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A collaborative effort

For one senior, the thesis pulls from music, religion, computers, and film

By Melissa Renny '03

Adam Nemett '03, a religion major, is one of 15 students writing a creative thesis this year. He isn't working on a novel, or a collection of poetry, as many do. Instead, he's the writer, director, and producer of *The Instrument*, a feature film scheduled for a test screening at Frist Campus Center May 22.

Nemett began thinking about the film two years ago, when he came up with a character he named Arthur Zarek, who was based on two American artists from the 1960s: Harry Partch and James Hampton.

Partch, an innovative composer who died in 1974, took the traditional 12-tone scale and created one with 43-tones to the octave; he also built musical instruments on which to play it. Hampton was a janitor in Washington, D.C., and is famous for creating an altar of 177 small objects wrapped in gold and silver foil; the altar was discovered after Hampton's death in 1964 and is now at the Smithsonian Institution. Zarek, an amalgam of the two men, is a visionary who believes in a musical form of worship.

The film opens with Zarek's death. In his will, Zarek requires that seven art school students live for a month in his apartment, which he calls "the instrument," and which is filled with strange musical instruments, in order to inherit a multimillion dollar piece of property. Pallo Zo, one of the seven, records their lives as a documentary, and Nemett's film follows the students through Zo's lens as they pool their talents to unlock Zarek's musical secrets. Music is the most important aspect of the film, and Nemett believes that by addressing the spiritual, transcendent powers of music, his film offers viewers something new. "For musicians, and other people who have devoted significant time to either playing, studying, or listening to challenging music, this movie, I hope, will resound deeply," he says.

At the beginning of his junior year, Nemett enlisted Ajay Kapur '02, a computer science major who was creating electronic instruments for his own thesis; he became both music director and an actor in the film. David Hittson '03, a music major looking for an opportunity to compose music, also signed on.

The project became a collaboration between Princeton and the Maryland Institute College of Art when Nemett's father, a professor there, set up a course last spring in which students created the room Nemett would use in his film. Nemett, Kapur, and Hittson traveled to Maryland and asked students to contribute paintings and sculptures based on music. "The project could not have happened without everything that the institute contributed," Nemett says.

Working with Joyce Carol Oates, Nemett finished the screenplay last spring and was accepted by the creative writing program to write a creative thesis, which includes the screenplay, the film, and a novella based on Arthur Zarek. His religion thesis includes the film and a critical analysis.

"It's a wonderfully imaginative and ambitious project, with visionary overtones; quite unlike any other thesis I have




Photos: From top, David Hittson '03, Taryn Wayne '01, and Ajay Kapur '02 in scenes from *The Instrument*. (photographs: tze wei ng '04)

advised,” Oates says. “It may well have a life independent of its academic origins.”

Filming took place in Baltimore last summer, where 20 students and recent graduates from Princeton and the Maryland Institute College of Art converged on Nemett’s house. “I had about 17 members of cast and crew living in my house in Baltimore for a month, working 20-hour days. When you make your first feature film, you basically have to assume every part of the production, from budgeting to editing, business-plan writing to lighting design, set design to schmoozing the cops into letting me shoot in restricted areas,” Nemett says.

Many of the scenes involve dance and singing performances set to Hittson and Kapur’s music. Hittson’s contributions include orchestral music, world music, electronic music, a composition for a rock band, and improvisation. As a music major, Hittson used these compositions as the basis of his thesis, making him one of the first music majors to work on a film.

With 70 hours of footage, the editing began. Macauley Peterson ’01, a former Princeton film student, helped Nemett create a trailer and cut the film.

Although distinguished professors, including Oates, Cornel West ’80, and Paul Lansky, will evaluate the project, Nemett says the film is for the public. He plans to enter it in festivals this summer. “I don’t want this to be just a thesis project that is going to get shown once at Princeton,” Nemett says. “I think we have a good enough product to shoot for the top.” 

Melissa Renny ’03 wrote her senior thesis on storytelling in novels written by children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors.

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