

FILM

They're Beginning at the Beginning

By MARJORIE ROSEN

A FEW YEARS AND DOZENS OF auditions ago, a couple of struggling young actors, in their desperation to lure an agent, decided to create a video calling card about a couple of struggling young actors. For inspiration, they looked no further than, well, themselves, plumbing their own humiliations and failures to come up with the right stuff.

Soon their idea took off: the calling card ballooned into the feature film "Lisa Picard Is Famous," which opens for a two-week run at Film Forum on Wednesday. Billed as a "mockumentary" about an actress whose imminent breakthrough is being relentlessly captured by a pesky documentary filmmaker, the movie, directed by Griffin Dunne, who also plays the filmmaker, offers up a constellation of celebrities like Buck Henry, Carrie Fisher, Charlie Sheen and Sandra Bullock. But its true stars are those fresh-faced young New York actors, Laura Kirk and Nat DeWolf, who not only wrote the movie but play two fictional New York actors named Lisa Picard and Tate Kelley.

Arriving at a theater district restaurant recently, Ms. Kirk appears soft-spoken, self-contained and youthfully elegant; Mr. DeWolf, with inline skates flung over his shoulder, has a more windblown, even disheveled look. Neither appears to be over 30, although in actorly fashion they decline to divulge their ages.

When ordering, the two collaborators turn into a Broadway-baby version of the Bickersons. She doesn't want anything. He's thinking of a quesadilla. She weighs in on his order; he weighs in on her opinion of his order. "We're not a good combination in restaurants," offers Mr. DeWolf. Ms. Kirk adds, "And we've spent a lot of time in restaurants," explaining that they wrote much of their script in longhand at K-Mart's K Cafe on Astor Place, where, she says, "you don't even have to order anything."

Ms. Kirk, who grew up on a farm in Kansas and became starstruck after watching -- what else? -- "The Wizard of Oz," begins to explain how "Lisa Picard Is Famous" came to be: "I had gone to Los Angeles and put all my temping money into creating my actor's reel. But when I was finished, all I had was a Diet Dr Pepper commercial, some inexplicable thing where I

play an android, and this dramatic re-enactment about a dog, which we actually used in the film. And a friend of mine looked at the reel and said, 'You can't show this to anyone.' I was just crushed." Even so, on returning to New York, Ms. Kirk decided to recycle her embarrassment into performance art by "just taking the reel and talking about it, like 'I'm serious about this work.' And I told Nat about it."

Mr. DeWolf spent his childhood in Weston, Mass., outside Boston, mucking out the family stables and dreaming of playing Maria in "The Sound of Music." He attended the Boston Conservatory and studied musical theater before heading to Manhattan and signing up for Wynn Handman's acting class. It was there that he met Ms. Kirk, when they were assigned to play a love scene from Jean Anouilh's play "Thieves' Carnival." ("We cracked up through the whole thing," he says. "But we just sort of hit it off.") After hearing Ms. Kirk's notion of using her reel as an ironic commentary on her career, Mr. DeWolf had a few ideas of his own. "In grad school, I used to joke about how, when I went back to New York, I was going to do a one-man show about homophobia," he says. "That would be my ticket to fame."

The two began mapping out a story about what Mr. DeWolf calls "two delusional actors," best friends, who in their desperate search not just for fame but for an acting job as well -- any kind of acting job -- also test their friendship. At first, the collaborators thought small, intending to write a 20-minute film in the hope of attracting an agent; they put together 27 pages. But the actress Mira Sorvino, a friend of Ms. Kirk's, liked the script so much that she persuaded them to expand it into a feature.

So Ms. Kirk and Mr. DeWolf began working on their story. Occasionally, Ms. Sorvino would hold readings at home, inviting actor-friends to come over, take part, listen and -- to paraphrase "Othello" -- be nothing if not critical. For well over two years, they held these informal workshops until finally, in 1999, Ms. Sorvino says, "The script was so good

and had so much heart, I became interested in producing it." In short order, Dolly Hall, who had produced "High Art," and GreeneStreet Films, a production company, also committed to the project.

Then someone came up with a brainstorm: for an actor-director to both play the role of the documentarian and to direct the film. "I believe it was my idea, I'm not sure," Ms. Sorvino says by telephone from Nova Scotia, where she is on location for the movie "Wise Girls." "But it made it a film within a film within a film. And then the director would actually



shape the experience of the documentarian's view of Lisa."

Enter Griffin Dunne, best known as the star of Martin Scorsese's quirky, paranoid 1985 fantasy, "After Hours" (which Mr. Dunne also produced). His last directorial effort had been the special-effects-heavy "Practical Magic" (1998), with Nicole Kidman and Sandra Bullock playing witches. By contrast, this script had a budget of less than \$1 million and was to be shot on digital video. Figuring it would allow for more spontaneity, Mr. Dunne signed on.

Disorienting Ms. Kirk and Mr. DeWolf was one of the tactics Mr. Dunne's character used whenever he "interviewed" them on camera. "I'd find that little dumb guy in me and deliberately act like I wasn't understanding what they had to say," he says. His goal? To replicate "that look that documentary subjects have when they don't know what's coming next." He added, "That anticipation is always one of the hardest things for actors to bury."

He also decided to open up the movie by asking celebrities to contemplate fame. These included some of the usual suspects -- and some unusual ones, like George Hall. "I'd

heard about this guy who used to carry around Edgar Bergen's dummies in a suitcase," Mr. Dunne says, "and I thought, 'I've got to see him.' The thing in the suitcase is more important than the guy who's carrying it."

Mr. Dunne came to the picture with a distinctive perspective on celebrity. His father is the author Dominick Dunne, who, he says, "was obsessed with fame and worshipped famous people."

"Before he ended up writing about them, he was a slave to them," the younger Mr. Dunne says. "It created a lot of mixed feelings in me about fame -- my own and other people's."

While "Lisa Picard Is Famous" is, in part, Mr. Dunne's loopy musing on the subject, it is also about striving, disappointment and such a sufficiency of other things that, in the end, Mr. Dunne videotapes himself in the editing room wondering aloud what the movie is about. "That's when we came up with the Heisenberg theory that I'm effecting change on the very people I'm filming," he says. "I'm supposed to be filming them and their career, but in fact I'm affecting their career by filming them."

And how have Ms. Kirk and Mr. DeWolf been affected by the ride? They briefly tasted fame in May 2000 when they took the film to the Cannes International Film Festival. Ms. Kirk recalls a sea of perhaps 100 photographers whistling and screaming her name -- "Laura! Laura!" -- as they walked into the auditorium on opening night. "I had absolutely no idea what was happening," she says. "I felt shocked. And I was grateful that Nat was there. At least we had each other to go, 'Oh, my God!'"

Real fame has been elusive, however. Since finishing "Lisa Picard Is Famous" almost two years ago, Ms. Kirk and Mr. DeWolf have both signed with agents, landed an occasional acting job and finished two scripts. There's talk of a sitcom based on their movie. But mostly, Ms. Kirk and Mr. DeWolf are still temping, auditioning and hoping.

Perhaps Mr. DeWolf sums it up best: "I bought a tuxedo to wear at Cannes, and I wore it all year. Catering." ■