By Steve Smith, University Communications

For three hours on a morning in May, an urgent scene played out over and over in downtown Ashland: A crowd of locals gathered around a TV news reporter, who grimly spelled out how a young girl from town had gone missing. Twenty feet away, the local sheriff, leaning against a squad car, waited for the reporter to finish so he could organize a search party.

“All right, listen up. We’re going to start the search down by the railroad tracks,” the sheriff said, dropping his cigarette to the pavement and crushing it with his left shoe. The crowd reacted with surprise.

“That’s enough,” the sheriff belowed. “Let’s get moving!”

And… Cut!

The scene was part of the production of “Vipers in the Grass,” a short film created by the Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film at UNL. The sheriff is actually actor Dean Winters of “Oz”, “30 Rock” and “Rescue Me” fame. And on that May morning, the scene was shot roughly a dozen times in hopes that practice makes perfect.

In a one-of-a-kind collaboration, more than 130 UNL students worked side-by-side for a week with Hollywood professionals to produce the short film.

But this wasn’t your typical student film – it was written by Hollywood mainstay Jorge Zamacona and also attracted writers, actors, directors and production workers with hundreds of TV shows and motion pictures to their credit to UNL. During their week on sets in and around Lincoln, the industry professionals mentored and instructed students in the intricacies of building a motion picture from start to finish.

In the end, “Vipers” will be the only project of its kind in the United States – blending a student academic project with a creative product that will be submitted to film competitions and festivals around the country.

Winters, who along with actress and Lincoln native Harley Jane Kozak appeared with student actors in the film, said he and other industry pros weren’t sure what to expect when they arrived on set May 14. But, he said, he was instantly impressed with students’ professionalism and enthusiasm.

“They definitely got thrown into the fire and know what it’s like to be on a set,” Winters said. “They’re doing great … it’s a great learning experience for them.”

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of the project, Steger said, is the authentic look and feel of the entire production. By taking advantage of a grant from the Program Enhancement Fund through the Hixson-Lied College of Fine and Performing Arts and the Johnny Carson Theatre and Film Endowment, the project has taken on characteristics of a professional motion picture.

“(The Carson school’s) objective has been to provide students with an opportunity to work directly with faculty and outside professionals to create a professional production that is larger and broader in scope than can reasonably be expected of students working independently,” Steger said.

In addition to film school students, UNL’s School of Music, the Department of Art and Art History, the College of Journalism and Mass Communications and Nebraska Educational Telecommunications are contributing everything from the film’s musical score to its art and graphics to a “Making Of” documentary. The post-production work on the film will occur over the next 10 months with the help of staff and faculty at NET, with plans for a gala premiere in late spring or early fall 2010.

Students, faculty and staff coordinated all aspects of the film’s production. They scouted locations; oversaw production design, scenic and costume design and construction; operated cameras, lighting and grip; worked on contracts, travel and housing for outside professionals; and built the film’s budget and shooting schedules.

Ryan Kathman, a Carson graduate student who plays a priest in the film and who has worked on professional movie sets, said he could tell little difference between the student-run production and a Hollywood set.

“It puts the pressure on you a little bit more (as an actor), I think, but that’s a good thing. I’m being treated as an equal on the set, but I’m also trying to really watch and learn (from the pros).

“The chance to get to work with all of these people …. is really something that doesn’t come around every day.”

Jorge Zamacona, whose credits include “Oz” and “Homicide: Life on the Street,” said he hoped the Carson School students got as much as they could out of the week. Between takes in downtown Ashland, he admitted that he wished he would have had an opportunity to learn from industry pros during his days in film school in California.

“We had professionals come in and lecture for a day (when I was in school). We never had anyone walk us through an entire production,” Zamacona said. “So for these kids, this is valuable. This is time well spent.”

Zamacona was scheduled to be in Lincoln last week to work with students on post-production and editing.