

Vail Daily

The flipside of Tiffani Thiessen

Laura A. Ball

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Tiffani Thiessen took a leap to the other side of the camera this year for her directorial debut, "Just Pray." Well, maybe it was more like a step.

The veteran actress has been in front of the camera since the age of 9, best known for her roles in "Saved by the Bell" and "Beverly Hills, 90210," experience that helped her real-life role as a director. "When I'm on set as an actress, I'm observing everything. That really helped me. I want to know how things are working. I want to know how a telephone works if I need to use it. I want to know how a computer works if I need to use it. When I was on set as an actress, I knew how the film worked. That's me, though. I'm a very curious person. I think knowledge is power," Thiessen said. "I take the credit in being that I'm a very observant person, sometimes, my fiance says, to my fault."

The 22-minute film is a coming-of-age story about a young boy named Cyrus (Zac Smith) from the rural South who finds a common bond between himself and the owner of a beauty shop, Corley (Constance Zimmer). Even though there's 30 years difference between the two, they find they are going through similar events in their lives. He is also very close with his mother, Cheryl (Janel Maloney), who is dying of cancer, and he's maturing from the fact that knows he's going to lose her.

"He's a very soulful kid. I think he's probably way beyond his years. He's also a kid that gets picked on a lot and he's very different," Thiessen said. "He's a little boy that's really trying to find himself."

From hundreds of short films that were submitted to the Vail Film Festival for screening, associate director of the festival, Megen Musegades, along with the rest of the film committee, chose Thiessen's. "It's the story and the characters that create a movie, and the characters are well-developed and it's very touching. I think everyone can kind of put themselves in this little boy's place even though they're not living the same story. Constance Zimmer is the character that this little boy places hope in and everyone has had someone like that in their life and it's just a very relatable story."

Tired of reading scripts without any soul, Thiessen turned to her producing partner and one of her best friends, Dean Johnson, partly complaining and said, "Why don't you write something."

"It was kind of on a dare. And he of course goes off and he writes it, and he wrote it beautifully," she said. "I think the biggest connection I have to it is my connection to Dean. It's partly about his hometown in South Carolina. Dean is one of my best friends and being that I know his words so well. I had spent so much time with his family. I knew his words so well. People from the South, they have this knack for storytelling. People tell stories on their porch, drinking lemonade. I never want to leave their house. I'm sitting at the kitchen table. I'm laughing I'm crying. They're so detail-oriented in the way they can express their stories. They can make you laugh so hard and they can make you cry and the way they tell their stories you can envision it. You don't even have to see the picture. You can see what the old truck looks like. You can taste the food in your mouth. It's pretty amazing."

Before filming began, the 31-year-old actress-turned-director returned to North Carolina to take photographs, observe the culture to recreate the essence of South the best she could, especially since they would be shooting in California.

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"I'm a very A-type personality. I make sure and prepare myself before I jump into anything," she said. "I make sure all my eggs are in one basket. I like to have people around me that I trust. And that's what I did."

Thiessen drew from other tips she learned from her days in front of the camera, like to keep breathing, communicate with the crew and remain patient.

Thiessen also took comfort in the fact that she didn't have to worry about what she looked like since she wasn't in front of the camera. Something, she says, she has less of a tolerance for as she gets older. "The greatest part about it was that I didn't have to put hair and makeup on every day. I didn't have to worry about what I ate that day. I could come to work in sweats and, I got creative in a whole different way," she said.

The other aspect she enjoyed as a director was watching the story come to life.

"The whole coming-to-life aspect of it where you can see words and then you can see characters and then you can see pictures and then you can see movement and then you can see the movie: It's amazing."

Making the film, however, didn't come without its production challenges. And she likes a good challenge, but it's nearly impossible to get funding for short films because you can't get any money back, she said.

"It's very, very rare that a short film is distributed. It's people who just want to help out because they believe in you," she said.

Without her acting connections, she's not sure if the film would have been made. Even the music by Paul Doucette, drummer for Matchbox Twenty, was a favor to Thiessen.

"We went knocking on doors and begged for so much stuff. I fought and got people to donate as much as they good with connections that I had, even the walkie talkies. I think it's always hard to get funding, especially at this time and where we are in world, especially when you're entertaining people and not doing something for charity. I think it's very, very hard. And that's sad but I know that those are the doors that get closed in young filmmaker's faces all the time."

Thiessen doesn't expect anything to come of the movie other than showing it at a few festivals. She recently learned that the film has been accepted into the Tribeca Film Festival, something she is very excited about.

"The only reason we wanted to do it is because we loved it and we wanted to challenge ourselves. We loved how the movie turned out. Being that it got into one festival, we're happy. Being that we got into a couple of great festivals, we're ecstatic. It was more of just getting Dean's name out as a writer and me as a director."

She doesn't expect to stop acting anytime soon, she does expect to do more directing, and is in fact already looking for her next project.

"I don't know if I prefer one or the other. I can't really say," Thiessen said. "They're both really challenging, and they're both really fun."