What's Wrong With Neil?

Have you ever been in one of those situations where you attempt to pass a love letter to the object of your desire, only to have it intercepted by the class bully who reads it out in class, totally destroying your reputation, your chances of making it with this person and your life in general?

That's What's Wrong With Neil, Omni Films' first dramatic production, another Family Pictures anthology installment brought to you by the CBC.

On the top floor of a suburban, west coast yuppie house, a stone's throw from Grouse Mt. in North Vancouver, Neil (played by David French) stares at a fish tank at the foot of his bed while director Brad Turner stares at him through an Artflex. Neil has been keeping to himself a lot since the bully (played by Mathew Briard) exposed him. Now his family is worried because he has mysteriously withdrawn and no one knows why.

"It's more about boys just uncovering the mysteries about girls," says Andrew Seebaran, 11, who is playing Neil's friend Jasper.

Neil's sister, played by 15-year-old Sarah Bowling, saves the day by bringing his love interest up to his room where the two end up being good friends and, deep sigh, Neil can go back to school and not be so depressed.

"Neil has a real adult outlook on everything," says Bowling who describes the Neil character as a "nerd" with only one good friend (Jasper) in his life.

Paul Vitols (Cinema Canada's West Coast writer from 1979 to 1984) co-wrote What's Wrong With Neil? with Warren Easton. It's their first produced dramatic piece. They saw the Family Pictures Series as their big chance.

"This seemed like the ideal opportunity," recalls Vitols who followed the Family Pictures bible to come up with the concept. "The strength of it is in the depiction of a universal situation," he says. "Neil's whole drama is in his head, but most people would see it as just another incident among many."

The 24-minute anthology format doesn't have a lot of room for complicated character or plot development which is why Vitols focused on "an important incident, but small enough for a half-hour."

But Neil's problem complicated everybody else's lives, which is why director Turner focused the show more as an ensemble piece, while the script still seems focused on Neil. Turner is perhaps the reason this basic half-hour boy-wants-girl-boy-loses-girl-boy-meets-girl-and-they-end-up-being-friends comedy drama works as well as it does. His years with SCTV and TV Ontario, and directing serial dramas like the Twilight Zone, has led to his philosophy of creating an atmosphere on set that will somehow translate to film.

"You have to open up the gate... create an air of real credibility," says Turner. "Comedy is more an environment, it's not necessarily in the script. If you can create the environment on set, you can create the air on screen."

Producer Michael Chechik and Omni Films partner Rob McLachlan, who is DOF on What's Wrong With Neil?, have worked together for the last 10 years doing documentary films such as Ferrall Ancient Mariner, about Sea Turtles, Rites of Spring, about the seal hunt and a film with David Suzuki called The Nuclear Past. Chechik says they have a couple of features in development and that they intend to keep producing documentaries.

Chechik found the experience of producing the anthology short was helpful, if frustrating. "It's a good showcase for our work and it's good in terms of going through it to anticipate problems at the feature level. We had to go through all the hoops with them (the government agencies) as if it was a feature," he says. "It wasn't until the day before yesterday (the first day of photography) that we got our first check."

Perhaps when Neil grows up he'll be asking that universal question of struggling independent cash-strapped producers: "What's wrong with the industry?" What's Wrong With Neil? will be aired this spring on the CBC.

Ian Hunter •