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A Kinder, Gentler Filmmaker

The secret of Jeffrey Travis' success

BY TODDY BURTON



Picture your average independent filmmaker: recent film school graduate or (more likely) dropout, frayed hipster hair, funky boho tee, and countless American Spirit Lights. Now, meet Jeffrey Travis. At 34, this longtime Austin resident didn't go to film school, made his first movie only four years ago, and can honestly be described as a happy family man with a wife and three kids. He hardly ever curses the state of Hollywood or the corporate excess of Blockbuster Video. In fact, he hardly ever curses. Despite his unassuming nature and all-too-recent career origins, he's already got a failed Fox pilot under his belt, a promising independent feature in development, and an experience directing Martin Sheen.

It all began like most stories of this millennium: Once upon a time, the economy collapsed. Laid off from his tech job in 2001, Travis decided to try his hand at filmmaking. Armed with a Canon XL1, no crew, and his wife and son as actors, he filmed "What's Wrong With This Picture?" in an afternoon. "When I showed it to [my friends], they seemed to like it," Travis says. "But I had no idea I was sitting on somewhat of a gold mine."

The simple story of a boy who draws a stick figure that comes alive went on to play at over 30 film festivals worldwide – including SXSW, the Los Angeles Film Festival, Tribeca, and Toronto – and is featured on several DVD collections. As Travis shyly chuckles, "I'm probably one of the few people you've met who's made money off of a short film."

That's when producers started calling. And, in their uniquely desperate way, clamoring for material. "They

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would ask, "Do you have a feature based on that?" Travis recalls. "But, it's kind of one joke." Despite his realistic outlook, Travis couldn't pass up an offer from 20th Century Fox to finance the development and production of a TV pilot. Shot in 2004, the pilot (which didn't get picked up) consisted of a completely local cast and crew.

So, back to the origins of his success: heart-driven projects. His first feature, currently in development, is an adaptation of *Marshall Hollenzer Is Driving*, a debut novel published in 2000 and written by another local talent: Owen Egerton (of *The Sinus Show* fame). After reading the book in practically one sitting, Travis optioned the movie rights and wrote the script.

But his most imminent project is "Flatland: The Movie," an adaptation of the cult novel, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, written in 1884 by Edwin A. Abbott. If you're not a math geek or enrolled in an eighth-grade geometry class, you may not be familiar with the tale of Arthur Square and his world of only two dimensions. Recruiting Dano Johnson (SXSW 06 award winner for best animated short), Travis and his producer, Seth Caplan, co-wrote the script with Johnson and began production in January of 2006. Set for release this fall, the 30-minute film will be marketed to children and classrooms.

Executive Producer Will Wallace got a script in front of President Bartlet himself (or Captain Willard, depending on your taste). That's right: Martin Sheen is playing a square named Arthur. After Sheen signed on, Travis was able to secure other visible talent. Though I'm verboten from revealing the identity of his female lead, I can say that she is the star of a certain UPN hit show. Additionally, Travis cast Tony Hale (late of *Arrested Development*) and local wunderkind Lee Eddy.

For more information, see www.flatlandthemovie.com and www.dosgringos.us.

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