SELF-STARTER

BY MARK DUNDAS WOOD

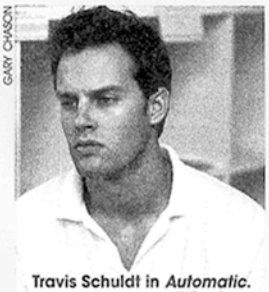
> Travis Schuldt

'Automatic' Drive

The indie feature *Automatic*, now popping up in film festivals around the country, serves its audiences bitter slices of suburban American life. The drama tracks the lives of six dysfunctional young people—sibling rivalry, fiscal irresponsibility, compulsive sexuality, all captured in sharp digital colors. As actor-producer Travis Schuldt explains, each of the film's main characters has a small window of opportunity to escape his or her predetermined fate. But, in the end, all six—automatically—snap back into the worn grooves of their established behavior patterns

Schuldt, who plays spendthrift ladies' man Randall in the film, says the genesis of *Automatic* occurred in a Los Angeles bar in 2002 where he, director Jonathan Walls, and writer-actor-producer Jay Thames sat complaining about the lackluster states of their careers. Schuldt was producing live theatre with the Lone Star Ensemble, a company he'd helped found in 2000, and he'd had a little luck on television—including a three-year stint on the daytime drama *Passions*—but he was finding it difficult to break into theatrical features. Thames, meanwhile, had not yet written a film. And though Walls was gaining experience as a documentarian—his street-musician film *Playing for Change*, co-directed with Mark Johnson, would come out in 2003—he had yet to direct a narrative feature. "We were sitting there—a writer, a producer, a director—and we knew a lot of good actors," Schuldt recalls. "So Jay and I just started putting together a story."

GARY CHASON



Travis Schuldt in *Automatic*.

After devising a basic scenario, Schuldt and Thames gathered a group of performers they knew from teacher Sandy Marshall's acting class. Improvisation sessions were held, building on the ideas the co-creators had concocted. The sessions were recorded on audiotape and transcribed by Thames. While only about 15 percent of the dialogue that emerged in these improvs wound up in the final script, the tapes proved useful as Thames crafted the screenplay. "It was really a great way to hear the voices of the characters," recalls Schuldt. "Once we spent enough time with that, it was really easy for Jay to write in those voices."

Nevertheless, it took about 20 drafts to arrive at a satisfactory shooting script. Among the bigger challenges was building the right dramatic structure to interlace the lives of the main characters. The filmmakers shared the script with friends and peers in order to get feedback. Six months into the developmental process, they held a staged reading to gain further input. "It was actually kind of a financing move, as well," notes Schuldt. "We were hoping that people would like it so much that they'd want to invest in our film—invest in the idea." Did the tactic work? "Not as much as we'd like," he admits with a laugh. Still, the personal support was welcome even if financial aid was not forthcoming.

GARY CHASON

Travis Schuldt, Jay Thames, and Jonathan Walls.

Schuldt and Thames originally had a business partner who was to raise funds for the project; when that partnership fell apart, the two covered most of the budget personally, relying on the support of friends and family for the remaining costs. After consulting with Paul Bales of SAGIndie, they decided on a Modified Low Budget Agreement, a contract Schuldt notes has changed since the *Automatic* shoot in the summer of 2004.

Shoot 'Em in Texas

Though the shoot was initially planned for Los Angeles, the producers didn't want the setting to be identifiably Californian. "We wanted the city to be this general suburbia that is unrecognizable but very American," Schuldt explains. "We didn't want people watching this movie and saying, 'Oh, these characters are messed up because they live in Los Angeles.' " They resigned themselves to shooting around the palm trees, but then they attended the 2004 Sundance Film Festival. Thames, a Houston native, ran into Alfred Cervantes of the Houston Film Commission. Cervantes convinced them to shoot in Texas, which proved to be a wise move. Cervantes and the commission were very helpful, and Houston was a bountiful place. Graced with a relatively unidentifiable skyline, it offered the desired quality of anonymity; it had a sizable talent pool from which to fill supporting roles; the film-permit process was relatively easy; and good, inexpensive locations were in large supply.

The shoot was remarkably smooth, as well, perhaps in part because the scenes had been thoroughly rehearsed in California. The project was also blessed with two directors of photography. The original DP, John Darbonne, had to take another job in L.A. just before the start date on *Automatic*. His associate, Dale Marks, came to the rescue, and Darbonne later joined the group in Texas. The film was shot mostly in 24P, using a Panasonic SDX 900.

Three principal actors from the original improv sessions—Schuldt, Thames, and Sean O'Bryan—wound up acting the roles they'd helped create. The three new leads—Jamie Anne Brown, Jennifer Ferguson, and Brandy Howard—were invited to add their own improvisational touches to the script. "If they said, 'I wouldn't talk like this; I wouldn't say it like this,' we'd change it accordingly," notes Schuldt. It was Schuldt and Thames' responsibility to scan the budget and "blackline" it on a day-to-day basis. The pair grew adept at recalculating expenses, deciding which items were needed and which could be done without.

Post-Crawl

After 18 days shooting in Houston, the company returned to California for a few days of pickup shots. During postproduction, things became chaotic; the filmmakers felt the amount of work remaining seemed insurmountable. "It slowed us down to a reverse crawl," Thames wrote in his production blog (www.automaticmovie.com/blog. html). "We were back to our lives, and we had to earn a living—and at the same time we had to try to finish this film," explains Schuldt, who was sidetracked when he landed a role on the ABC series *10-8: Officers on Duty*.

Schuldt, Thames, and Walls each had a different idea about what the film should look like and how it should move. Meanwhile, unanticipated costs were creeping in, for things such as access to an editing deck and creation of the credits. "When you're doing things on such a low scale, you're asking a lot of favors," says Schuldt. "People tend to say yes before they think about saying, 'Maybe I can't do this,' or, 'If I get busy, maybe I won't be able to do this.' It just makes your job more difficult."

By March 2005, *Automatic* was ready to be shown at the SXSW film festival in Austin. It was well-received, which came as a relief to the producers; to that point, audiences for the film had consisted mostly of friends and relatives. It has since been shown at the Woodstock, Starz Denver International, and Deep Ellum (Dallas) festivals, and Schuldt and Thames are seeking distribution. They hope to be able to roll at least some earnings from *Automatic* into another film project.

Schuldt advises other first-time producers to choose their collaborators wisely. "Make sure those people are the ones you can be screaming at one second, then be laughing with the next…" he says, noting that his friendships with Thames and Walls have gone through "many cycles." But, he adds, they're all still speaking to one another. <

Are you an actor who is starring in, as well as writing, directing, and/or producing a film? If you'd like to share information about your project, contact Jenelle Riley at jriley@backstage.com.

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