

Here's to you, coach

Victoria Charters and Kenneth Johnson made 'I Heard the Mermaids Singing' as a tribute to their acting coach.

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The Skinny

"I Heard the Mermaids Singing," a short film co-directed by and starring Kenneth Johnson and Victoria Charters, will be shown tonight during the 8:45 p.m. block of films at the Great Lakes Independent Film Festival at Theatre 145, 145 W. 11th St. Tickets are \$5 at the door.

Michael Shurtleff was a showbiz legend as acting coach and casting director. He was the genius who cast Dustin Hoffman in "The Graduate." He helped Barbara Streisand, Robert Redford, Bette Midler, and others land key roles on Broadway and in film. He also wrote "Audition," a how-to bible for actors, which Australian actress Victoria Charters soaked up before she moved to Los Angeles in 1994. Upon arriving, she was thrilled to learn Shurtleff was offering acting classes and immediately signed up. During one session, Shurtleff presented a play he'd written, "I Heard the Mermaids Singing." He chose Charters to play Sweetzer, the mysterious, free-spirited woman who meets her soul mate, Al. Charters liked the piece so much she began working with Shurtleff on a screenplay for a short film. Later, though, he decided he'd rather turn it into a feature-length project.

That was that, until last year when her mentor died. At Shurtleff's memorial service, she met actor Kenneth Johnson, who played Detective Curtis "Lemonhead" Lemansky on FX's "The Shield" until his character was killed off in season five. He currently co-stars with Holly Hunter in "Saving Grace."

Turned out that Johnson had studied with Shurtleff, as well. What's more, he had played Al, the male lead, during class.

You can guess what happened next. Charters and Johnson teamed up to make "I Heard the Mermaids Singing," a 24-minute short film, as an homage to their acting coach.

"We wanted to make a piece as a tribute to him, so this was the first thing that came to mind. It was a very impactful experience, the journey of this piece," said Charters, who studied with Shurtleff for two years. "It was a very sweet experience to revisit something we'd already worked on years ago."

At its heart, "Mermaids" is a love story with an O. Henry-worthy turn.

"It's a story of these two odd people who meet outside of a party and go on a journey together," Charters said. "I think one of the nicest descriptions of it came from someone who said it's a beautiful slice of life. It's a love story with a twist."

For a love story to work, chemistry is paramount. Luckily, Charters and Johnson had that. After one director and then another backed out, they decided to co-direct. They shot it in just two days in scenic Santa Barbara, Calif.

"We rarely disagreed," Charters said. "Ninety-eight percent of the time we were linked up. It was very, very easy."

"I Heard the Mermaids Singing" has played 11 film festivals this year, including the Short Film Corner at Cannes. It also won a short film award at the Park City Film Music Festival. "I will always cherish the experience of working on this piece. It was something I wanted to do for 12 years," Charters said. "We've had a great run with it. I hope Michael would be pleased."