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Filmmaker Richard Welnowski brings his high-tech video expertise to town

By STEVE PAUL
The Kansas City Star

LAWRENCE | The future of filmmaking sits on a tripod on a movie set in a warehouse basement.

Richard Welnowski strings a thick black cable to connect the high-definition camera to an advanced digital processor and storage device two rooms away.

Before long Welnowski is watching a 12-second shot on his video monitor: Staged lightning flashes and a glass jar of canned corn topples off of a swaying shelf.

Then, with deep-set, pinpoint eyes, he watches it again.

"You see, the take is instantly trapped and can be played back," Welnowski explains to a visitor. "And you see exactly what you would see on the big movie screen."

"This," he adds, "is like a big film revolution."

A lot of people agree with him.

"I am convinced that Richard is an engineering genius," says Teri Rogers, CEO of T2/Take 2 Entertainment, a post-production company in Kansas City, "and that he has brought a level of professionalism to cinematic endeavors in Kansas City that's really unparalleled."

With Welnowski's equipment, there's no shipping film to a lab in Chicago or Los Angeles. No waiting for "daily" rushes or for someone else somewhere to color-correct



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On location in an abandoned organ-making plant in Lawrence, filmmaker Richard Welnowski (left) views video shot on the \$120,000 Viper camera with "Nail Biter" film crew Hanuman Brown-Eagle, Kendall Sinn, Patrick Rea and Sally Sinn.



from richard welnowski

Richard Welnowski took his mobile unit to Mississippi to shoot footage with Wide Awake Films of Kansas City for a National Geographic Channel re-enactment of a Vietnam War battle.

the images. Just pure high-definition video imagery with a clarity and color range that can exceed that of 35mm movie-quality film.

It's like a new era for local film-making, all because of a highly motivated engineer-turned-video-professional whose main mission these days seems to be singing the praises of the Viper camera system he helped its German manufacturers develop — and of his newly adopted hometown.

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Welnowski has been a high-definition video trailblazer for more than two decades. In 1989, long before today's obsession with all things HD, he shared an Emmy award for technical work on one of the first all-HD projects, a PBS film by Zbigniew Rybczynski called "The Orchestra."

Now he has a global practice, hopping from TV and film projects in Iceland to a new National Geographic cable channel series on war to commercial shoots in Kansas City. Twenty years ago, he says, high-definition filmmaking required 2 tons of equipment. Now he has a backup Viper unit that fits in a backpack.

Just a couple of years ago, while considering a move from his New Jersey home base to Los Angeles, Welnowski stepped off a plane in Kansas City.

"Richard was flying from Iceland to Los Angeles," says computer-graphics specialist Jonathan Arnold. "And he had to stop in Kansas City. I met him and we got to talking about my company's skill set and his skill set, and in a way it was like chocolate and peanut butter coming together to make a Reese's peanut butter cup."

Welnowski proceeded on to L.A., and a couple of months later returned to Kansas City, where he discovered the comforts of a Midwestern city in mid-revival.

"The traffic is horrific," he told Arnold about his Los Angeles experience. "The quality of life here is much better. Let's do it."

The upshot is that Welnowski's move to Kansas City — he lives in a loft overlooking the Missouri River — has raised the bar of possibility for filmmaking here.

"Kansas City, with Richard, now becomes a place where more national projects can take place," Arnold says, "because his reliability and experience are here."

At the time of his move Welnowski was still working several months a year in Iceland. Certain younger TV watchers will know Welnowski's work there combining animation and live action on Nickelodeon's award-winning series "LazyTown."

But he and Arnold began talking about rehabbing an old River Market building into a "green-screen" studio, a construction project that's almost finished. Arnold's company took the lead on the project, and Welnowski concentrated on building his mobile Viper studio — "the smallest unit ever for the highest definition production," he says — which he fashioned inside a Ford Expedition.

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Tall and trim, Welnowski speaks in a hurried, accented English, shaped by his growing up with German and Polish parents. He has lived in the U.S. since 1979. He travels extensively.

This year he completed work on a children's adventure movie, "No Network," shot mostly on location last winter in Iceland. His Viper camera, battery packs and advanced hard-drive storage units held up famously, he says, in 10-degree temperatures and driving wind, rain and snow. Behind-the-scenes video footage of the production support his enthusiasm for the equipment.

The Internet, a high-speed network and Welnowski's digital technology allowed the filmmakers to handle final color grading and other post-production details without leaving their respective locations in Iceland, Norway, Belgium, Germany and Kansas City.

"No Network," which he co-produced with Norwegian and Icelandic colleagues, is scheduled for release in Europe this holiday season.

Also this year Welnowski worked on three segments of a National Geographic Channel series on war called "Day Under Fire." (The first segment is scheduled to air at 9 p.m. Tuesday.) He was part of the crew assembled by Wide Awake Films, a Kansas City production company with a long history in filming Civil War re-enactments.

The hourlong re-enactments — of specific battles of the Civil War, World War II and Vietnam — were shot in the U.S. with Welnowski's Viper and all-digital, high-definition technology.

"It's better than Ken Burns — believe me," Welnowski says.

"Personally," adds Wide Awake's Shane Seley, a self-described early adopter of high-definition equipment, "I've never shot prettier images with any other camera in my life."

"He just loves production," Seley says of Welnowski. "And he works tirelessly."

Some days on the National Geographic project they were on the set for 17 hours. Welnowski baby-sat the backup process.

"Richard would do that all night and be back on the set at 6:30 in the morning," Seley says.

Welnowski's reply: "I sleep fast, Shane."

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Independent filmmaking has been on the rise in Kansas City, and a recently passed Missouri tax credit for filmmakers has provided a boost. Welnowski and his resources are taking things to another level.

Back in Lawrence, on the set of the tornado thriller called "Nail Biter," Welnowski and Patrick Rea, the director, are watching a close-up shot of the toppling corn.

"I can cut it right here," Welnowski says.

"Really?" Rea says.

"We can even edit this to the moment. OK? We graded it. We did it. And we showed exactly how it's going to be done on the screen."

Welnowski and Teri Rogers of T2 are among the co-producers of the film, and Welnowski is a technical adviser to Rea and his crew. He's supplying his expertise and the cutting-edge equipment.

Rea is very much a convert from the not-so-old days of shooting scenes and multiple takes on film, then not seeing what you got for a while.

"Shooting on film," he says, "is like shooting an arrow into the forest then waiting four days to find the arrow."

"Nail Biter" will have a budget of at least \$1 million.

That's the equivalent of the catering budget of an \$85 million Hollywood film, Welnowski says. That very specific figure is a sly reference to last winter's release "Zodiac," which was the first Hollywood feature shot digitally, and successfully, with Viper cameras like his.

But the end result of a movie shot, processed and made from beginning to end in the Kansas City area, he says, will be just as good or better.

Anyone with the money — the Viper alone costs more than \$100,000 — can buy the equipment. What they still might not have, Arnold says, is the experience and contagious energy embodied in Welnowski. People are now sending him scripts. He is meeting with producers of potential film projects in Los Angeles. His equipment is in high demand throughout the region.

But perhaps his greatest asset, Arnold says, is the way he touts his chosen home.

"He's one of the best ambassadors for Kansas City I've ever seen," Arnold says. "He absolutely loves the city. He loves the people. He loves the openness of the

community...

“He loves his loft downtown. ... He runs on the riverfront every day. He’s the poster child of the expatriate in Kansas City.”

Steve Paul, senior writer and editor, 816-234-4762, paul@kcstar.com.

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