Albert Berger: From Screenwriter to Producer

Upon graduating from TUTS University, Albert Berger returned to his native Chicago where he bought and managed the Sandburg Theater, a revival showcase for obscure and classic films. Then it was back to school, this time Columbia’s graduate film school—a step that would ultimately lead to a high-powered film-producing career.

While at Columbia, Berger befriended classmate Gabe Weber, and the two became screenwriting partners. After graduation, Berger moved to Los Angeles while Weber stayed in New York. Within six weeks of sending their scripts to studios on both coasts, they had landed their first screenwriting deal. Berger and Weber collaborated for a total of eight years, writing scripts for Paramount, TriStar, MGM, Orion and producer Roger Corman.

Berger eventually grew dissatisfied with the screenwriting life. He wasn’t interested in watching most of the films he was hired to write. It was time to make the leap into producing, “so I could pick the things I wanted to do and do more than one project at a time.”

He found a new partner in Ron Yerxa, and since 1993 the team has run Bona Fide Productions, which specializes in lower-budget, thoughtful films. The team has produced eight movies to date, including Alexander Payne’s Election (1999), Steven Soderbergh’s King of the Hill (1993) and Minghella’s The Golden Mountain (2005). (Gold Mountain) was the exception to the pair’s lower-budget rule. They had optioned the book before it became a hot Hollywood property.

Berger also served as executive producer of the award-winning documentary Crumb (1999), about the 1960s cartoonist Robert Crumb.

November is a big month for Berger and Yerxa. On Nov. 11, 2005, an adaptation of a Myla Goldberg novel, with Richard Gere as a desperate father who embraces his 11-year-old daughter Eliza’s quest to become a spelling bee champion while his wife (Juliette Binoche) sinks into depression. Columbia student Max Minghella plays Eliza’s talented older brother.


• Bette Gordon on “Thinking” Film Audiences www.columbia.edu/cu/news/media/04/320_univer-sity/index.html

In this Oct. 26/04 lecture, film professor Annette Insdorf explains how the opening sequences of great films provide the visual and oral keys needed to unlock the remainder of the cinematic text. Her clausal reading includes clips from such motion pictures as The Conversation (Jack Garfein, Italy, 1971), The Tin Drum (Volker Schlondorff, Germany, 1979) and The Unbearable Lightness of Being (Philip Kaufman, U.S., 1988).

• Peter Farrelly Advises SOA Grads www.columbia.edu/cu/news/media/04/298_soa _presentation_diplomas/index.html

Addressing SOA’s 2004 graduating class, filmmaker Peter Farrelly, SOA’86, tells the story of the time when he was a struggling SOA student juggling three jobs to pay for his education, often showing up late for classes. A professor confronted him one day about his tardiness, and taking pity on his situation, pro- posed that Columbia would give him a $2,000 interest-free loan if he would quit two of his jobs and concen- trate on his studies. Farrelly ended his talk by distributing five checks for $3,597.12—today’s equivalent of the 1981 loan—to five grad- uates chosen at random.

Boosting the Cause of Women in Film

A Los Angeles native, Mary Wigmore (SOA’05) had a vari- ety of film experiences before coming to Columbia, rang- ing from art research to documentary producing to acting. For her thesis project last year, she directed a short film, All at Sea, about a young woman who seeks con- nection to her scattered family in the wake of her mother’s death. The action takes place in a California surf town—hence the title.

Dan Kleinman, acting dean at the film school, describes it as “a lovely story, beautifully shot and acted,” demonstrating Mary’s “great potential as a film director and her command of the medium.”

Since graduation, Wigmore has made another film short centering on a female protagonist: DeaThreakers, a “faux documentary” about the dating adventures of Fran, a 30-year-old New Yorker.

The movie is based on one of four winning essays in Glamour magazine’s “rei moments” competition, designed to further the cause of women in film.

Codirected with Gwyneth Paltrow, DeaThreakers will be distributed by Glamour in October, coinciding with Glamour’s December issue.

Film Report

News on Recent Graduates

Dan Kleinman, acting dean of the film school, reports that the quality of its graduates is “getting better and bet- ter,” offering recent graduate Kit Hui as a prime example. Her short film, Missing, was the sole U.S. contender in the race for a Palme d’Or at this year’s Cannes Film Festival.

Also on Kleinman’s list of recent success stories are: Sameh Zoabi, whose film short Be Quiet was screened at a recent New York Film Festival event just before Noah Baumbach’s The Squid and the Whale (Zoabi now has a four-month residential fellowship in Paris financed by Cinefondation); Talah Hadid, whose thesis film Your Dark Hair, Ihsan, has been garnering critical attention (see Awards); Tom Glynn, Joe Castelo and Ayad Stehie-Akhtar, who collaborated on The War Within, now showing at Landmark Sunshine Cinema on East Houston St. and favorably reviewed in the New York Times (see Screenings); ’04 graduate James Ponsoldt, whose thesis film, Junegull and Hurricane, played at festivals all over the world and who is now working on his first big feature, starring Nick Nolte; Sergio Umansky, who graduated five years ago and is now in Mexico shooting his first feature; Vanessa Reissen, who just entered her third year on the writing staff of the NBC series Las Vegas; and Simon Kinberg, who graduated a couple of years ago and turned his thesis script into the big-budget Hollywood film Mr. and Mrs. Smith.

Film Festival Awards

• Be Quiet, a short film by Sameh Zoabi, SOA’05, has received the Cannes Film Festival’s Cinefondation award and an IFP Market Short Award.

• Your Dark Hair, Ihsan, a thesis film by Talah Hadid, SOA’05, took home the Silver Medal in the “alternative” category at the Student Academy Awards.

• St. Paul, written and directed by Francisco Ordoñez, SOA’05, and produced by Joe Turner Lin, SOA’04, was named “Best Short” at the 2005 New York International Latino Film Festival.

Film Screenings

• Be Quiet and Your Dark Hair, Ihsan were screened at the New York Film Festival, Sept. 23–Oct. 9.

• Sisters, by Julia Solomonoff, SOA’00, was screened as part of the Discovery program at this year’s Toronto Film Festival, Sept. 8–17.

• Also at the Toronto festival was the premiere of The War Within, written by Ayad Akhtar SOA’02, Joseph Castelo SOA’03 and Tom Glynn SOA’02. The film was directed by Joseph Castelo and starred Ayad Stehie Akhtar. It is currently playing at Landmark Sunshine Cinema in downtown Manhattan.

Online Videos of Live CU Film Discussions

Whether you’re teaching or learning film, you may appreciate knowing that Columbia’s own Web site offers videos of University talks on various aspects of film. Here are a few noteworthy offerings:

• Annette Insdorf on Deciphering Films’ Opening Sequences www.columbia.edu/cu/nu- news/media/04/320_univer-sity/index.html

In this 10/26/04 lecture, film professor Annette Insdorf explains how the opening sequences of great films provide the visual and oral keys needed to unlock the remainder of the cinematic text. Her clausal reading includes clips from such motion pictures as The Conversation (Jack Garfein, Italy, 1971), The Tin Drum (Volker Schlondorff, Germany, 1979) and The Unbearable Lightness of Being (Philip Kaufman, U.S., 1988).

• Bette Gordon on “Thinking” Film Audiences www.columbia.edu/cu/news/media/00/ betteGordon/index.html

SOA’s Bette Gordon explores the idea that pure entertainment is as important as film audiences become more willing to think.

• Peter Farrelly Advises SOA Grads www.columbia.edu/cu/news/media/04/298_soa _presentation_diplomas/index.html

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Peter Farrelly, SOA’86, director of There’s Something About Mary and other hit films.