

**DID YOU EVER KNOW?** *Grassroots* producer Peggy Rajski won an Academy Award for directing the 1994 live-action short *Trevor*. It was a rare instance of an Oscar tie: the director of *Franzo Kafka's It's a Wonderful Life* was also awarded a statuette.

Jason Biggs and Joel David Moore are

# PLAYING POLITICS

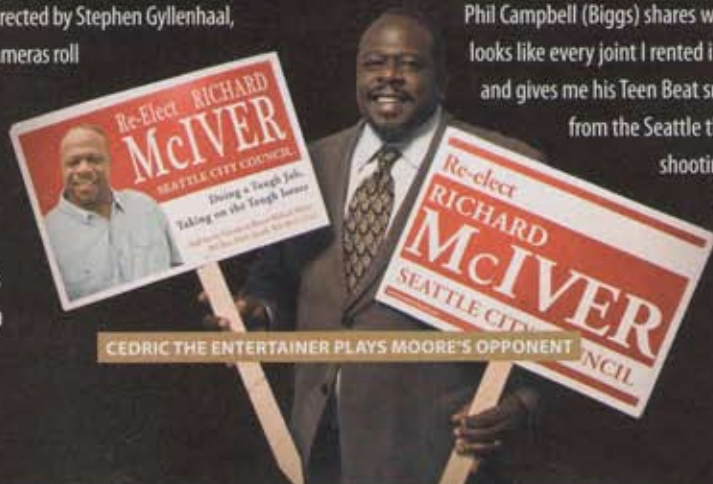
ON THE SET OF THE UPCOMING **GRASSROOTS** — THE DEFINITIVE SEATTLE MOVIE?

BY COLE HORNADAY PHOTOGRAPHS BY HILARY HARRIS

**WEEK ZERO Starbucks at 4th and Seneca** ■ Tracy Leigh's workday starts around 5:00 am. For the veteran barista and mother of four, it's an ideal schedule allowing time for her two greatest joys: her kids and her acting. Despite the espresso machine's sputter, she overhears an exchange between her coworker Emily and a customer . . . "Hey, you look kind of like—" says Emily. "Yeah, I get that all the time," says the customer ■ After a beat, Jason Biggs cops to being recognized. He's in town shooting a film about radical Seattle politics called *Grassroots*, co-written and directed by Stephen Gyllenhaal, dad of Maggie and Jake. The cameras roll next week ■ Tracy is embarrassed. She doesn't recognize Biggs. "Yeah you do," says Emily. "He's the guy from *American Pie*" ■ "The guy with the pie?!" remembers Leigh ■ Imagining the scene in question, Leigh hands Biggs

coffee, blushes and looks up, right, anywhere but straight at him ■ In Seattle, people read others' coffee preferences like their astrological signs. Leigh will only reveal Biggs' taste as concise and unpretentious.

**WEEK ONE 310 Mercer, Capitol Hill** I pull up to the set as Gyllenhaal steps off the curb, a cell phone glued to his ear. You can see where Jake and Maggie got their good looks ■ The ramshackle two-story house standing in for the place Phil Campbell (Biggs) shares with his girlfriend Emily (Lauren Ambrose) looks like every joint I rented in college ■ A lanky young man turns about and gives me his Teen Beat smile. It's my buddy Nik Doner. I know him from the Seattle theater community. He's waiting to start shooting. We talk and laugh and a PA walks up. "Oh God, I'm busted," I think, "I'm laughing too loud—I'm a disruption and they're going to throw me off the set!" ■ They don't. Maybe it's the familiarity of the set, but I feel at home.



CEDRIC THE ENTERTAINER PLAYS MOORE'S OPPONENT



**WEEK TWO The Comet** > It's hot, over 80 degrees. In Seattle, that's a heat wave. Built in 1948, the Comet Tavern is a dingy piece of Seattle grunge history. Kurt Cobain knew it well. Today it's supposed to be a coffee shop. The ceiling is clustered with hundreds of crumpled dollar bills and playing cards tacked to the tiles with pushpins and chewing gum. Actor Joel David Moore, last seen as a nerdy nine-foot Na'vi in *Avatar*, attempts to rally these coffeehouse denizens by reciting poetry in a polar bear costume. He's playing Grant Cogswell, the eccentric rebel-poet-perennial political candidate whose story is the star of the movie.

**WEEK THREE The Re Bar** > This place is Seattle's convergence zone for rock, burlesque, amateur wrestling and pencil fighting. Art imitates reality; this place was Cogswell's original campaign headquarters.

I've read the script. It's quirky and uncomplicated, clean and character-driven—a small story about big dreamers. This may be *the* Seattle movie. Maybe we can finally put *Sleepless in Seattle* behind us. Gyllenhaal directs from a cramped corner and the bar's booths are crammed with production folks hovering over their laptops. No big sets, no Hollywood gloss. Interns document everything.



**WEEK FOUR Re Bar Redux** > It's still *really* hot. In between shots, blowers wave like giant slinkies wearing long sleeves and crank out cool air. Craft service chef Shannon Clegg backs up to one, her skirt billowing as she strikes her best Marilyn Monroe pose from *Seven Year Itch*. I sit at the bar and chat with the crew as they reset shots. There is something infinitely cruel about sitting so close to a tap, yet powerless to pull yourself a frosty beer.

**WEEK FIVE The Atrium, Fremont—The Center of the Universe** > Co-Producer Peggy Case and I chat. She's produced the gamut from indie darlings (*Zoo*) to PBS documentaries (*The American Experience*). "Producing low-budget film can be really grueling," she says, scribbling notes on receipts and checking her watch. "You're doing everything, as opposed to a regular feature film where roles are very regimented. The role of the producer, regardless of the budget, is to weigh and balance things and look out for the health and safety of the film." Clean bill of health so far.

**WEEK SIX Wrap party** > There are some tears. The food is good. The free drinks are better. Camera flashes are a constant mini-blitz as the gaggle of interns document Biggs', Moore's and Gyllenhaal's every move. Someone built a three-foot scale model of the Space Needle and glued a polar bear to the saucer section. Moore wanders about in an oily, white fake fur coat he says Biggs dared him to buy off the street for a hundred bucks. And even Grant Cogswell is there, his real-life campaigns having driven him to the brink and back. He mingles in the crowd with the Seattle city logo tattoo on his bicep hidden under his shirt. If Cobain's ghost was here, we'd have maximum Seattle density. Now to see how the movie fares beyond ...

and ... cut.

EMILY BERGL PLAYS A PUNKY POLITICAL ACTIVIST



< As chair of the Independent Directors Committee of the Directors Guild of America, Director **Stephen Gyllenhaal** (*Waterland*, *Paris Trout*) has made his name with indies and biopics. In Campbell's and Cogswell's story, the director found the consummate tale of the City on the Sound. "Seattle is one of those places that thinks

outside the box," says the director. "There's something about Seattle that's a little bit iconoclastic."

In *Grassroots*, Gyllenhaal asks the audience to rethink its voice in a community. He's also asking filmmakers to rethink how films get made. Years ago, Gyllenhaal rounded up a Hollywood think tank to make indie film production more feasible. "We need to make movies for a reasonable price. You can't have this huge overhead, expect to pay for it all and hope to make some kind of return."

## GRASSROOTS

Directed by Stephen Gyllenhaal

Screenplay by Stephen Gyllenhaal and Justin Rhodes

Based on the memoir *Zioncheck For President* by Phil Campbell

After losing his job, Seattle journalist Phil Campbell (Jason Biggs) reluctantly agrees to help his oddball friend Grant Cogswell (Joel David Moore) with his bid to unseat city councilman Richard McIver (Cedric the Entertainer)

[www.grassrootsthefilm.com](http://www.grassrootsthefilm.com)

MORE GRASSROOTS ON PAGE 24 >>



LAUREN AMBROSE OF *SIX FEET UNDER* IS LOVE  
INTEREST EMILY

## MEET THE CAST & CREW OF *GRASSROOTS*



< Working on *Grassroots* was a homecoming of sorts for Portland-born actor **Joel David Moore**, but the six-week sojourn to Seattle to play activist Grant Cogswell was nothing compared to the six months he lived in New Zealand and leapt around Jim Cameron's motion capture studio for *Avatar* wondering what he'd look like as a blue-skinned giant.

"It's a wonderful story about political activism," says Moore of his first starring role back on earth. "That's the nature of the greater Northwestern culture. They care about so much—from their land to their relationships to the city in which they live."

After a previous pairing with Jason Biggs in Aundre Johnson's short piece *Third Rule*, it was clear the friends' on-camera chemistry would help raise the stakes on a movie a little less epic than the battle for a planet's soul.

"It's a small town kind of story," says Moore, "but it's still about passions and beliefs. Any time you are that involved in a passion, you're not going to feel the highs without the lows and vice versa—otherwise your heart wasn't in it in the first place."

< From the birthplace of Facebook comes New Media Writer **Sara Wright**, a plucky Harvard graduate whose background in English and drama makes her the ideal player for the team of multimedia buzz-makers. Since the first day of filming, Wright and the *Grassroots* cast and crew have blasted the blogosphere and social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook with daily—if not hourly—happenings from the set.

"I've been put in charge of letting people know the progress of the film shoot on a day-to-day basis," says Wright. "I include a lot of anecdotes to give people an idea of what it's actually like to be on set." The plan was both to chronicle the filmmakers' journey and to put the readers on the set as it was happening. Notes Wright, "The movie is grassroots both thematically and viscerally—the way it's being made is grassroots."

To Wright, it comes down to what's entertaining. "Not everything on a film set is interesting," she laughs. "You know there's a lot of downtime and then there are the action-packed days."



> Punk poet, freelance writer, filmmaker, political activist, recovering pedicab driver and one of the most unique thinkers to emerge from Seattle's post-Grunge culture, **Grant Cogswell** isn't quite the political neophyte found in Gyllenhaal's screenplay.

"Grant is charismatic," says producer Peggy Rajski. "There's a kind of charm to him that's effortless. He's incredibly genuine and he has such an extraordinary vision of the community."

Cogswell conscripted fellow Seattle writer Phil Campbell to be his campaign manager in his bid for Seattle City Council. Campbell documented the long strange trip in the memoir *Zioncheck for President: A True Story of Idealism and Madness in American Politics*, a title inspired by radical lobbyist (and hearty partier) Washington State Congressman Marion Zioncheck. *Zioncheck* became a handbook for DIY politicking.



TOM ARNOLD AS TOMMY THE BARTENDER





JASON BIGGS AND CHRISTOPHER MCDONALD HAVE A CAMPAIGN CONVERSATION



▲ "A lot of people doubt this film will have a reach beyond Seattle," says producer and Academy Award winner **Peggy Rajski**. "They ask, 'Why would anybody be interested in this?' which I find amusing. Politics in Seattle are really interesting. Unlike a lot of other cities, it's very dynamic."

Rajski believes that audiences across the country are hungry for a political David versus Goliath movie. "I like this story so much because these guys in the face of a system of insiders were not intimidated," says Rajski. "They refused to be made to feel powerless."

And online, she's already seen fans connecting to *Grassroots*. "It's already being reflected in our Facebook followers. It's been fun to see the demographics reveal themselves. We're excited to find it's tapping into that crowd we saw during the Obama campaign, but it's not necessary exclusive to liberals or conservatives. *Grassroots* is something people will be drawn to across the political spectrum."

▲ **Ron Leamon's** costume-designing career runs the gamut from stage to film to the catwalk. He cut his teeth in costume design at Disney World darning the split britches of Disney characters, and in the '80s, he moved to Washington, where he and his partner Gerard Parr work out of a 2,000-square-foot design studio off Seattle's South Lake Union.

Leamon says that for a costume designer, convincing audience that they're looking back ten years is much harder than the 1950s—or even the 1700s. "I used the WTO riots as my reference point," says Leamon. "I was actually there marching with my union when the riots broke out." Capturing the correct tone without falling back on the Grunge-look cliché was a challenge. "We were still on that layered look—it was a carryover from Grunge, but upgraded from flannel to something else, something a little more crisp. It was a transitional thing."



COBIE SMULDERS PLAYS A BATTLEGROUND BEAUTY



▲ Hair and Makeup Assistant **Autumn Sanders** is a busy lady. Splitting her work time between Los Angeles and the Pacific Northwest means she crosses state lines every six weeks.

Sanders has spent the last two years sweating to build her resume and contacts. "It's a new development in my career," says Sanders, "I'm doing a lot of photo shoots, music videos, commercials and short films. I'd done salon hair and makeup for 12 years and wanted to do something more. I went to LA just for a class to study makeup and stayed."

Her experience on *Grassroots* has been par for the course. "On this production, everybody—the crew, the cast—is amazing," says Sanders. "Everybody gets along really well. I've lucked out with all my productions."



▲ University of Washington student and craft services chef **Shannon Clegg** says film—not catering—is her calling, but she readily took on a gig that granted her access to a world of secret knowledge: the snack habits of the stars. No need to airlift fresh lobster from the coast of Maine. Clegg says it was a hoot plying Joel David Moore with PB&J sandwiches or feeding Tom Arnold's licorice jellybean habit.

In the first weeks, Clegg was a one-woman show. "I eventually got an intern and a beast of a cargo van," she says. "I was complaining because I only have a four-door Saturn with tires about to fall off. But the producers were awesome. They got me what I needed the next day."

Clegg's predilection for fun and mischief also made her the impromptu social secretary. Scheduling parties and karaoke nights connected Clegg to a very disparate group of people. "It's going to be sort of depressing when it ends," says Clegg. "But every movie is like that whether it's for four days or 34 days."