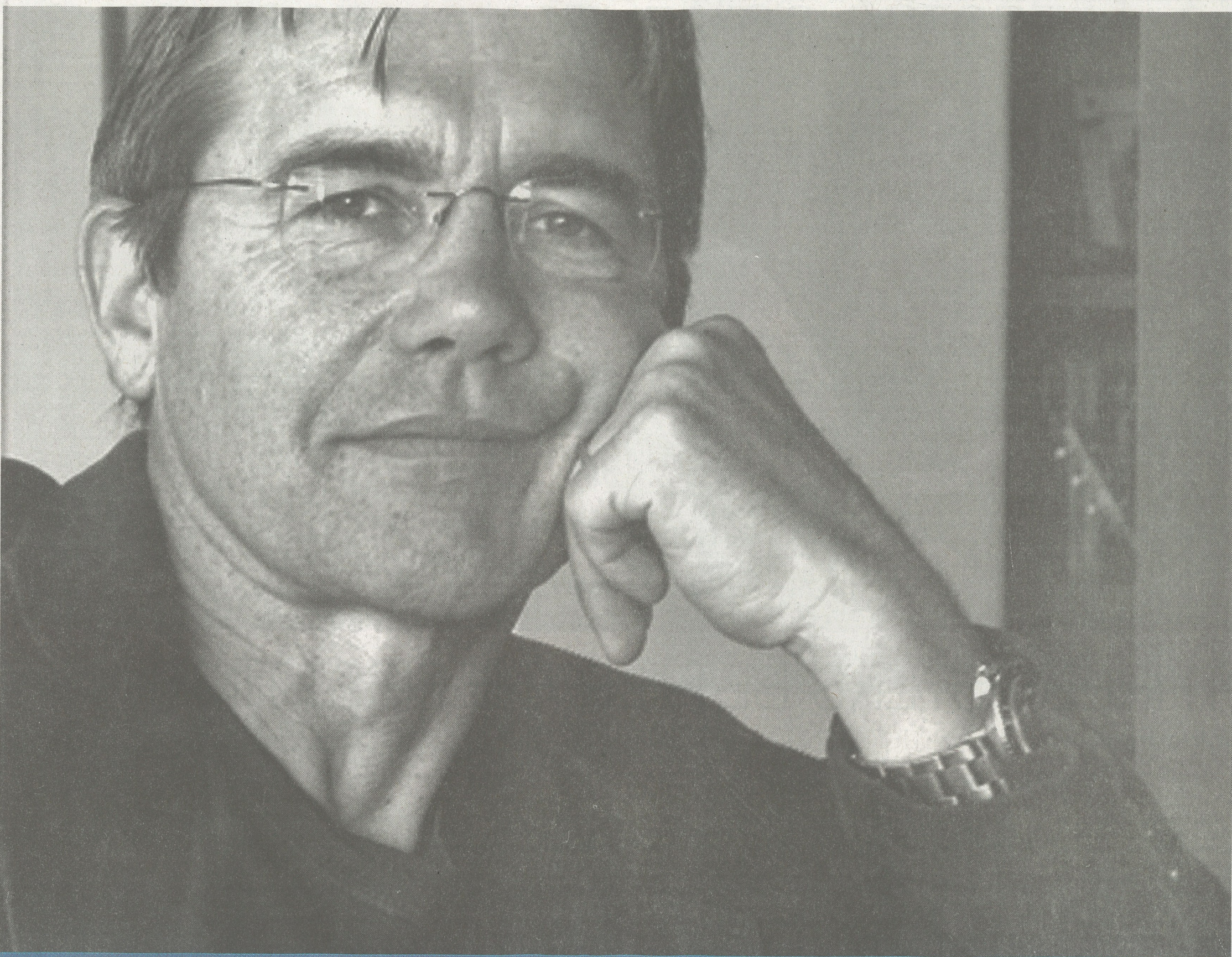


WEEKEND **BACKSTAGE**

STEPHEN GYLLENHAAL

accidental director, hip-hop enthusiast, situational lawbreaker

// STEPHEN GYLLENHAAL

At one point, film director Stephen Gyllenhaal (“Waterland,” “A Dangerous Woman,” “Losing Isaiah”) chose wrestling over Yale. His latest movie production, “Grassroots,” about two slackers running for office in Seattle, Wash., will premiere at the Whitney Humanities Center today at 7 p.m. WEEKEND managed to only mention his children once, tangentially. By **BAOBAO ZHANG**.

Q. Your latest film, “Grassroots,” is a comedy based on a true story. What’s up with that?

A. It’s the story of a real person named Grant Cogswell, who’s kind of an oddball, loves to dress up in his polar bear costume. Then he tries to run for city council in Seattle because he loves this monorail that only runs for two miles because it was built for the World’s Fair in 1962. He is a strange character but also a visionary: He wants the monorail to go across Seattle. So he’s got this fantasy, as far as anyone’s concerned his plan is a joke, and it’s made even worse when he ends up hiring Phil Campbell. The two set out to unseat the only progressive black city council member in Seattle.

Q. How did you find the story?

A. I read a book called “Zioncheck for President” from the Nation Books Institute and thought, “There is a movie here!” It took two-and-a-half years to extract a script I was comfortable with from the book.

Q. The movie’s two main characters, Grant Cogswell and Phil Campbell, are real people. Have they seen the movie? What were their reactions?

A. Phil has seen the movie. He is quiet a character. He was the one who wrote the book “Zioncheck for President.” He is now working in New York and working on another book. Grant has not seen it yet, he is in Mexico right now opening a bookstore. He was around a lot when we were shooting and I’m confident he’ll see it relatively soon.

Q. What’s with the polar bear costume in all of the advertisement and trailers for the film?

A. When you see the movie it will be much clearer, but it’s a gimmicky kind of vision. It’s meant to say: the Arctic is melting, the polar caps are melting, save the polar bears — or some form of that. The polar bear is also a powerful animal. Grant has a polar bear costume and he likes to dress up in it, too. For us, and for any movie, an important part is to create an image to play with. The polar bear has been used by big corporations — not that I’m totally adverse to those — but we decided to use it for “Grassroots.”

Q. What was one funny thing that happened on set?

A. Jason Biggs, Joel David Moore and Cedric the Entertainer were just goofing off on set. Watching Joel David Moore, this dorky

white guy, doing hip-hop with Cedric the Entertainer brought tears to my eyes — it made me laugh so hard. Then Cedric was wearing the polar bear claws and Joel was wearing the polar bear outfit made it even more hilarious. The polar bear rap was one of the more hilarious moments on set.

Q. Your films often explore a specific location with close detail. For instance, “Waterland,” examines life in the fens of East Anglia. This film is all about Seattle in 2001. Did you spend a lot of time in Seattle before filming?

A. Yes, I spent a lot of time in Seattle. When we were working on the script, I was up there a lot. I have spent a lot of time in the past in Vancouver, a city similar to Seattle, so I knew the area relatively well. During preproduction, we spent two-and-a-half, three months in Seattle raising money for the film. We shot everything on location, and a lot of it at the actual places where the events took place.

When you shoot a movie, you get all the scenes down and you shoot the wide shots to get a sense of what the city is. That’s when we captured the real Seattle. As filmmakers, your job is to set characters in a location. You get to look at a city in a way no one else does. You ask yourself, what makes this city different from other cities?

There is something different about Seattle that’s different from other cities because of its frontier days, to the rough-and-tumble lumber business. All these industries came from thinking outside the box and then became very, very successful.

Then there’s the grunge music scene, which is partially about young people living in the sub-

urbs outside of Seattle feeling very disenfranchised, very disconnected. They sensed there was something wrong with the American way of life. Out emerged this form of music, which still lives on in Seattle, which is still a very musical town. The music pulled a large part in the movie as well. We put together a great soundtrack.

Q. Where are you going as part of your tour?

A. We are going across the country. We are starting in Connecticut because I am doing a TV show in New York. We’re going to Vassar and Yale. Then we are going to spread out across a lot of the swing states, to the heartland of the United States, between now and December. We’re engaging people and interacting with a lot of political groups to talk and say we really need dialogue. While I am very progressive, very left wing, I believe it’s very important that anyone with any point of view be allowed to speak their mind and to run for office. It shouldn’t be just professional people paid for by big corporations. It should be just anyone who has a passion for democracy and for their own well-being to run for office and try to get their passions executed.

Q. How does it feel to be in a family where everyone is involved with the movie industry?

A. It’s like the hardware business. It’s important to understand there’s an awful lot about moviemaking that is craft. It’s very hard work. But it feels quite normal. The only thing that feels strange about the movie business is the celebrity element of it, which always takes me by surprise. I think movies are no less valuable and no more valuable than any other profession. The

“I PRETENDED I WAS A YALE STUDENT TO SIGN UP TO USE THEIR EDITING EQUIPMENT.”

actual craft of the movie — I’m delighted that my kids did it, my ex-wife did it, my wife did it. It’s a cool profession but it should not be over-romantized.

Q. You were an English major while attending Trinity College. How did you discover filmmaking?

A. I grew up in a small town called Bryn Athyn, Penn. It was a very religious town. Movies were not considered evil, but they were not considered anything you’d pursue seriously, as a career. I never saw more than a couple of movies growing up. I played in a rock band growing up in a religious town. Half of the members of the band were not from the town and knew something about what we called “the outside world.” I asked them where should I apply to college. They said I should apply to Yale and Trinity College.

So Yale was my main choice — I didn’t know anything about it though — and Trinity was my backup school. When I was supposed to go to my Yale interview, I had a wrestling match. I didn’t know what the interview part of the application was about, really, so I went to the wrestling match. I’m not sure I would have gotten in anyways. [Laughs.] But, yeah, that’s my rationalization for not

having gotten in.

I wasn’t exposed to film at all until I got to Trinity. Trinity had this great thing called the Cinestudio. It was like a cinema that showed a different movie almost every day. I had a girlfriend who liked movies. One day, I walked into the movie theater during my senior year and essentially never walked away.

There was no film department at Trinity. Still, I shot a movie. I borrowed equipment from a friend at Wesleyan. But there was no editing equipment at my college, so I hitch-hiked down to Yale. I pretended I was a Yale student to sign up to use their editing equipment. I cut the movie over two nights. In a way, this will be my second time at Yale. It’s part of being a filmmaker: being ever so slightly criminal.

Q. What advice would you have for candidates running in the 2012 elections?

A. Be honest. Be tough. Be aware that you represent the people. Look at the people you present and listen to them. Follow your heart. And get a filmmaker to cover you.

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