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## Wisconsin Film Fest: 'Joe Zopp' gets by on zany one-liners and dingos

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"The Illegal Use of Joe Zopp," filmed in Chippewa Falls, Wis., was shown Friday night at the UW-Madison Memorial Union Play Circle. - Promotional

Back before Facebook, people actually got together face-to-face and gossiped about their old high school classmates. Nowadays, it's so easy. Where's Mandy? Three kids, divorced and on Match.com. Eric? Working the night shift in an emergency room on a South Pacific Island. And his favorite movie is still "Pulp Fiction," he's going through a David Bowie phase recently and just made banana pancakes for breakfast.

The best part of the Scennie-made comedy "The Illegal Use of Joe Zopp," which screened Friday night at the UW-Madison Memorial Union's Play Circle, is its use of a quaint throwback to that pre-Facebook era, "The Dingo Game."

It's a "Where are they now" betting game that Joe Zopp's old high school classmates are playing. Each person from their graduating class is worth a certain amount of "dingos," points which the friends rack up each time they spot a former classmate in person. The less likely they are to see the person, the more points he or she is worth. There's a deadline, and the person who's scored the most dingos by deadline wins \$50,000.

Joe Zopp is worth the most -- 1,000 dingos -- because everyone thinks he's dead.

But he's not.

Who's Joe Zopp? A genius kid who suddenly disappeared seven years ago from a small town called Purewater (really: Chippewa Falls). The town believes that a train "smashed him to smithereens" at age 18, but in reality he ran away to Toledo. When one of "The Dingo Game" players sees Zopp there, he kidnaps him and takes him back to Purewater to prove he's alive. One thousand points and \$50,000 are at stake!

Thus the zany confusion begins. The plot is torturously convoluted, and the film wears out its welcome with too many twists, especially in the last 20 minutes. After a while, I gave up trying to untangle it and just enjoyed the goofy one-liners.

"Joe Zopp" packs in the enthusiasm of the entire northwestern third of Wisconsin. All of Chippewa Falls seems to be involved in the film, either onscreen or off. It's fun to get swept up in it.

The film also has a lot of technical oomph behind it. Where the script lacks a concise plot and character development, it excels in self-conscious but snappy dialogue, well-choreographed chase scenes and a great eye for background set details -- a toothy Jesus drawing hanging in an old lady's house, a billboard advertising a local real estate agent.

And it turns out "The Dingo Game" isn't something sprung from the collective imagination of the enormous filmmaking team that wrote, produced and shot "Joe Zopp."

"The Dingo Game is real, and there was a dead person who was an automatic win," said Nick Holle after the screening during the Q&A. Holle co-wrote, edited and produced the film, plus played the character of Joe Zopp on screen.

Right now Holle and the rest of the "Zopp" team are working on "The Entertainers," a documentary about the annual world championships for ragtime piano in Peoria, Ill.

"Illegal Use of Joe Zopp" isn't screening again during the festival, but it's available on DVD at [wutwutalma.com](http://wutwutalma.com).