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## An indie's touched by an angel

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Chicago Closeup

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On Kickstarter, the most common projects looking to raise money are independent films. Not every campaign gets funded. Not by a long shot. Recent analysis by the website Apps Blogger found that roughly half fail to reach their goal — a fate that recently befell an indie set in the world of Chicago bike messengers called "The Alley Cat," which was tentatively set to begin filming next month.

Filmmaker Marie Ullrich needed to raise \$35,000 for the project. When we spoke last week, she had clocked less than \$9,000, with three days remaining until her deadline. "I shouldn't give up," she told me, "but we're so far away from meeting the goal."

Per Kickstarter's rules, if a project does not reach its stated goal within a specified time frame, all of those pledged funds evaporate, and it was looking as though Ullrich would have to put the July shoot on hold indefinitely. This kind of setback happens all the time in moviemaking, regardless of the budget, and Ullrich was considering her options. "The other avenue is to go through independent producers. So I might have to travel to LA and meet with people who can help me with fundraising and get them sold on the idea. Doing it that way just takes a little bit longer."

Then a funny thing happened. A few hours before her deadline was set to expire, I got an email from Ullrich. "Someone found me via the Kickstarter website and wants to fund the film," she wrote. "For some reason, Kickstarter is only allowing her to pledge \$10,000, though we need (and she is willing to pledge) \$25,000." The bad news: Ullrich would not make her goal. The good news: Her investor was willing to fund the film outside the Kickstarter mechanism.

That means game on for "Alley Cat." Filming begins next week. The narrative expands on the bike messenger milieu of Ullrich's 12-minute short "Faster!" (which screened at Cannes in 2010), with its

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kinetic ride through the streets (and office buildings) of Chicago, following a bike messenger as she fleeces cubicle dwellers and swallows various indignities on the job. (The opening credits are a nice touch, appearing on license plates and traffic signs.)

The new film is set after-hours, in the nocturnal world of the Alley Cat race, a real-life underground bike messenger street race. "They're racing each other for prize money," Ullrich said, "getting drunk and just having fun — and then someone gets hit by a car. The race stops and turns into an impromptu ghost bike ceremony, and the night just kind of degenerates from there."

Though Ullrich has secured the bulk of her budget, she's not fully there and hopes those who initially pledged on Kickstarter will migrate over and donate to a PayPal account that has been set up on the website for "Faster!" ([fastershortfilm.com](http://fastershortfilm.com)).

"The upside," she said, "is that we may save a little of the fees that both Kickstarter and Amazon were going to take out of the amount we raised." (Kickstarter takes five percent of the funds raised; Amazon Payments, which manages the collection system, gets an additional cut.) "The downside is that probably not everyone will migrate over, so if people feel so inclined, please increase your pledge. If you need to reduce it because your circumstances have changed — well, trust me, I understand."

### **More indie news**

Joe Swanberg, who at 30 is Chicago's most prolific filmmaker, has yet another project in the works, set to begin shooting in town next month. In a departure from his microbudget efforts (including "Hannah Takes the Stairs" and "Alexander the Last"), he has teamed with the producer of Lena Dunham's "Tiny Furniture" on what is the biggest project of his career so far. (Though he stressed that the film is still relatively small, even by indie standards).

As with his previous work, the dialogue will be improvised. The primary difference is the high-profile cast (a first for Swanberg, who typically uses non-actors). In an effort to keep things low-key, details are being kept under wraps for the duration of the shoot. "I'm deep in preproduction," Swanberg said when we spoke last week, "so things have been very location-scouty."

Meanwhile, two of Swanberg's newer films — "Caitlin Plays Herself" and "Marriage Material" — will screen locally in a double feature next week. "They're both these small projects that I was motivated to make last year," he said. "And because I have this bigger movie that I'm making in July — plus another film that I shot in December that hasn't come out yet — I felt like I needed to get on it or else I'm going to do my own movies a disservice, and they're just going to quietly disappear and become these oddities when people look at my IMDB page. So I'd like for these to show around before I make them available for digital streaming."

"Caitlin Plays Herself" stars local actor (and Neo-Futurist) Caitlin Stainken as a politically minded performance artist stumbling through romantic entanglements (including one with a louse played by Swanberg). "Marriage Material" is the stronger of the two, focusing on the subtle tension that develops when a young couple begins debating whether marriage and babies are in their future.

Swanberg and his real-life wife appear in the early going as a counterpoint, arriving with their 7-month-old son in tow. "Most of my friends are in their early 30s," he said, "and these are the conversations people are having now. The stakes are a little higher than they used to be."

"*Caitlin Plays Herself*" and "*Marriage Material*" screen Thursday at Chicago Filmmakers and July 6 at Gorilla Tango's Skokie Theater in Skokie. Go to **[chicagofilmakers.org](http://chicagofilmakers.org)** and click on "screenings."

### **Outdoor cinema**

The Movies in the Park series (courtesy of the Chicago Park District) features a variety of genres this weekend, including "Dolphin Tale," "Transformers: Dark of the Moon," "Akeelah and the Bee," "Hugo," "The Wiz" and "Captain America: The First Avenger." Admission is free, and all movies begin at dusk, weather permitting. For a complete schedule (and list of corresponding parks) go to **[chicagoparkdistrict.com/events/movies](http://chicagoparkdistrict.com/events/movies)**.

### **Family-friendly 3-D**

The Chicago-made family comedy "I Heart Shakey" — about a widowed father, his young daughter and their mischievous dog — makes its debut in theaters this weekend. With Steve Guttenberg and Beverly D'Angelo in supporting roles, along with local actress Janet Ulrich Brooks and former Second City mainstager Andy St. Clair. Director Kevin Cooper (who teaches film at Columbia College Chicago) was keen to experiment with 3-D in a non-action setting and based the story on his own experiences when he moved into an apartment complex and found he wasn't allowed to keep his dog. The movie is also available On Demand. Go to **[iheartshakey.com](http://iheartshakey.com)**.

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