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## COLLEGE STUDENT'S MURDER

# 'Among Brothers': Artists grapple with S.C. tragedy

*Fictional interpretation on film*

BY LAWRENCE TOPPMAN  
Movie Critic

A girl's life has been ended. Two men's careers have begun.

That equation will never balance, but the death of Jennifer Anne Morgan has now been taken from the realm of unsolved crime to thought-provoking art.

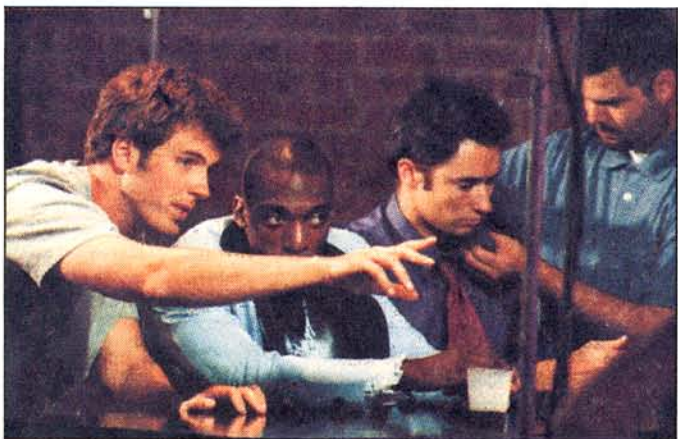
"Among Brothers," a fictional interpretation of the college student's murder in November 1994, will have its world premiere Friday at the Palm Beach International Film Festival and screen at WorldFest-Houston 12 days later. Charlotte will see it June 2-3 in

screenings by The Light Factory.

In the picture, a drunken fraternity member kills Jennifer - probably accidentally, perhaps not - while enraged at her refusal to accept him as a boyfriend. The police suspect him but never acquire enough evidence to charge him, and he's left to wrestle with his conscience. (The police in Florence, S.C., where Jennifer was a senior at Frances Marion College, were stymied and made no arrests. The case officially remains open.)

Years after the crime, Tom Morgan tried to get closure on his grief and anger by writing a script that "solved" the killing of his younger sister. He couldn't get that project off the ground until he met first-time filmmaker John Schwert at a Charlotte party.

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FOURTH WARD PRODUCTIONS PHOTO

Director John Schwert (left), works with actors Daniel Watts (second from left) and Matt Mercer in this bar scene from "Among Brothers." The picture gets its world premiere Friday at a film festival in Palm Beach, Fla.



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# Movie to premiere Friday in Florida

**Murder** from 1E

Schwert shot the film over four weeks last autumn, reducing the brother-sister relationship and focusing on the psychological dilemmas of the fraternity member and his accomplices after the fact. The movie's titles now credit Morgan with the story, Schwert with the adaptation and direction.

Speaking of credit, Schwert ran his credit ragged to raise money: He took out a second mortgage on his Fourth Ward house, which he figures he bought for \$30,000 or so under market value, and followed the film novice's tradition of maxing out credit cards.

"I could've spent a year looking for financing and shot on film," says the 29-year-old director. "Or I could've shot on video, which gave the story the edgy look it needs, and use my money."

"I put up \$32,000, which let me pay the cast and 13-person crew a small weekly stipend, and I have \$230,000 in deferred contracts. Fifty-one percent of the film belongs to me, the rest to the people who worked on it. If a distributor buys it, we'll make some money."

Schwert knows something about money: He worked in sales for Bank of America and First Union and collected an MBA from Queens University of Charlotte last year while working full time. He quit those jobs to start Fourth Ward Productions; he's now planning to shoot the Wachovia Championship at Quail Hollow Country Club for the bank's advertising campaign.

"I'm not working enough yet

(as a director) to pay bills, but I learned a lot on 'Among Brothers.' I realized the main skill it takes isn't artistic talent but planning: getting characters down in rehearsals, setting shot lists with the director of photography.

"You have to be resourceful and surround yourself with the right talent. We averaged 25 setups a day" - a Hollywood shoot wouldn't do half that - "so you can't tell people how to do every job, and you can't do it for them." On the other hand, you can hire your mother to be the crafts services person, feeding an average of 30 folks a day on the set for \$5 each with Harris Teeter platters.

Not surprisingly, Schwert is working on two more scripts, including a "bizarre" film that jumps across genres and a comedic drama of corporate America.

More surprisingly, the man who told Jennifer's story to close a door finds another one opening.

"I'll never quit my day job," says the 37-year-old Morgan, who sells commercial and residential real estate. "But I feel a passion for writing. I think of stories; I meet people who become characters in my mind. Writing about her put up a lot of roadblocks: You know what your sister's like, so you box yourself in. I can't wait to write one that has no boundaries."

Morgan's working on two scripts, including one about an insurance swindle. He says he does feel closure about Jennifer's tale; though Schwert's interpretation of the story differed from his at points, "John did an unbelievable job with the money he had. It's a real accomplishment to get to a film festival your first time out."