

SPECIAL-EFFECTS FILMMAKER

Running to a Different Drummer

On film, Mike Jittlov can go 500 m.p.h.; but in real life, he can't quite break into Hollywood

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PEOPLE

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BOSTON

CLAD in green robes, Mike Jittlov races at 500 m.p.h. through the Northern California hills, across an inlet of the Pacific Ocean, and horizontally along the wall of a downtown Hollywood building. He moves so fast that when he slips on a banana peel, he flies into orbit.

Better known to some as "The Wizard of Speed and Time," Mr. Jittlov is a struggling independent filmmaker in Los Angeles. In recent years his animation shorts have wowed audiences — from colleges and film festivals to IBM business meetings. This summer marked the debut of his first feature-length special effects movie, released as a video this month.

"The Wizard of Speed and Time" tells the story of an independent filmmaker, played by Jittlov, who is recruited by a Hollywood director to make a special-effects tour de force for an upcoming television special.

The catch is that the TV special is just a few weeks away, though Jittlov complains that he needs months to do the job right. Since he is fronting money for the project and selling it back to the studio, everything has to be done on a shoestring budget. As an added twist, the evil producer has made a side bet with the director that Jittlov will never finish, and the producer sets out to sabotage Jittlov's efforts.

"It's fresh and it's charming," says George Mansour, co-director of the Boston Film Festival. The film has "innocence and charm, and that is so unusual in movies these days," he says.

The reason may be that Jittlov is a very unusual filmmaker — one who acts, directs, does his own special effects, and demands total control over his works. It is that



THE WIZARD OF SPEED AND TIME: Jittlov stars in a scene from his film, a parody that turned out to be somewhat prophetic.

recipe, say some, that has all but cut him off from Hollywood's mainstream filmmakers.

Jittlov got his start at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1969. In "Speed," one of his student projects, he filmed a running man with a slowed-down camera, creating the illusion that the man was running very fast. Jittlov's projects won awards.

"Mike is one of the best people who has gone through the animation workshop at UCLA, one of the very best," says Dan McLaughlin, Jittlov's mentor and a professor in the department of film and television at UCLA.

After graduation, Jittlov animated several short films and commercials, but he became increasingly discouraged with the film industry. "Every film kept getting less and less creative. Normally in Hollywood, people want you to do what you did before, but do it with half the money and half the time," he recalls in a telephone interview.

Finally, in 1977, he embarked on his own project of making six short films, each to showcase a different style of animation. In one short called "Animito," Jittlov animated models snipped from fashion magazines using a technique partly pioneered by Mr. McLaughlin called kinestasis.

"I show the film . . . to my classes two to three times a year, and it is always one of the best received and appreciated films," says McLaughlin.

Another Jittlov short, also called "Wizard," has been shown at many IBM business meetings. Meeting organizers see it as a "lit-

tle film to relax the tension of the group," says Jittlov. "On the surface, 'Wizard' is content-free, but people like to watch it."

But only on the surface. At the heart of all his movies, Jittlov says, is a tribute to the creative spirit, a desire to reach beyond your limits and "follow your dreams."

INTEREST generated by the shorts brought Jittlov funding for a full-length movie. Filming began in 1983. "The Wizard of Speed and Time" was supposed to parody Hollywood, but in many ways the movie was prophetic of itself. Jittlov put his life savings into the production, he says. Soon he found himself on a kamikaze filming schedule with neither time nor money to do the job right. "Every night, I would sit down, rewrite the script, build the props, do the location, and sleep about three to four hours," he recalls — just like the fictional "Mike Jittlov" in the movie.

Soon the film was late and over budget, says Richard Kaye, Jittlov's business partner. "He had never done a feature before, and just wasn't able to deliver on time."

Five years later, after re-funding it twice, Kaye released the movie to the distributor. Jittlov, bitter about the experience, calls the film "a work print."

"Most of the effects are test effects," he says, adding that eight minutes of the film should be cut and the music re-scored. "I consider the film like a crippled little child. I can still heal it." Doing so will take \$100,000 and several months of work, though.

"In terms of not being finished, it's just a question of degree," Mr. Kaye responds. "We couldn't get them done in time for delivery contracts." Kaye maintains that in one place can the viewer tell that an effect is clearly missing. The video of the film is a "corrected" version, in that it has the eight-minute cut that Jittlov wanted. To him, it's still not a "final print."

Jittlov's problems are almost as unique as his films. "I can't think of another filmmaker in his position: an independent filmmaker doing low-budget films with special effects," says John Hart, a film critic for The Seattle Times. Even though Jittlov films many of the effects in his garage, the effects still cost a lot.

Although "Wizard" flopped in Seattle, a successful three-week run in Boston allowed it to open in several other New England towns. Other openings were planned for Austin, Texas, and Milwaukee and Madison, Wis. "The film probably will not lose money," says Kaye. "I don't know if it will show a huge profit, but it will at least break even."

McLaughlin, who ranks Jittlov with Charlie Chaplin and Walt Disney, says the real measure of Jittlov's success is the loyalty and number of his supporters. Three years ago there was a one-night screening of a work print of "Wizard." It sold out.

"The line stretched around the theater a couple of times," says McLaughlin. "You can't get that kind of response with big names on the screen, you can't buy it."

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— Prof. Dan McLaughlin, department of film and television, UCLA

MIKE JITLOV: In one special effect, he zaps Hollywood while wearing his 'wizard' garb; many of the effects were shot in his garage.

