

Shelton natives' movie aspirations come to life

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Shelton natives and lifelong friends Brian Reilly and Dillon Bentlage, independent filmmakers who created Karen Twins Productions, on their podcast.
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SHELTON — Whether at Trumbull's old Crown Theatre or a film fest at one of their homes, Brian Reilly and Dillon Bentlage grew up watching films together. Now the lifelong friends are making them.

The Shelton natives are an independent filmmaking duo who created Karen Twins Productions — and the results have been quite successful, led by the pair’s debut feature film, “Dilettantes,” which has received a distribution deal and is available on Amazon Prime Video, TubiTv and Roku’s streaming app, Indie Box.

“Spending so much time together being engulfed in all sorts of cinema shaped our individual passions for it,” Reilly said. “As we got older, our kindred appreciation for film transformed into career aspirations. And here we are today, running our very own film production company together.”

Reilly said movies they watched ranged from mega hits like Spider-Man, Lord of the Rings, or the Star Wars films to bad comedies such as The Adventures of Pluto Nash and kung-fu classics like Iron Monkey.

“We’ve known each other for 11 years, and in those years, we have shared a lot of experiences together,” Bentlage said. “Yet, out of all the big moments in our lives, it’s the small details that show me how close we really are.

“Those details give me a warm feeling reminiscent of that feeling you got as a little kid on your birthday,” he added.

Reilly and Bentlage were first introduced as newborns. The boys’ mothers, both named Karen, were best friends, meaning the pair were thrust together nearly from birth, through no choice of their own.

“We were basically forced into each other’s lives,” Reilly said. “I’m glad it worked out for us.”

“I’ve known Brian since the beginning of time,” Bentlage added. “It’s not often that you find someone you’ve known longer than family members. I’m pretty sure the day I came back from the hospital he was already there, a very mature and wise 2-week-old baby looking down at his protégé. One he would mentor for years to come.”

Reilly graduated from St. Joseph High School in Trumbull in 2013, and Bentlage graduated from Hamden Hall in 2014, but both grew up and lived in Shelton up until the last couple of years.

And the friends credited growing up in Shelton for their developing a creative side.

“Shelton has a very unique beauty to it,” Bentlage said. “It’s a town with character that only those from the Valley can understand. Shelton is kind of like your friend that your other friends don’t find funny or entertaining but you feel a warm sense of comfort anytime they’re around.

“I can’t remember how or when it happened, but I always saw the world through stories,” he added. “More specifically, I saw places and people as characters and settings in a larger production. Shelton for me, was always my origin story, all my experiences and memories of that town are thematic in my storytelling. It’s either this, or the credit goes to Trumbull for having the closest movie theater.”

Reilly and Bentlage began their collaboration — which ultimately turned in Karen Twins Production — between their sophomore and junior year of college in 2015.

“Dillon and I were hanging out before I studied abroad in Australia. At one point, he brought up an idea he had for a screenplay and thought, if I was interested, that I could help him write it,” Reilly remembered. “He pitched me the idea and I was really into it and started coming up with ways the story could go.”

Reilly said the pair wrote the script together while he was abroad.

“As we fleshed out the story, we came up with the name Karen Twins as our pseudonym, which eventually became our overarching production company name,” Reilly said.

“At the time, I had no idea how to write a script, but I knew I wanted to make a film,” Bentlage said. “I figured two heads were better than one, and Brian was always funnier than I was. We broke the script up into scenes and divided up the responsibilities.

“It was terrible like most scripts when you start out, but regardless, Brian and I had a great time working together,” he added.

Bentlage said this first script ended up on the cutting room floor, but the partnership remains. Karen Twins Production was officially formed, and two scripts later, Dilettantes, was born.

Dilettantes follows the story of four friends over the course of four pivotal years in Boston. As they mature from bright-eyed students into uncertain adults, each one struggles to find direction and purpose, and the lines between friendship and romance are blurred. This coming-of-age story reflects on the complicated attachments of young adulthood and speaks to the anxiety of finding your place in the world.

“It was a film that we knew would be fairly easy to film and we just wanted to do it to say that we did it,” Reilly said. “We decided the best way to learn how to make a feature film was to go out and make one. One feature film under our belt fresh out of college and entirely funded by the two of us and our good friend, Simon Kincade.”

Reilly said the film was created with a \$12,000 budget and a mostly free cast and crew.

“We weren’t even thinking about submitting to festivals at first,” Reilly added. “We legitimately just wanted to make it and move on to the next one. So, getting this deal went far beyond our expectations. We can make money off it. That’s every filmmaker’s goal.”

The pair said they submitted *Dilettantes* to some film festivals afterwards and it was selected by The Indie Gathering International Film Festival (where it won Best Supporting Actor and second for Best Drama/Romance), the Seattle True Independent Film Festival, and the Amsterdam Lift-Off Film Festival (where it placed third for Best Feature Film).

Bentlage said the pair never intended it to be a watchable movie. All they wanted was a learning experience.

They spent four years writing scripts, filming shorts, and studying other filmmakers, but, Bentlage said, how could they expect people to hire them as writers and directors if they had never actually worked on a large production?

“This mentality allowed us to keep our set, for the most part, stress free. We weren’t worried about getting it right,” he said. “We spent a year prior to filming in pre-production, rewriting the script, hiring talent, planning the shooting schedule, and implementing backup plans in case something wasn’t feasible.”

In their free time, the pair read books from filmmakers and other productions to educate themselves on the craft. On set, every crew member and actor was in charge of their role with no micromanaging.

“This was a learning experience, and therefore an equal chance for everyone to practice their passion. Brian, Simon, and I trusted everyone,” Bentlage said.

“Overall, the success of this film has been incredible, and we are so grateful for everyone who helped put it together and brought it to where it is today,” added Reilly, who now lives in Wilmington, Mass.

Karen Twins Productions acted as a brand name for their first five years. After the pair made *Dilettantes*, about two years ago, they decided if they wanted to continue making films, and even producing other people’s films, they needed to turn this into an actual business.

“In 2020, we got connected with an entertainment attorney down in Texas who specializes in forming LLCs for productions and production companies,” Reilly said. “Establishing a production company is no different than your typical business, except for not needing a business plan. Now, each project we work on is officially produced by our production company, Karen Twins Productions.”

The duo shares a similar fondness for the creative, intimate experiences that occur among the cast and crew, whether that be an improvised blooper or constructing a DIY rig to better position the camera.

“It’s never the big picture that gets me excited,” Bentlage, now of Brooklyn, N.Y., said. “In fact, it can scare me because of how overwhelming it is. It’s the small moments with your team where you find this feeling, isolating your current step from the mountainous task at

hand.”

Reilly agreed, saying he, too, points to those “little moments” that make the work so special. He said as independent filmmakers, there are always times when you must improvise to make a scene work.

“It’s those little moments of creativity that I look back on and smile at when rewatching our work,” Reilly said. “No matter how big the budget may be for our next project, I think we’ll always end up having to do something like that. You’d never know we didn’t shoot a scene ‘the professional way’ and you don’t need all the fancy equipment to make scene look incredible.”

Now what’s next for the fledgling independent filmmaking operation?

Karen Twins is currently in mid-production of an international web-series with plans to release it this year. This series is called “Play It By Ear” and focuses on Mila and Lukas, a couple forced to endure a long-distance relationship when their jobs place them on opposite sides of the world.

Filming began last October in Amsterdam, Netherlands and will continue this March in Los Angeles.

“We’ve worked on this series for three years and are eager to release it to our fans and audience,” Bentlage said

“I’m ready to show the world ‘Play It By Ear,’” Reilly added. “We also have a podcast called OnlyReelFans, where we discuss different films and interview fellow indie filmmakers. You can listen to it on Spotify and Apple Podcasts.”

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