A scene from El Chancecito (A Little Chance) by Efterpi Charalambidis, winner of the New Line Cinema Award for Best Comedy, at the 2003 Columbia festival.

A scene from Jesus Henry Christ, by Dennis Lee, which won the Guoxi Fu Best Film Award at the 2003 Columbia festival.

**BY KRISTIN STERLING**

As part of an assignment in his Writing 1 class four years ago, Dennis Lee created a four-page screenplay about how the meek, and questioning, shall inherit the earth. As emerging filmmakers on a small budget, he and classmate Joe Turner Lin planned to shoot it for fun and put their classroom skills into practice.

Last year at the Columbia University Film Festival Lin became the first recipient of a new award by HBO Films to promote the development of minority producers—the HBO Films Young Producers Development Award—for the screenplay Jesus Henry Christ. It tells the story of a free-thinking 10-year-old named Henry who attends a Catholic school, where he is punished for expressing his beliefs. Through his suffering, Henry saves his classmates from the tyrannical new headmaster.

With the award money, the pair created a film that is a finalist for a Student Academy Award and received the Guoxi Fu Best Film Award at the 2003 Columbia festival, where Lin also received the Film Division Best Producer Award. The film also received a National Board of Review of Motion Picture Award at the festival and was named Best Student Short at the HBO US Comedy Arts Festival in Aspen.

“It is nice to win these awards,” says Lin. “Neither of us has ever experienced something so high-profile—it’s so surreal. This film was more rewarding than any other I’ve made.”

With 40 films and digital videos to choose from, deciding the winners of the more than $110,000 in awards was no easy task.

“This is my seventh Columbia University Film Festival, and the most successful one I’ve seen. We had more good films than ever before, continuing a long-standing trend,” says Dan Kleinman, chair of the Writing 1 division.

This year’s festival featured several comedies. Among them is El Chancecito (A Little Chance) by Efterpi Charalambidis, winner of the New Line Cinema Award for Best Director, the Lifetime Student Filmmaker Award and the Audience Choice Award.

Shot in her native Venezuela, the film is set in a hair salon where everyone has aspirations—the shampoo girl wants to be a stylist; the manicurist wants to win the lottery, and a customer wants to become Miss Venezuela.

“I wanted to shoot a story that would represent a microcosm of my country as I perceive it,” says Charalambidis. There are two powerful institutions in Venezuela: lottery games and beauty contests. Inside of those microcosms, people bet on their own aspersions through lottery or hard work, through courage or patience. All of this is set against the actual context of Venezuela, where the latest political turmoil has brought economic crisis, demonstrations and uncertainty.

An actress, director and producer, Charalambidis is also involved with the Greek Cultural Center in Queens (her parents are from Greece) as program coordinator and director of plays. Later this year she will direct a play there, also sending out the film for consideration in other festivals.

In another dark comedy, Gardening Tips for Housewives, Jessica Weigmann pushes the suburban ennui trend that has been seen in films like Sam Mendes’ American Beauty and Todd Haynes’ Safe, and in so doing received the New Line Cinema Award for Outstanding Achievement in Filmmaking. The film was inspired by a newspaper article in which a tourist, horrified that heartless New Yorkers would walk past homeless people without helping, said this would never happen in the suburbs. Weigmann took this idea to the next level, depicting a homeless man settling into a suburban backyard, and endangering the tranquility of American domesticity.

About the award Weigmann says, “I am honored to receive the Outstanding Achievement Award from New Line. I really respect the films they produce and was thrilled that they singled out my film as one they enjoyed.”

Like many other emerging filmmakers, Weigmann plans to use the money to print the film so she can submit it for consideration at other festivals.

While film screenings comprise the majority of the festival, screenplay readings were the focus on Friday, May 9, with students reading excerpts from their scripts. Deborah Chow won the Comedy Central Award for Best Comedy Screenplay for Dogpass. Festival director Gary Graham won the Ezra Litwak Award for Distinction in Screenwriting for godless, and Nina Tsi’s received the Best Teleplay award for a script, titled My Jet Airliner, for the television show Scrubs.

Other leading festival awards include:

• IMAX Outstanding Achievement Award and Tribeca Entertainment Outstanding Achievement in Screenwriting Award: Leon Siminiani, Archipelago
• Arthur Krim Memorial Award: Rachel Vine
• Twentieth Century Fox/Farrelly Brothers Outstanding Achievement in Comedy Award: Marianne DeMarco, Goose Down
• Windows Media Outstanding Achievement in Technolo- gY Award: Joseph Raso, Together Alone

The 16th Annual Columbia University Film Festival will continue in Los Angeles on June 2nd and 3rd.