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SCREEN

Silver screen supermarket sport

Fact is blended with fiction in *American Shopper*, a sendup of consumer craziness

People will do a lot of crazy things for \$10,000, and in Columbia, people are dressing in costume, using shopping carts as props and dancing down grocery store aisles to win some cash. It's all part of the film *American Shopper*, currently under production in Columbia. The movie blurs the traditional line between fiction and documentary.

American Shopper depicts aisling, a new sport in which contestants decorate shopping carts, dress in costumes and select 15 grocery products while performing a routine set to music. The film, directed by Tamas Bojtor and Sybil Dessau, centers on Jonathan Sawyer, who has traveled to Columbia to popularize aisling, the new sport he created. Jonathan Gotsick, the actor who plays Sawyer, has no lines to learn in advance; most of what he does is unscripted. Other cast members are locals competing for a \$10,000 prize: \$5,000 in cash and \$5,000 in grocery store gift certificates. These locals weren't given a role to play; they simply play themselves.

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[See full size image] During an aisling practice at Schnucks in late October, Clare Adrian, 58, bends over to pick up a grocery item. Aisling contestants are awarded points for creative routines. (Photo by Tasha Bjelic)

TO CURE WHAT AISLES YOU

Whether aisling contestants push or ride their carts, creativity is key. (Courtesy of goaisling.com)



Aisling is much more than a sport. It's also an art that requires creativity. One at a time each contestant collects the required 15 products in three minutes. But simply picking out these items under the time limit will not earn the contestant many points.

Movement, originality and aislemanship are keys to aisling success. For each of the three categories, contestants are awarded a maximum of 10 points toward a perfect final score of 30. Competitors lose

The aisling finals will be held Nov. 26 at Schnucks. Katie Mustard, the movie's producer, hopes many people will come to the event. She says audience members will have the chance to be extras in the film, and the crew will raffle off prizes from local businesses. In a competition at The Blue Note on Oct. 29, the top 21 contestants were chosen as finalists by three judges unaffiliated with the movie. Another panel will judge the finals. The competitors are rated in three categories: movement, originality and aislemanship.

The road to the finals began when more than 75 people signed up to compete for the aisling prize at an informational session on Oct. 12. The directors filmed the entire session, and attendees were told that they would be part of a movie, as well as competitors for the prize.

When Gotsick explained aisling to the crowd, many people seemed skeptical of the film. He told the crowd: "It might sound crazy. It might sound like a waste of time. But I'll tell you what a real waste of time is. A real waste of time is the 6,000 hours the average American spends shopping in a lifetime."

Mustard says it was important that the lead actor have improvisational skills because of the film's nontraditional format. Gotsick, an actor from Los Angeles who has performed stand-up comedy for more than 10 years,

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score of 30. Competitors lose points for missing, duplicating or damaging products, as well as for bumping or knocking over a display. Five bonus points are awarded if a contestant collects the bonus product.

Movement

In aisling, movement can mean doing karate chops down an aisle, acting out a dance scene from the musical Grease, or juggling four cans of peas before tossing one into the cart and the others onto the shelf.

Originality

The originality score considers the innovation of costume, cart design and aisling routine. For example, a competitor could dress up like a dolphin, decorate a cart like a Sea World exhibit and pick products off the shelf while making dolphin noises and jumping down the aisle. Anything that makes the judges' jaws drop probably will earn contestants solid originality scores.

Aislemanship

The aislemanship score takes into account how well contestants turn the ordinary act of shopping into a personal, inspiring and, of course, entertaining experience. It's an overall score that rates how well contestants embody the spirit of aisling. Having fun and making others laugh will boost this score.

was the perfect fit, Mustard says. Gotsick is a friendly guy who jokes around with anyone who will listen, so he was a great choice to persuade people to sign up as prospective aisling contestants.

In one scene, Sawyer says he developed the idea for aisling while shopping at a supermarket in Los Angeles. He was stunned by the forlorn expressions on the faces of people around him and decided to try to make shopping fun again.

In reality, the sport's creator is Bojtor, a Hungary native who came to America in 1996. Bojtor wanted to make a movie to satirize American consumerism but also to show that Americans are open to new, sometimes crazy ideas. He believes aisling could only be possible in America because Europeans are too set in their ways.

The decision to film in Columbia had much to do with Mustard, a Columbia native who graduated from Hickman High School in 1997. She has lived in California since she graduated, but when she learned Bojtor and Dessau were looking for a small-town setting, Mustard was quick to suggest Columbia.

The local competitors "are an incredibly varied group of people," Mustard says. "We have a kid who's 12 and a grown woman of 65. We have people from all types of jobs, different places around Columbia." The \$10,000 prize lured some of them, including Chris Bailey, 34, a single mom in Columbia. Bailey says the money would change her life. For others, such as Wes Cunningham, the opportunity to appear in a movie was just as exciting. Cunningham, 56, a self-described "country guy" who teaches GED classes at Moberly Prison, says, "I felt kind of silly at the meeting, but

I said 'what the heck?'" At the final competition, he'll decorate his cart with tin cups and pans, wear his cowboy attire and use a drumstick to play a tune on his pots and pans each time he picks up a product.

The finalists have been practicing at Schnucks every Tuesday night for about a month to prepare for the final event this Saturday. Most competitors arrive in everyday clothes and practice with unmodified shopping carts. They work on their routines, learn the locations of the products they must retrieve and quietly picture the final performance. The directors hover close by to catch the action on film.

When they're not filming, local cast members spend their days as they normally would. The directors have been busy filming all 21 finalists at home and at their jobs to get to know each of them on a more personal level.

Filming concludes at the end of November, but it will take the directors until next fall to complete the editing process. "In a documentary so much of the story will come together during the editing because you have so many hours of footage," Mustard says.

Eventually, the crew would like to circulate the film through festivals, Mustard says. But for now, cast and crew are focused on the final competition. The event will be exciting for local participants. They might, as Sawyer hopes, even learn that shopping should, and can, be fun.

— Abigail Allred

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