

Binder's dream comes true with 'Crossing the Bridge'

By Don Sadler
Special Writer

Mike Binder has always admired Woody Allen. During his formative years in Birmingham, Binder would write scripts in the hope that he could follow in Allen's footsteps as a writer and director of feature films. However, before making it in films, Woody Allen had to gain notoriety by working elsewhere in the entertainment industry. "I knew he had started as a stand-up comedian," Binder said.

So, Binder left Birmingham and made his mark in comedy, doing "The Tonight Show," "Late Night with David Letterman" and a slew of HBO work, but only as a writer. His ultimate goal remained to write and produce his own films.

"That goal has been reached with the weekend release of Binder's new film "Crossing the Bridge." While "Coupe De Ville" in 1990 was the first of his screenplays to be produced, "Crossing the Bridge" marks

the first time Binder has also occupied the director's chair. Originally written in 1970 and entitled "The Bridge," it took a great deal of effort to bring Binder's semi-autobiographical story of three friends coming of age in mid-70s Detroit to the big screen. Binder produced the film independent of the major studios, so his vision could remain intact. After "The Bridge" was completed, the stumbling for a distributor began, and a taker was found in a rather unusual place.

"We shopped around the studios and eventually sold it to Touchstone Pictures (a division of Disney)," said Binder last week while in town for the film's local premiere. "Jeffrey Katzenberg and Michael Eisner (the two heads who run the Disney studio) watched it, and once they had seen it, they loved it."

"Crossing the Bridge" stars Josh Charles, seen in "Dead Poets Society" and "Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead," in the role of Mort

Golden, a funny kid who writes TV and movie scripts, but spends most of his time hanging out with his two best friends, Stephen ("The Young Riders") Baldwin plays Denny Morgan, a former high school football hero with family problems, and Jason Gedrick is Tim Reese, a pug-nacious rebel who rounds out the trio.

The three friends spend most of their time cruising in the "War Wagon," an old beat-up Buick Electra. Among their favorite destinations are the strip clubs across the Ambassador Bridge in Canada and a clearing where they drink and smoke marijuana. Eventually, the boys are offered a proposition that involves drugs and another crossing of the bridge but with much higher stakes.

"It really was another time," Binder said about the prominence of alcohol and drugs in the film's plot. "I don't think the movie advocates drinking and drugs. It shows the characters walking away from all that. When you're 19-20-years-

old, you don't realize how quickly you can screw up your life."

The movie features many shots of Detroit area landmarks, including the Ambassador Bridge, Tiger Stadium and Lafayette Coney Island. But the majority of the film, which is set in 1975, was shot around Minneapolis.

"It's really funny because I've worked on this film for so long," Binder said. "I told the producers 'Don't worry, I'll show you where every location is.' We got back here (to Birmingham and Royal Oak) and none of them were there anymore. Between all the strip malls and burger joints, it just didn't have the same feel anymore."

Binder is thrilled that his dream of making movies has become a reality and has no intention of returning to stand-up comedy work. He is currently on location in Ontario working on the follow-up to "Bridge," entitled "Tamakwa." The film is about a reunion of people who went to summer camp together as children.



Ken Dixon

Another autobiographical work, "Tamakwa" stars Elizabeth Perkins, Diane Lane, Kevin Poliak and Alan Arkin and is scheduled for release next year.

"This is a lot harder work," Bind-

er said, comparing moviemaking to stand-up comedy. "With comedy, you get your answer back immediately as to whether a joke is funny or not. With films, it can sometimes take years. But it's a lot more rewarding."

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