

Why Go Coastal?

For this young filmmaker, there is no going west

by DAVID WILCOX

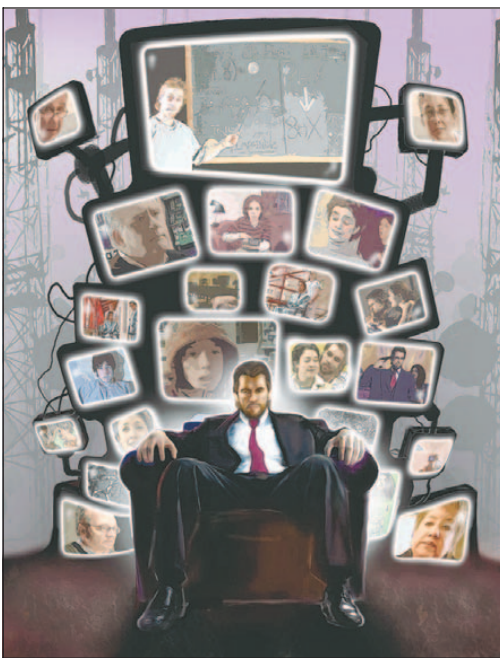


Photo courtesy of Zach Phillips



Photo courtesy of Zach Phillips.

Landlocked filmmaker Zach Phillips prefers Salt City over salt water. Left, promotional poster from "The End of Ford Dupri."

When film student Zach Phillips graduated from Syracuse University in May 2005, conventional wisdom dictated that he go to New York City or Los Angeles to pursue a career in filmmaking. He stayed in Syracuse instead.

"My plan is to make films here in Syracuse for a long time," Phillips said. Like a growing number of filmmakers working outside Hollywood, Phillips would rather realize his creative visions in Syracuse than go to either of the coastal filmmaking hubs and work in an insignificant capacity on films in which he has no artistic stake. To punctuate his intention, Phillips named his new production house The Syracuse Film Company.

Filming in Syracuse is "the easiest thing ever," Phillips declares, because few officials in the city receive requests to accommodate filmmakers. "Here you can block the streets and maybe inconvenience some people but you don't have to pay money. Whereas in New York City you have to be Steven Spielberg and pay three million dollars to do it," he said. The diversity of natural environments close to the city is another filmmaking asset Phillips treasures.

His creative instincts are at least partly genetic. Phillips, 22, of Fayetteville, comes from what he described as "a family of artists." His grandfather – whom he referred to as the most important man in his life – was Richard Hart Phillips, a psychiatrist at SUNY Health and Science Center. In his spare time, Phillips's grandfather was a poet, sculptor, and gardener, among other creative endeavors.

At first glance, Phillips doesn't exude an ounce of the archetypal eccentricities that artists often project. With his haphazardly combed dirty blond hair and an unadorned navy blue pocket T-shirt, Phillips looks more like a film crew member than a director with the passion of a prophet. Even Phillips is hesitant to call himself an artist.

"What I do is look at the work of artists and say, 'Damn, if I could get that guy and that girl together and if they saw this script, something really amazing could happen,'" he said. "I've never really been much of an artist; I'm more of a facilitator of artists."

Phillips' vision took form throughout a childhood during which he was interested in a variety of art forms. He drew extensively and wrote science fiction short stories. He created radio shows with a friend and spent many late nights listening to the WRVO Playhouse on radio that featured classic shows by Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, and Jack Benny. Then Phillips' attention turned to television.

"I watched more TV between the ages of zero and 15 than maybe anyone in history – I may hold the record. It's damaged me severely," he jokes. Phillips watched mostly sports on TV. "Sport is an art," he insists. He points to Oliver Stone's involvement with NFL Films as justification that sports are not "diametrically opposed to art," but rather another form of it.

In junior high school, Phillips' passion for film ripened. That passion is palpable in his voice. "The cool thing about movies is that everyone likes them," he said. "Even people who barely watch movies have at least one they can get excited about. I decided, 'Hell, if I know so much about movies I'll just make them.'"

When he applied to Syracuse University, Phillips had to his credit two cheaply made documentaries – "The Caning of Senator Charles Sumner" and "Television of the 1980s: A Revolution in Child-Raising," which explored the influence of the media.

Dan Guisbond, who collaborated with Phillips on both films, witnessed firsthand Phillips' predilection for filmmaking. "He gets visions in his head about how something needs to work out, and then he just makes those visions happen," Guisbond said.

Phillips's work at SU continued to frisk the media theme. "The End of Ford Dupri" explored the filmmaker's love/hate relationship with TV. The film is rife with self-consciously idyllic scenes that are staples of classic narratives, such as the award acceptance speech and the declara-

tion of love atop a tree branch in front of a sunset. Phillips turns conventions on their heads by juxtaposing them with suicide and nihilistic decrees.

His use of blue screen backdrops cast these scenes in a grippingly oneiric light that physical sets could never have provided. The photography ranges from the vibrant shades of sunset to the pallid gloom of an emergency room. The plot structure is more thematic than narrative, illustrating the wayward journey of Dupri's soul.

Ford D'Aprix, who played the homonymous character, felt Phillips' persistence was exceeded only by his passion as a director. "Once we found a level we could communicate on, he was phenomenal to work with. He just had a great vision," D'Aprix said.

"The Diary of Katie Woods," an entry in the 2005 Syracuse International Film & Video Festival, continued Phillips' exploration of media effects, but with the focus shifted to ideals projected by TV and movies. The film consists of a series of intimate conversations between the eponymous teenage female and her home video camera. As Katie encounters a barrage of adolescent maladies, the viewer ultimately sees the discrepancy between who Katie is and who she strives to be. Woods is portrayed by Elizabeth Luttinger, Phillips' half-sister. The actress deftly engages the audience while refraining from superfluous histrionics as her icy blue eyes gaze into the camera, which gradually assumes the role of an unresponsive therapist.

Phillips found convening a film crew in Syracuse easy because of the talented people in the area. By networking with friends he found a cameraman, Eric LaPlante. By posting a notice at Syracuse stage, Phillips recruited a crew as well as Jay Bray, an accomplished set designer.

Before he continues his film career in Syracuse, Phillips will spend the next few months in Italy, writing and "visiting all the places there are to see."

His next projects include a film about the Greek and Roman gods to be filmed in Latin, a David Mamet-style comedy, and a feature-length animated adaptation of "A Cuckoo in Nacoochee," a children's story written by the filmmaker's grandfather. As disparate as his ideas are, they will all be produced by The Syracuse Film Company. ■

David Wilcox graduated from SUNY Geneseo in May 2005 with a double major in communication and psychology, and was arts and entertainment editor of the newspaper, The Lamron.