

# A WAKE FOR MY YOUTH (WITH ACTORS)

Or, What It's Like Watching Hollywood People Make a Movie About Your Life

by Grant Cogswell

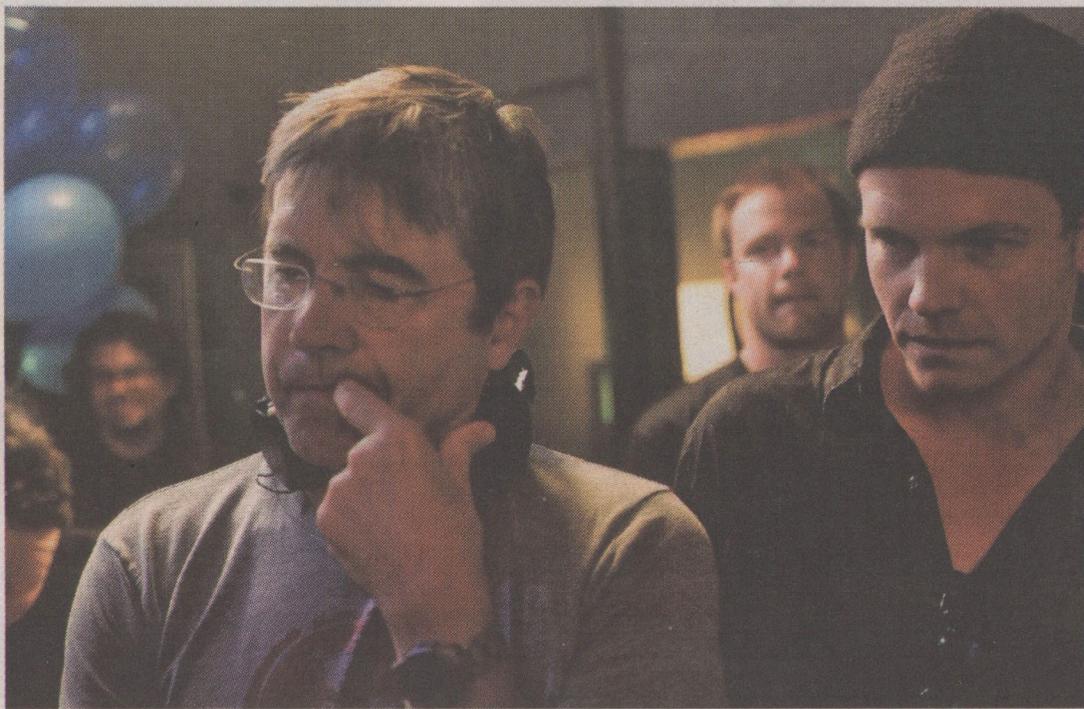
**T**o spend time on the set of a Hollywood movie in which your younger self is one of the central characters is the ultimate ego trip. It makes it easier to forget that a year and a half ago I was unemployed, essentially homeless, and pushing the last of my salable possessions in a shopping cart four miles across the flats of the San Fernando Valley in order to sell them for exactly seven dollars. That was shortly before I first met Stephen Gyllenhaal.

The way this came to pass is that in 2005, former *Stranger* news writer Phil Campbell published a book about his time managing my 2001 campaign for Seattle City Council, and that a little over a year later, director Stephen Gyllenhaal (yes, they are related, he is their father) bought the rights to put the story to film. Joel David Moore, the scientist from James Cameron's *Avatar*, plays me; Jason Biggs, best known as the star of the *American Pie* movies and now athletically closing in on middle age, plays Phil.

The supporting cast is something of a marvel: *Six Feet Under*'s Lauren Ambrose as former *Stranger* staffer Emily Hall, internet com-phenom DC Pierson as Sandinista barista Wayne, Tom Arnold in a role based on former Re-bar owner/manager Steve Wells, former congressman and Republican senatorial candidate Michael Huffington as monorail activist Cleve Stockmeyer, and most deliciously, Cedric the Entertainer as city councilman Richard McIver, the incumbent I was running against and lost to. Cedric is unique among comics because his humor is not rooted in some bitterness or self-hatred: He is simply a genius with situations and the possibilities of language. When the crew was preparing a fantasy sequence in the council chambers at the top of the King County Courthouse in which I cameo as a councilperson fending off a polar bear attack with a stapler, Cedric incidentally quipped—straight-faced—“I was born with bear paws.” Funniest thing you have ever heard.

Complete surreality: being in the fifth-floor offices of the King County Council that I last stepped into as my first political campaign (an initiative against the stadiums) wound down. I was 27. Today they are mocked up to imitate the old City Hall. Chaos of a movie set, the endless gray crates, water bottles, marks crosshatched in colored tape on the carpet. We go into the council chambers (a foam-core city seal on plain pine board overlaying the silhouette of Dr. King) and I sit, and someone laughs and comments that I am finally a coun-

**GRANT COGSWELL** is in Seattle for the Grassroots shoot but lives in Mexico City, where he is starting the city's only English-language bookstore, *Under the Volcano Books*. He has been contributing to *The Stranger* since 1999.



**ON THE SET** Stephen Gyllenhaal and Grant Cogswell (above); Jason Biggs and Joel David Moore (right).

cilman, and I think: *I am so glad I never became a councilman*. I always thought about these closed, gray rooms, or the Styrofoam and veneer of the old City Hall, that in them second by second you could feel yourself slowly dying. James Kebblas, the director of the mayor's Office of Film + Music, told me after the production's kickoff that I was never a politician, but an artist who ran for office, and I thought, *Finally someone who understands me*. I'm far happier as an expat screenwriter than I was fighting for an impossible dream.

**P**eople now have asked me a dozen times a day since I came back to Seattle last month what it feels like to have a movie being made about my life. They can't imagine. I tell them neither can I, but it is nevertheless happening. A decadelong fight for public transit here is by dramatic necessity being compressed into the classical frame of a single campaign season and drawn as a cartoon, with myself as hero. The portrait of me is wacky-idealist and off-balance; for example, it makes a lot of my loud opposition to light rail, which I have been lately riding daily to the set. Counter to my predictions back then, it is whisper quiet.

The deep-bore-tunnel battle, which I joined at its outset and later abandoned, is heating up just in time for this shoot. The



PHOTOS BY HILARY HARRIS

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production is working the transmedia angle heavily: The rules of independent film distribution and publicity rewrite themselves daily, and nearly every move made by the crew and me is documented by a friendly young intern shouldering a camera. Gyllenhaal's idealism about taking my campaign message to the world is bold, but a little more of my past than present self.

Richard McIver himself showed up on set to meet his avatar and sat down for a long, friendly tag-team interview in which we

reminisced about our campaign against each other, to add to the hours of documentary being collected around the events that inspired the movie. We've been on friendly terms since that campaign, perhaps prodded by the Stockholm syndrome of being a candidate, which made even Ford and Carter the best of friends: Only one person knows just how you feel, and there is, in the wide scope of things, little you really disagree on.

What I know from having done both, I told producer Peggy Rajski, is that producing a feature film is harder work than running a campaign or being a candidate. But two days' immersion in my old rival's company and the halls of power on Third and James drove home how deeply I felt at the end of that experience that public officialdom was not a life I wanted. The people who serve selflessly, whatever their musty allegiances and blinders—we all have them—are truly public servants: They have given up their lives to fractious tedium and these fluorescent-lit rooms.

I have always been an advertisement for myself, whether trying to achieve the impossible with the Seattle electorate, raising cash for my own ventures into filmmaking, or simply reconstructing a self from the blast zone of a '70s childhood—but at this stage, on a set bedecked with shirts and signs bearing the blue logo that was my standard nine years ago, I hate my name a little again. In the months after running for office, I wore the name stickers at parties with quotation marks in the margins, feeling like a brand. Gyllenhaal tells me his own name has “nothing to do with me” and the hype that follows it has more to do with his famous and beautiful children than the career as a director of television that doesn't seem to completely satisfy him, the human that possesses it, or his string of films that ended in 1998—films that never quite went off entirely as hoped. He seems to be only now fully, freely, at 60, coming into his own.

I am thankful every day it is him doing this. He is stridently independent and actually not a wealthy man. It could easily, had bigger players taken notice, have been someone like Stewart Townsend, whose *Battle in Seattle* was shot in Vancouver and gave Gary Locke a chop-socky accent. *Grassroots* is by design local, with a local crew and half a dozen department heads who got their start on the feature film I wrote and produced five years ago (and who have made their bones since: I had nothing to do with this production). While deliberately loose with the facts, Gyllenhaal is rigorous when it comes to cultural and especially sub-cultural signs and meanings: We spent five minutes—an eternity on a live set—parsing the distinctions between death-, speed-, and black-metal heads and Crass punks before an actual-location scene of the election-night party at Re-bar.

Oh—and the movie's a *comedy*. I didn't know till I got off the plane, and sometimes forget to mention that. ■

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