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By night, BeFree's Amato pines for the 'Limelight'

By Mark Hollmer - Journal Staff

More than 300 guests clad in tuxedos, suits, gowns and evening dresses strolled and chatted their way to a first-floor ballroom at the Providence Westin Hotel.

It was Feb. 22. Around 8 p.m., Mike Amato took center stage at the Providence, R.I.-based hotel to introduce the premier of "Limelight," a satirical comedy and the third film he's written, produced and directed.

In the moments before his movie premiered, Amato said he experienced "kind of a mixture of emotions."

There's "relief that this thing was done and you got it done on time," he said. "You're feeling glad to be able to show it in front of people, (but) when you sit down and the movie starts, you're feeling terror. What if people don't laugh?"

You've heard the joke about the actor who "really wants to direct." Amato is a software company executive who wanted to direct, write and produce his own movies.

Amato, 45, a married father of two sons, is vice president of program development for BeFree Inc. in Marlborough, a software company whose customers pay them each month to track affiliate sales on the web.

By day, Amato is a software/high-tech survivor who has worked more than 20 years in the Bay State high-tech industry. Prior to BeFree, he most recently worked for Xchange Inc., a now-defunct customer-relationship management software rising star that at its height had market capitalization of \$2 billion. In fact, that's where he started the "by night" portion of his résumé a few years ago.

By night, Amato has made three movies in as many years, as head of Jodom Pictures, named after sons Joseph and Dominic.

At Xchange and later at BeFree, Amato said both companies have been supportive of his unusual after-hours hobby. His staff at BeFree, for example, gave him a picture of silent film star and director Charlie Chaplain looking into a viewfinder.

Making movies has ended up being a suitable hobby for Amato, in part, he said, because he's always loved the genre, and it lets him (and other technology employees who volunteer to be part of his films) pursue a

more creative side than they're used to.

"When you're in the technology profession," he said, "you don't always get to see the artistic side except if it's web development. This is very much a release from that, and it lets you explore the other side of your brain."

Amato says the technology-related skills he's learned, particularly through project management, have helped him to make movies and be "a better filmmaker."

"To get a movie done you have to have stuff wired (and be) highly organized, driven and focused to the end goal on getting the thing done," he said.

Amato's latest, "Limelight," looks at an individual's 15-minutes of fame, and how that could play out, but with a twist.

"We thought, (what if) Joe Bluecollar was suddenly exposed to the same level of media attention celebrities normally get, and what if every aspect of his life was exposed to publicity and how he would handle it?" Amato said.

Anthony Villa, a graphic designer who worked for Amato's wife, Lynne, plays lead character Ed Taylor, marketing manager at Chewy Taffy, a taffy company bought by Texas entrepreneur Dick Hammer (played by Brian Hoffman, an old customer of Amato's, and by day a managing partner with Winter, Wyman & Co. in Waltham, a job-placement firm for software and other industries). Taylor grows famous and is fawned over by the media as a potential savior of the new company. Before long, though, the press hounds start sniffing for scandal.

Each of Amato's movies are all-volunteer productions staffed with actors and production crews that come from a diverse mix of family, friends, business acquaintances and fans of amateur filmmaking, and who follow the film work of Amato and others like him.

Many, like Hoffman, have technology-related or other high-caliber day jobs, running the gamut from web designing to software sales representatives and attorneys. Both of Amato's sons have small roles as well. (Full disclosure: My sister, Gretchen, and brother, Peter, have bit parts.)

Making a movie from scratch is cheaper than your average Hollywood blockbuster, but still requires a big investment. Amato's three films earned tabs of between \$5,000 and \$10,000, including food, props and some travel costs. Amato pays for his movies' production largely out of his own pocket. Filming takes place on weekends and editing and production at nights after everyone else has gone to bed.

Amato uses a Canon XL1 mini-digital video camera to film his movies, and edits his films himself using a digital video work station from Avid Technology Inc. of Tewksbury, a digital editing hardware and software

company. He also wrote lyrics for the movie's songs. Steve Sherrick, a sound editor who works in Watertown, helped with much of "Limelight" as well.

Amato's film web site can be reached at <http://www.jodompictures.com>.

MARK HOLLMER, a high-tech reporter for the Boston Business Journal, specializes in telecommunications, Internet, networking and software companies. He can be reached by e-mail at MHollmer@bizjournals.com.

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