American Splendor: SOA Alumni Bring an Unlikely Comic Hero to the Big Screen

By Kristin Sterling

A s a file clerk at a Veterans Hospital in Cleveland, Ohio, Harvey Pekar would seem like an unlikely character on which to base a comic book hero, much less the featured character in a film where audiences at the Sundance and the Cannes film festivals would be cheering him on. Yet directing duo Shari Springer Berman, SOA ’94, and Robert Pulcini, SOA ’94, brought his story to the big screen, and to critics the International Film Critics’ Jury Prize and the Cannes Film Festival’s Grand Jury Prize and the Cannes Film Festival’s Grand Jury Prize and then at Cannes, with the award from International Film Critics’ Association. How does Pekar feel about the film and the attention? Berman and Pulcini think he is as happy as he can be with the film. At Cannes, the film premiered on Pekar’s 20th wedding anniversary. After the screening the audience descended on him and his wife Joyce who celebrated with a big Hollywood-style kiss. Reflecting on the screening at Sundance, Pekar wrote in Artoffur’s Summer 2003 edition “The audience loved it. That was surprising, to have hundreds of people cheering me. We saw the movie a couple more times and it got the same enthusiastic response.”

The importance of collaboration is one of the underlying principles that they learned at the School of the Arts. One of their main influences at Columbia was Professor Ralph Rosenblum, who taught them valuable lessons about editing and direct- ing. “Writing the script is just the beginning,” says Berman. “You can do anything in the editing room, especially with documents. I often hear Ralph in my head saying ‘let go of the script!’ Incorporating animation and other optical effects into the film, it took Berman and Pulcini a full year to edit American Splendor. Their hard work and effort paid off, first at Sundance, where they won the Festival’s Grand Jury Prize and then at Cannes, with the award from International Film Critics’ Association. How does Pekar feel about the film and the attention? Berman and Pulcini think he is as happy as he can be with the film. At Cannes, the film premiered on Pekar’s 20th wedding anniversary. After the screening the audience descended on him and his wife Joyce who celebrated with a big Hollywood-style kiss. Reflecting on the screening at Sundance, Pekar wrote in Artoffur’s Summer 2003 edition “The audience loved it. That was surprising, to have hundreds of people cheering me. We saw the movie a couple more times and it got the same enthusiastic response.”

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sion that the film would be a documentary, after Berman and Pulcini delved further into Pekar’s work and spent some time with him in Cleveland, they decided to switch back and forth between documentary and narrative, with occasional animation as well as voice-overs by the real, gravelly-voiced Pekar.

Actor Paul Giamatti, who bears little resemblance to Pekar, is featured in the narrative port-

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self, appears in the documentary sections. Berman and Pulcini employed this unusual technique to reflect the multiple “looks” in Pekar’s comic books.

“On paper it was great,” said Pulcini. “When we were actually shooting the film we wondered how we would make it work.”

“We really weren’t sure about it until we saw the audience reaction at Sundance.” Berman admitted.

“Harvey didn’t interfere in the shooting, or read the script,” said Pulcini. “He wanted the film to be an accurate portrayal, includ- ing his flaws—true to the spirit of who he is.”

How does this screenwriting/directing duo—married to each other for eight years—work together?

“We don’t sit down at the computer together and start typ- ing,” explains Berman. They begin by brainstorming an out- line. One will start to write a few scenes and the other will review and polish the work as the time comes to shoot the film. Pulcini tends to be more focused on the camera and visuals while Berman often works more with the actors. The couple admits to disagreeing occasionally throughout the process. “If we are arguing it usually means that something is wrong,” says Berman. “Ultimately it is better for the film when we talk through it.” Because of the collaborative nature of the filmmaking process, they are grateful to have a partner whose opinion they trust and respect, and who can offer a necessary critical voice.

Interestingly, this comic book legend can’t draw. He wrote the dialogue and diagrammed each frame using stick figures. Other comic book artists then created the graphics to accompany the narration. As a result, there are distinguishable differences in the appearance of various editions, reflecting the stylistic variations of the illustrators.

In the 1980s Pekar made a few appearances on the David Letter- man Show, leading several film- makers to inquire about making a movie based on his comics. For years nothing developed, until producer Ted Hope approached screenwriting and directing duo Berman and Pulcini.

Although they were only vaguely familiar with Pekar’s work before undertaking the pro- ject, they fell in love with his comic books. As documentary filmmakers they are most inter- ested in the people behind the scenes and piecing tidbits togeth- er to create a story that flows from beginning to end.

“In his comic books Harvey documents his own ordinary life which makes it very hard to adapt [into a screenplay] because there is no narrative,” said Berman. “We spent a lot of time finding the right context for his stories.”

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