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THE PRODUCERS

INDEPENDENT FILMMAKERS BREATHE NEW LIFE INTO
CENTRAL FLORIDA'S SILVER-SCREEN DREAMS.

BY STEVE BLOUNT

We are lurking in the cavernous, dimly lit recesses of Universal Studios building 25-A, awaiting director David Nixon's hushed command, "Cut," which will signal the end of a scene from his latest movie, *Letters to God*.

The sound stage is awash in technicians who mill about a series of rooms built to simulate the interior of a modest home. While the camera is rolling, they walk quietly or talk,

sotto voce, readying the next backdrop, moving lights or downing doughnuts from the craft services cart. Although we're sitting about two first downs away from the action, we can see everything on flat-panel monitors.

Letters to God is the story of a young boy's battle with cancer. In this scene, his mother, played by veteran actress Robyn Lively, is lashing out at her own mother who's suggested that the boy's illness is part of God's plan. Once, twice, three times, the camera

rolls until Nixon has what he needs and calls a final, "Cut!" Lively runs from the set and into the arms of co-producer Kim Dawson. She's here because of her acting ability, but Lively's tears and sobs are very real. The movie is based on the life and death of screenwriter Patrick Doughtie's son, Tyler. Even as visitors to the set, it's pretty hard not to get choked up watching the story unfold.

Dawson, Nixon and Doughtie are all part of a Renaissance in local filmmaking that shifts the focus away from studio-

make and has taken in more than \$10 million so far. The church's second film, *Fireproof*, was released last year and has already taken in more than \$33 million. While those were shot in Albany using volunteer stagehands and actors with the assistance of pros, including Nixon, director of photography Bob Scott and leading man Kirk Cameron (*Fireproof*), Nixon brought *Letters to God* to Orlando.

Why?

"Because it's home," he says. "I've lived here for 15 years and have a successful

tify their job, so the the message gets watered down. We're a small guerilla-type unit, and we can stay true to message. And that's the only reason we're making these movies, to get the message out."

Now that Hollywood has seen that this message translates into money, they're more than happy to distribute faith-based films, Nixon says.

Nixon and his colleagues on the film know Hollywood very well. Bob Scott has worked on many theatrical releases, including *The Express*, *The Bourne Ulti-*

THERE'S A SPIRIT IN FLORIDA YOU DON'T FIND IN L.A.

financed blockbusters and toward independent films with big stories, but much smaller budgets.

"You're not going to see *Transformers*-style special effects on a budget of \$3.5 million," Nixon acknowledges. "You can't make a \$150 million movie in this genre and expect to make your money back, but we can make a movie for under \$5 million that will do very well for the investors."

The genre Nixon refers to is movies with a Christian message. This is a new-found niche in moviemaking, one that's getting more notice ever since Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, released in 2004, took in more than \$600 million.

Story-driven movies created by independent producers for niche audiences have become a viable alternative to big-budget blockbusters. And Orlando is poised to become a hub for those productions.

Nixon was co-producer and assistant director on two previous Christian movies, *Facing the Giants* and *Fireproof*, both financed and produced by the Sherwood Baptist Church of Albany, Georgia. *Facing the Giants* cost just \$100,000 to

commercial production company. We do work for Disney, Subway, folks like that."

The son of Australian missionaries, Nixon says: "It's my heart that Orlando could be the capital of Christian filmmaking. We have fabulous filmmakers here. The crews are at the same level as anybody in Hollywood, the facilities are just as good. And it's a lot easier to do it here than in Hollywood because the system there is difficult to work under."

One example: The big studios still own most of the distribution channels in the United States. If you want to get a movie into theaters, you have to go through them. When Nixon first took *Facing the Giants* to his contacts in Los Angeles, they were encouraging, but with a caveat: "They said they'd love to distribute our movie if we'd just cut out all of the God stuff. The God stuff is kind of the point of these movies.

"It's not a secular versus religious bias, it's a commercial bias," he explains. "They don't want to offend anyone, to turn off any potential customer. The studio system is a bureaucracy, and in order to get a film made, it has to go through a lot of hands. Everybody has to touch it to jus-

matum, *Talladega Nights*, *Friday Night Lights* and *Monster*. Kim Dawson was a producer for the long running *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* movies, the highest-grossing independent film series of all time.

Another producer, Paul Sirmons, is also a Hollywood veteran, having directed numerous episodes of *The Waltons*, *Falcon Crest*, *Flamingo Road* and a number of theatrical releases, including the *The First of May* (starring Mickey Rooney) and the upcoming *Burning Bright*.

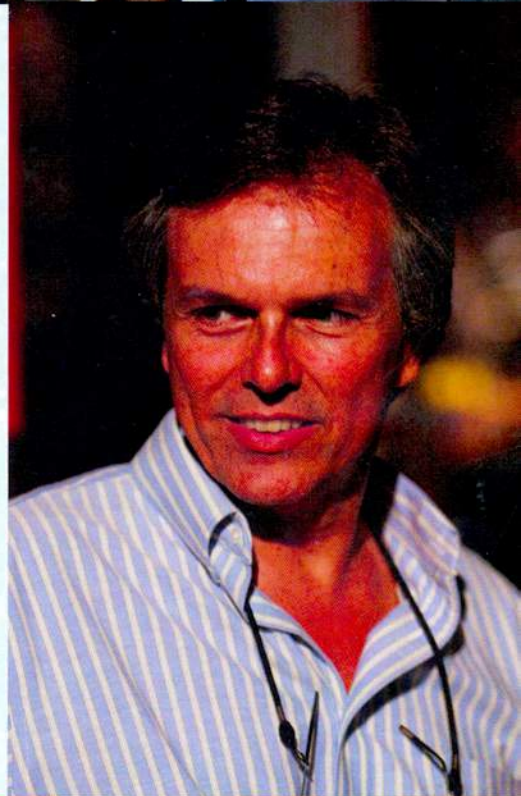
Paul Sirmons also happens to be the former film commissioner for the state of Florida, a post he held from 2005 through 2008.

"I'm a native Floridian," he says. "After I graduated from the University of Florida in the 1970s, I went to California because there was no film production going on here. To get into the business, you had to go to either New York or Los Angeles, and it doesn't snow in Los Angeles.

"When the Orlando studios of Disney and Universal opened, it was an opportunity to come back here, so I rolled cameras as the first assistant director on the first production at Disney/MGM,



Clockwise from upper left: Director of Photography Bob Scott and director David Nixon frame a shot on the set of *Letters to God*; actor Michael Rooker, director Todd Thompson and actor Bill Cobbs inside the Inland Lakes Railroad train in Mount Dora; Paul Sirmons is the former film commissioner for the state of Florida; screenwriter Patrick Doughtie (with headphones) brought his son's battle with cancer to the screen in *Letters to God*; Kim Dawson produced the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, the highest-grossing independently produced series of all time; dressing a set for *Letters to God* on the Universal soundstage.





Director Todd Thompson choreographs the chaos in tight quarters for *This Man's Life*.

which was *Superboy*, and the first production at Universal (*The New Leave It To Beaver*). I've managed to stay here ever since, although I've traveled quite a bit to work out of town."

Although he lived through the hype-and-crash of "Hollywood East," when the thinking was that Orlando would rival Los Angeles in the production of big-budget theatrical films, he's extremely optimistic about the new wave of independent productions taking root here.

"I don't think there's any difference between shooting in Hollywood, New York or Florida," he says. "Most of our people have worked in L.A. or New York. The equipment is the same. We have Panavision here at Universal, and Hollywood Rentals has an equipment house here in Orlando. We've got post-production houses both here and in Miami that are state of the art. We can do it all here. We're at the same level as New York and

Los Angeles, but Florida is just a friendlier place to make a movie.

"There's a spirit in the people of Florida that I don't see in California. People aren't jaded here. We go to film in little towns, and they're glad to see us come. We work very hard to treat them well so they'll still like us when they leave. That's important to us because we live here. This is our home."

Sirmons is optimistic about the future of film, especially independent films, in Florida: "This is where filmmakers want to shoot. You can get any look you want in Florida except mountains."

Two other essential elements, according to Sirmons, are the state's incentive program for filmmakers and an assortment of film schools.

The incentives were a key focus of his time in Tallahassee as film commissioner.

"Canada started this back in the 1990s," he explains. "They started giving

filmmakers incentives to go there and shoot. Australia followed, and England and a lot of other countries.

"Other places caught on—I think New Mexico and Louisiana were the first in the U.S.—and started offering incentives, giving back 15 to 20 percent of what a production spends on location as a rebate. Florida did not have an incentive, and films stopped coming here to shoot. No longer were films going to a location because it had the very best look or the best crews or the best equipment. They were deciding based on where the best incentive was."

"We don't have to match their incentive percentages, because producers really want to shoot here," Sirmons says, "but the issue now is that the incentive is underfunded. We had about \$24 million last year, in better economic times, but that's been cut to \$10.8 million for the 2009-2010 fiscal year that started in July.

PHOTOS: COURTESY STARS NORTH, COURTESY ANDREW GAY (OPPOSITE PAGE)

That's already gone, only funding three projects, so there are a lot of productions that won't be coming here this year."

While competing incentives are luring some productions elsewhere, Florida schools are doing a good job educating young filmmakers.

"Look at our schools – we have UCF, FullSail, University of Miami and Florida State, all with very good film programs," Sirmons says. "There's also the program Ralph Clemente has built at Valencia Community College.

"We have a number of filmmakers who are starting to bubble up to the surface. Several of them are working on this picture, including David Nixon. Ralph Clemente and Todd Thompson are two more."

Thompson is co-founder, with Balinda DeSantis, of Stars North, a Celebration-based production company. Their latest film, *This Man's Life*, was named "Best Florida Film" at this year's Sunscreen Film Festival in St. Petersburg. It features the familiar face of Hollywood veterans Michael Rooker (*Days of Thunder*, *JFK*), Betsy Brantley (*Deep Impact*, *Princess Bride*) and Bill Cobbs (*Night at the Museum*, *That Thing You Do!*).

Thompson himself has appeared as an actor in *The Green Mile*, *Contact*, *The Waterboy* and *Rosewood*, but his passion was to write and direct. He and Balinda DeSantis began producing films in 1999 and launched an effort to produce full-length features in Orlando. With just \$50,000, they wrote a business plan and began selling their idea to investors nationally. "The movie was called *Shooting Blanks*. We had Samuel L. Jackson and Jennifer Tilly committed to doing it. We also had \$1 million from investors on September 10, 2001," Thompson says ruefully. "And the tragedy that happened the next day made everything fall apart. It was quite a blow."



UCF'S BEAUTIFUL CONCEPT

The University of Central Florida Film Graduate program is the only one in the country where grad students create feature films for their thesis. The students are responsible for raising the needed funds to film their project, a requirement that teaches students to embrace limitations.

However, with the economy in a recession, it seemed more like a tight squeeze than an embrace.

UCF grad student Andrew Gay admits that raising money for his film, *A Beautiful Belly*, has been difficult. However, the film has raised about \$40,000 so far.

Gay started out as a writer but became interested in film because of its multidimensional possibilities: "When you write something, you're limited to just the words. With filmmaking you have all the different textures of color and sound and images

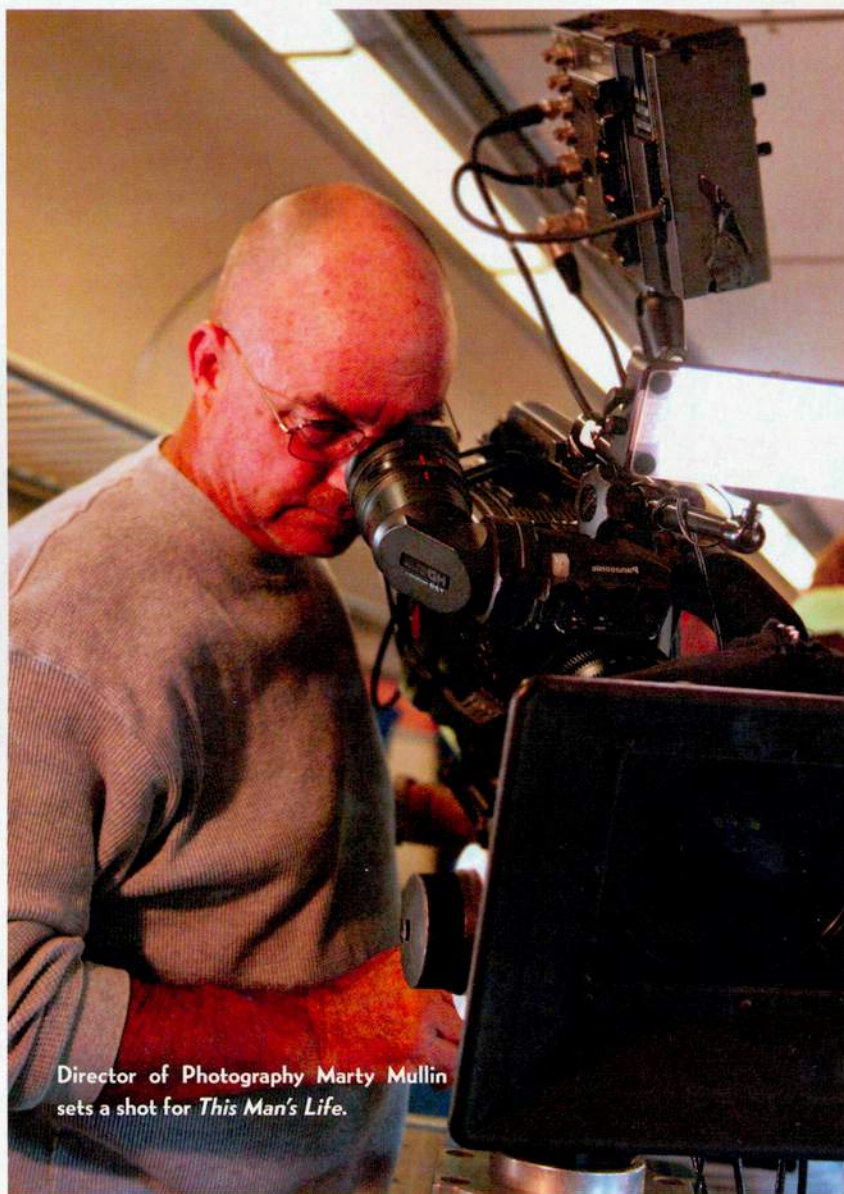
and a fun collaborative process. A script is just words on a page, but it becomes this process of becoming more when you work together in a collaboration."

A Beautiful Belly tells the story of Jason Ackart, an aspiring children's entertainer, who gets his girlfriend, Danny, pregnant. The two decide to make a life together as husband and wife but are faced with the difficulties of career and their attraction to other people.

"People don't give funds to a film like this because they think they're going to make a ton of money," Gay says. "They do it because they believe in the project."

With the help of family and friends, Gay raised enough money to carry the film through post production, creating *A Beautiful Belly* on a beautiful budget.

– Karen Johnson



Director of Photography Marty Mullin sets a shot for *This Man's Life*.

Instead of giving up, Thompson says he refocused his efforts on making a series of short films, 30 minutes or less, that could be filmed on even smaller budgets with the idea that they might eventually be released as an anthology. The first, *Time & Again* starred familiar character actor Seymour Cassel (*Rushmore*), while the second, *Once Not Far From Home*, features Erik Per Sullivan, star of the television show *Malcolm in the Middle*. A fourth film, *A Little Taste of Heaven*, will wrap up the series.

All of Thompson's films have been filmed in and around Orlando.

"These are four heartwarming stories starring people you recognize," he says. "Everyone who worked on this film gave it their all, and that's a measure of the quality of work that can be done in Florida."

"One thing about Orlando is there's so much versatility in backdrop," Thompson continues. "The backgrounds here are timeless, we've shot period pieces, modern looks, rainforest – and you can

always go into sound stages at Universal if you need to build something.

"Everyone's willing to open doors to you. I always wondered if someone knocked on *my* door, would I be willing to let them take over my house for four days. People have been so welcoming and generous and hospitable."

Once Not Far From Home required a long country road and a lone house, which Thompson eventually found in Oakland by flying over the area several times. The house was about to be renovated, and Thompson persuaded the owner to hold off a few months to allow them to shoot there. Most of *This Man's Life* takes place on a train, which Thompson found in Mount Dora.

"We went to Neil Baugus at Inland Lakes Railroad in Mount Dora," Thompson pleasantly recalls. "He showed up at 6 am in the morning with a full crew for four days at no cost to us. What a great, generous guy. We could not have done it without them."

Thompson's refrain about the generosity and talent of Central Florida is echoed by Nixon, Sirmons, Dawson and others. And they're all of the opinion that Central Florida's film future depends on smaller movies, shot with budgets under \$10 million that use grassroots marketing rather than nationwide television to build their audience.

"What they're doing here is creating a formula that will work in Orlando that relies on a very nontraditional marketing approach," Nixon says. "The saying in the industry is that if you spend \$30 million making a movie, you have to spend another \$30 million promoting it and getting it into theaters. That's \$60 million the film has to take in before it starts making money."

"The grassroots approach is nothing like that. It's all about the Internet,

pre-screenings and using word of mouth from people who've seen the movie, letting them be your marketers. You're going to see a lot more movies with budgets under \$10 million, and that's perfect for Orlando because it's much cheaper to shoot here than in Los Angeles."

In Nixon's case, the grassroots are built on a network of churches and faith-based organizations. For Thompson, it's about film festivals and the community nationwide who are fanatic about effective storytelling.

At the end of the day, however, it does come back to return on investment. Nixon's efforts have proved themselves already, with *Facing the Giants* making a 100:1 return. That's impressive. But Orlando has done that before. University of Central Florida film school graduates Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez made *The Blair Witch Project* for just \$35,000. To date, it's grossed more than \$270,000,000 worldwide, giving it the highest gross-to-cost ratio ever recorded by industry trade sources. After that success however, both Myrick and Sanchez left Central Florida.

In the newly cost-conscious Hollywood, those kinds of numbers get people's attention. And – if the state continues to fund incentives to film here (see page 4) – both Thompson and Nixon intend to stay right here.

"Our idea was never to make one film," Nixon says. "It's to make 20 or 30 or 40 films, using the same crew and the same kind of formula right here in Orlando."

Thompson concurs: "I have a family, and I really don't see myself moving anywhere else. I love filming here. Who knows, if things keep going maybe one day I'll be knocking on your door asking if we can use your house for a shoot."



Erik Per Sullivan (right and below), TV's *Malcolm in the Middle*, on the set of *Once Not Far From Home*.

FLORIDA IN FOCUS

Florida has a long history of moviemaking and was a major production center when Hollywood was still a struggling outpost. Thomas Edison built the very first film studio at his laboratory in Orange, New Jersey, in 1893 and later opened the first studio in New York City in 1908. That same year, the first movie studio – Kalem Company – opened in Jacksonville. The film used at the time needed a lot of light to produce an image, much more light than the electric lamps of the time could produce, so films had to be shot using sunlight. When skies turned gray in New York in the winter, the crews headed for Jacksonville to keep working. Over the next 20 years, hundreds of features were churned out. Oliver Hardy (Laurel & Hardy) made his first film in Jacksonville in 1913, and the predecessor company of MGM was founded in Jacksonville in 1915.

Eventually, Los Angeles eclipsed Jacksonville and the studios moved west. But, Florida was still popular for its varied scenery and amenable weather for outdoor shooting.

Significant parts of *Creature from the Black Lagoon* were filmed in Florida, including scenes in Wakulla Springs, Silver Springs, Marineland and Jacksonville's Pottsbury Creek, and the creature was played by a Floridian, Ricou Browning. The *Sea Hunt* television series filmed in Silver Springs, as did many Tarzan movies. More recent (and familiar) fare includes several Adam Sandler movies (*The Waterboy*, *Happy Gilmore*), *There's Something About Mary*, *Godfather Part II*, *The Truman Show*, *The First Wives Club*, *Jackass*, *Monster*, the *Smokey and the Bandit* series, *PT 109*, *Striptease*, *Scarface*, *Rosewood*, *Parenthood*, *My Girl*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Analyze This*, *Apollo 13*, *Bird Cage*, *Where the Boys Are*, *Caddyshack*, *Cape Fear*, *Cocoon*, *Edward Scissorhands* and *Grand Theft Auto*.

An interactive map showing film locations throughout the state can be found on the Visit Florida website, visitflorida.com/movies, along with a long list of films that have scenes shot here.

