures like in a silent film. Peterson's characters are

frequently gay or bisexual, which Lubitsch never would have been able to explore. And "Yellow" has a distinct Portland flair, seen in characters' vintage clothes and tattoos as well as locations like Valentine's bar and the MAX train.

Despite Peterson's gifts, "Yellow" wasn't without its crises. One breakfast scene was almost derailed by a bread-blackening toaster. DeFreese, the producer, was often calling friends at the last minute to serve as extras. But all the while, his collaborators say Peterson has been an unwaveringly steady force.

"I was absolutely amazed," Schopmeyer says. "The whole production was fraught with so many ridiculous problems and obstacles beyond our control — not to mention the ones we gave ourselves. But he held it together always. Nick's so thoroughly dedicated. He gives his entire life to his films."

With such an ambitious and daring feature debut, the whispers about Peterson being destined to follow Van Sant and Miranda July toward Hollywood triumph may soon become a roar. But Peterson has different motivations. "You see a film by Ozu or (French legend Robert) Bresson, and it's uniquely theirs," he says. "That's the model for me. The rest may or may not happen, and that's fine."

Meanwhile, Peterson is all too happy to keep living — literally and figuratively — in his films.

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