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It's Coppola Night at the Santa Cruz Film Festival

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Nobody goes to a drive-in theater to see a "film." So, it was a bit of risk when the Santa Cruz Film Festival decided to get some fresh air at the Skyview Drive-In for its penultimate night.

But, tonight's picture show at the drive-in is perfectly in keeping with the spirit of drive-in culture. The main feature, lovingly titled "The Creature From the Sunny Side Up Trailer Park," is what its director Christopher Coppola calls a "rubber monster movie."

If you paused at the name, your instincts are right on. Coppola is, indeed, part of the world's most famous Italian-American filmmaking family. He's the nephew of family patriarch Francis Ford Coppola, cousin of director Sofia "Lost in Translation" Coppola and brother of actor Nicolas Cage.

But Christopher, 42, is something of a family maverick, which is why he spends his career making pleasingly weird B-movies that pop up on outdoor screens.

"Creature" mixes Ed Wood-style cheesiness with clenched-fist social commentary. It's the story of separated-at-birth twin brothers who first meet when their mother dies. The catch? One's black, one's white and both are racists. They have to put aside their shock and animosity, however, to fight against an irate ancient monster called Bloodhead, revived from its slumber by a local occult group.

"I wanted to do a '50s-style B-grade drive-in movie," said Coppola. "The best of those movies were funny and innocent and moralistic all at the same time."

Coppola's goal was to make a movie about racism but also introduce a monster and a mystical subtext to explain the tension. "I was asked once if the monster was Big Bird influenced, to which the answer is 'Yeah, kind of.' We created this legend that Bloodhead was a god back when the Mojave was underwater. He was envisioned as kind of aquatic and birdlike with an American Indian mystique about him. Someone told me he looked like a cross between a lobster and a rooster and I'm fine with that."

To give the film that extra bit of nutsy fun, Coppola cast a handful of familiar faces from the television of the 1960s and '70s, including Lynda "Wonder Woman" Carter, Shirley "The Partridge Family" Jones and Frank "The Riddler" Gorshin.

Coppola shot the film on high-definition digital video, an emerging technology that has the chance of revolutionizing how movies are made. But learning a new technology didn't jibe well with other factors he had to face on the shoot in the summer of 2002. Originally slated for a 24-day shoot, the new equipment slowed the shoot down considerable and it ended up lasting 72 days. Also, those days happened to be some of the hottest on record in the Mojave Desert east of Los Angeles where Coppola was shooting. Temperatures flirting with 120 degrees made the shoot the younger Coppola's own "Apocalypse Now."

Nevertheless, Coppola is a believer in hi-def, which delivers a sparkling image on digital video, which means no more expensive film stock, no more film guesswork and no more waiting for dailies.

"I would call it an evolution rather than a revolution," said Coppola. "There are some people who have a problem with it, but they're naive. This is just how it's going to be done."

With perhaps the best name you can have to make it as a film director, Coppola is still a champion of the scruffy independents. As director of a dozen films — none of which approached the visibility that his famous brother gets on an off-day — Coppola has some straight talk for aspiring filmmakers.

"Directors have to be their own producers these days. They have to be entrepreneurs. You have to envision your audience and you have to find your audience."

Coppola believes that high-definition digital video will save young filmmakers for big investments in pricey film stock and lead to more people making more movies. He points to small, independent venues in Europe — "Mom-&-Pop moviehouses, coffeeshouses, etc. — that set up small theaters to play independent films. Such a thing is possible even here in the U.S., he says.

"There's a desire for it, no doubt," he said. "My advice to filmmakers would be to be true to who you are. Don't make a film just as a calling card to get noticed in Hollywood. Make the film you want to make, even if it means doing it on mini-DV or something."

Coppola won't be the only member of his royal family showing his work at the Skyview tonight. Bruno Coppola — cousin to Francis Ford and second cousin to Christopher — will also screen his short film "Stuff That Bear."

Contact Wallace Baine at wbaine@santacruzsentinel.com.

If You Go

WHAT: 'The Creature from the Sunny Side Up Trailer Park,' playing at the Santa Cruz Film Festival. Also playing is Bruno Coppola's 'Stuff That Bear,' Cam Archer's 'Bobby Crush' and Aaron Platt's 'The Cold Ones.'

WHEN: 8 p.m., tonight.

WHERE: Skyview Drive-In, 2260 Soquel Ave., Santa Cruz.

TICKETS: \$6 general; \$5 students and seniors.

DETAILS: 459-7676 or www.santacruzfilmfestival.com.

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