

Woodstock native's paranormal film is now streaming

By LORI D'ANGELO
Daily News-Record

Zack Van Eyck spent 13 years in Los Angeles trying to get his film scripts produced, but it wasn't until he finally returned to his family's cabin in the Shenandoah Valley that he was able to get his first full-length film made by producing it himself.

And that film, "The Hitchhiker Effect," which won several awards at small film festivals, is now avail-

able to stream on Amazon Prime Video, Apple TV and Google TV. Van Eyck isn't hoping to make big bucks on the low-budget sci-fi dramedy, which he filmed using rented equipment in six days.

"Because my actors were so good, we were able to do it pretty quickly," he said.

Instead, he's just hoping for enough money back to produce his next film.

"If we can just make back another \$20,000, we



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Lead characters Alan, played by Michael Beardsley, and Liz, played by Allyson Sereboff, on the set of Woodstock writer and director Zack Van Eyck's first full-length feature film "The Hitchhiker Effect," in Woodstock.

can make another film," he said.

In fact, he even has the script for his next planned project, "The Love Machine," and the actors in mind. He plans to recast Michael Beardsley and Allyson Sereboff, who played the lead characters, Alan and Liz, in "The Hitchhiker Effect."

At festivals, the film won several awards, including best film, best actress for

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Film

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Sereboff, best cinematography for Sara Bravo, and editing awards for Adrian Dennis. Van Eyck also won the Robert Rodriguez Indie Auteur of the Year Award at the Bare Bones Film and Music Festival at Muskogee, Oklahoma, in March.

The film takes place after Alan returns from a trip to Utah, where he investigated paranormal activity. Alan believes that something spooky, perhaps extraterrestrial, has followed him home.

This well-known phenomenon is called "The Hitchhiker Effect," which is associated with Skinwalker Ranch in Utah, a place known for its strange happenings.

Van Eyck, 63, knows about the Hitchhiker Effect because he wrote about it as a journalist for the Salt Lake City newspaper, the Deseret News, in the 1990s. They asked him to write a story about aliens, and he did.

Van Eyck was able to raise the money he needed by cashing out his retirement and selling some of the walnut trees on his family's 13-acre property in Woodstock.

"We made about \$8,000 of the budget from selling our walnut trees, and we have such a forested area here, we're right next to the GW National Forest, that's our border, and the river is our border on the other side, that we have plenty of trees, and you can't even tell that



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Left to right, "The Hitchhiker Effect" music composer Derrick Dymalski, writer and director Zack Van Eyck, actor John Bigham, and actor Michael Beardsley at the Hollywood Reel Independent Film Festival in 2024.

the walnut trees are gone," he said. "I love trees, and I'm sorry that they're gone, but that's how we made our film."

Van Eyck does have other filmmaking experience. He co-directed the 90-minute documentary "Daytona Dream" in 2010, and he was one of two writers for the 2005 film "Jupiter Landing."

The initial budget for "The Hitchhiker Effect" was \$19,555, and Van Eyck has about four other films he can make for the same price if he can come up with the money.

He already has the location in mind: the cabin in Woodstock, where he shot

"The Hitchhiker Effect."

The star of "The Hitchhiker Effect," Beardsley, has been in about 100 films, but he is not a household name. Another star of the film, John Bigham, has also appeared in several films, including 2022's "The Mean One," about the character of The Grinch, in which he plays Dr. Seuss.

Because the cast doesn't have a big-name star, Van Eyck is hoping the story will be the draw.

"We're hoping that people will watch it because of the connection, to some degree, to Skinwalker Ranch," Van Eyck said. "I broke that story in 1996 while I was working for the Deseret News."

Skinwalker Ranch is a 512-acre ranch that is the site of numerous reported

paranormal events.

"From 1994-1996, Terry and Glenn Sherman lived out there with their two children on what is known as Skinwalker Ranch now," Van Eyck said. "They were watching these windows or portals open up in the sky where you could see a different atmosphere on the other side, and ships would come through, and they saw Big-foot and dinosaur-type creatures and dire wolves and all kinds of other strange stuff."

Van Eyck had previous experience writing about paranormal events, having previously worked as a journalist in New Mexico. But it was only when "Independence Day" came out in 1996 that his editors tasked him with writing a UFO story. While attempting to track down a story, Van Eyck met up with local UFO researchers and read Frank Salisbury's "The Utah UFO display: a biologist's report," which was written in 1975 and detailed reports of UFO activity in the northeastern corner of Utah, which is sometimes referred to as the Utah Basin.

Joseph Junior Hicks, who was both a science teacher and an electrical contractor, was the person locals went to when they had UFO stories. It was through Hicks that Van Eyck connected with Gwen Sherman, and the rest is paranormal history.

Van Eyck has the rights to tell Sherman's story and has already written a script, but what he doesn't have is the budget to make the film.

"The Hitchhiker Effect

is a very real thing that has happened, continues to happen, to researchers who go out to Skinwalker Ranch. This has happened to some government people, where they go out there, and they're around the activity, and then they come, and the activity follows them home," he said. "It's kind of like poltergeist activity. So I thought, 'Well, hey, that's a way that we could write a story which involves the ranch,' and that's something that we could do very easily just in a house, and that's the one resource I have is a cabin on 13 acres."

A TV series about Skinwalker Ranch, "The Secret of Skinwalker Ranch," is now in its 6th season on The History Channel.

Van Eyck hopes this film, which tells the story of Alan trying to figure out what is happening after a trip to the ranch while navigating marital struggles with his wife, Liz, will open the door for him to

make that bigger-budget film.

He sees "The Devil's Ranch" as such a film.

"It's like 'Close Encounters,' 'Amityville Horror,' 'Poltergeist,' all wrapped into one," he said. "It's a great story, but it needs lots of special effects."

"The Hitchhiker Effect," which features several unexpected twists and turns, leaves many viewers wanting to watch it again, Van Eyck said.

If the film recovers its costs, Van Eyck plans to begin work on his next sci-fi film, "The Love Machine," next year on a microbudget.

"It's so gratifying to have something produced," he said.

He now tells people who also dream of making movies, "Don't wait for someone else to make your film. Put together \$20,000, and do it yourself."

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Cinematographer Sara Bravo and writer/director Zack Van Eyck are pictured during the first shot of the film "The Hitchhiker Effect" just below the Woodstock Tower.