

Los Angeles Times

CALENDAR

weekend

Los Angeles Times
Thursday, September 30, 2004
calendarlive.com/weekend

Filmmakers on the verge

They're young, creative and living in L.A., with aspirations of — what else? — directing. Meet four who've managed to make their movies, and get Hollywood buzzing. Page 32.



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COVER STORY

Four who dared to dream, L.A.-style

By Chris Lee, Special to The Times

If their stories weren't true, they'd be dismissed as just a few more hackneyed Hollywood scripts.

Paul Feig came to L.A. hoping to be discovered. Alex Turner knew it was time to put up or shut up. Jordan Roberts and Jacob Aaron Estes toiled for years as script doctors, rewrite men and advertising copywriters — but never gave up their dream.



Today, all four L.A. transplants are filmmakers on the verge — each has a new feature film that is putting him on the map. That they've gotten this far is something that continues to leave these up-and-coming directors shaking their heads.

"Los Angeles is a wonderful place to live when you're working, but if you're not, it can be very frustrating," said Turner, who makes his debut later this year with "Dead Birds," a horror film set during the Civil War. "You think about everyone that's out here trying to make it, versus the number

of people that actually make it as an actor or a director — probably 1%."

Such relentless pressure is just a fact for L.A.-based filmmakers struggling to break into the industry — no surprise there. But how do you produce something creative and original in an environment notorious for kowtowing to the bottom line? Rebel and chart your own course, success be damned? Or go along to get along, peddling whatever the studios seem to be buying?

The box-office gods haven't yet had their final say. But these four filmmakers all responded in markedly different fashion to living life in the considerable shadow cast by the industry — and all came out on the other side. As they know only too well, not everyone can say that.



Alex Turner

To hear Turner tell it, the offer to make his first feature was far too good to refuse.

The native New Yorker, who had a thriving career directing movie videos and commercials, moved to Los Angeles last fall because "this is where the work is, this is where the [movie] business is. You have to be here to take advantage of that."

Soon, producers who had seen his work were calling, and "so we went into the usual dance — 'We've got to find something to do together.'" Turner didn't take it all that seriously. Then, a script arrived. "Moody, atmospheric, good scares. And it wasn't your typical art-house movie."

But the career-making opportunity meant shelving a more personal project Turner had intended to direct for his debut, a dark sexual thriller.

In the end, practicality prevailed. "In today's marketplace, there's an incredible amount of pressure to be successful with your first film," Turner said. "You get one, maybe two shots to make your mark and not much opportunity to grow. Twenty years from now, I want to look back on a large body of work."

Set during the Civil War, his richly imagined, genuinely suspenseful supernatural horror movie, "Dead Birds," tells the story of a band of Confederate soldiers (including Henry Thomas, Patrick Fugit and Isaiah Washington) who hole up in an abandoned plantation house after robbing a bank. Terrifying apparitions exacerbate the greed and internal rivalries that have already put strain on the group, and the soldiers begin to be picked off, one by one.

Premiering earlier this month at the Toronto Film Festival, "Dead Birds" triggered negotiations with major distributors, although as of this week, the film hadn't yet been picked up.

Turner, 34, shot "Dead Birds" in Alabama, where he was able to rent the town-sized set originally constructed for Tim Burton's "Big Fish" "for a song."

The Hollywood Hills resident said he has no regrets about setting aside his own project. He only has to look around to realize how lucky he is to have a film in the works, and a critically acclaimed one at that.

"Of course you want to tell personal stories," he said. "But I could foresee years of trying to get my personal stuff made. It's hard getting any movie made. You have to be realistic."