

NOW PLAYING: **POSSUMS**

**A charming independent film
with a decidedly Sooner flavor
is propelling a couple of OU grads
along the path to Hollywood success.**

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

The promotional poster for the movie "Possums" features a deserted small-town football stadium bracing itself against a threatening sky. The caption reads: "Never let reality get in your way."

The aphorism accurately reflects the spirit of the fictional, and sometimes mythical, high school team of the film's title. It also deftly describes the modus operandi of J. Max Burnett, the young writer/director who championed his first film all the way to the Sundance Film Festival and into movie theaters nationwide.

After receiving his master's in theater from the University of Oklahoma in 1994, Burnett headed to Los Angeles with story ideas humming in his head and a couple of phone numbers in his pocket. Luckily, one of those numbers belonged to high school buddy Greg Coolidge. Throughout their senior year at Norman High and undergraduate courses at OU, the two worked together fre-

quently—writing, directing and acting in each other's productions.

"Both Max and Greg were eager students and extremely hard workers, constantly looking for ways to improve their skills," recalls Ted Herstand, professor emeritus of drama. "By their senior year, they were already professionals."

After graduation, Coolidge moved to Long Beach intending to earn his master's degree in theater at California State, but a simple twist of fate derailed his academic ambitions. As a favor to his roommate, he went along on an audition and came away with his own agent. By the time Burnett finished graduate school and headed west, Coolidge was working steadily and had successfully networked into the entertainment industry.

"Hollywood is just like high school with money," Coolidge says with a laugh. "You have to be the flavor of the month or extremely lucky. I've been very, very

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lucky." What he does not say is that he is also very, very talented. Not only is Coolidge versatile as an actor, he is also a gifted writer, which keeps him in demand on both sides of the camera.

When Burnett arrived in Los Angeles, Coolidge was able to assist him in learning the intricate ropes of the film industry. While taking jobs as an "assistant to everybody," Burnett read and analyzed countless scripts. As production assistant on the film "The Tuskegee Airmen," Burnett was sent on location to Arkansas and Oklahoma. While driving back to Los Angeles from Muskogee, he turned on the radio and stumbled across the play-by-play of a high school football game.

The seed that was planted somewhere in the middle of the Texas Panhandle grew into the screen play for "Possums," the story of a luckless high school football team whose record is so pathetic that even the coach votes to cancel the program. However, the local hardware store owner refuses to give up on the Possums and continues to deliver breathtaking radio coverage of games that occur only in his imagination. The climax, where reality and small-town pride square off in a fight for the state championship, transcends the well-worn path of the sports film genre and explores deeper themes of faith, forgiveness and redemption.

Burnett took the story to Coolidge and asked him to produce the film. Coolidge pitched the script to his upstairs neighbor and former child actor Leanna Creel, who was in the process of establishing her own production company.

"Leanna loved it!" Coolidge exclaims. She brought in Michael Burns, her executive producer and partner at what is now Ignite Entertainment. They optioned the script for a year. But as time went by and production on the film had not budged, Burnett made a gutsy career move.

"I told them I wanted to take the script elsewhere," he recalls. "And they said 'No, no, we'll make it!'" What happened next, according to Burnett, was even better. They gave him the green light to direct. "I was whooping on the inside," he says. He had a lot to whoop about.

In less than three years in the business, with not a single film class on his transcript, the 26-year-old Burnett found himself in the director's chair of his first motion picture. "People asked me, 'Were you utterly terrified?'" Because

suddenly 60 people are literally looking to you, asking you 200 to 300 questions a day. But directing seems so natural to me. I feel relaxed, but at the same time really pumped up. There's a feeling of elation there I just can't explain."

When it came time to cast the leading role of Will Clark, the voice of the Possums, Burnett knew the man he wanted for the job. During an apprenticeship with OU alumnus Max Weitzenhoffer, producer of Broadway's "The Will Rogers Follies," he had worked with singer/songwriter Mac Davis.

"I knew Mac would be perfect for the part," says Burnett, "only he wasn't doing film anymore." Undaunted, Burnett and Coolidge met with Davis and over lunch, coaxed the veteran actor out of retirement.

The rest of the casting dominoed. Coolidge would play Jake, the new kid in town, who becomes both a friend and surrogate son to Will. Nathan Burgess, also an OU alumnus, was cast as the intellectually challenged newspaper street vendor. The character was based on the real-life Calvin Steeves, whose banter with the locals and his omnipresent OU football helmet have made him a Norman icon for two decades.

A stroke of genius was the casting of former OU and Dallas Cowboy head coach Barry Switzer as coach of the Prattville Pirates, the "winningest" team in the state. Switzer was asked to take the part after another member of the family, Oskie, his daughter Kathy's Akita, won the role as the mayor's dog.

"Just make sure I get paid as much as the dog," Switzer cautioned Burnett. The young director said the legendary coach was wonderful to work with, ex-

trêmement charismatic. "At Sundance, Barry was one of the most famous people there," insists Burnett. "People were always stopping him on the street."

Bob Davis, executive director of the Oklahoma Film Commission, helped Burnett scout locations around the state. They chose the community of Nowata in eastern Oklahoma for its small town charm and hospitality.

"The people of Nowata were absolutely wonderful," says Coolidge. "They threw a parade for us when we arrived, and we were like, 'This is great! Get the cameras!'" The parade ended up in the film, as did many of Nowata's citizens.

Production required six weeks, with a budget just under



Jaconna Aguirre

Norman High School and OU classmates Greg Coolidge, left, and J. Max Burnett bring "Possums" to the hometown folks at the film's Oklahoma premiere, hosted by the Oklahoma Film Commission.



Oklahoma's first lady, Cathy Keating, right, visits with OU alumnus Greg Coolidge at the premiere of "Possums," in which she makes a cameo appearance.

\$1 million. "That's not much by Hollywood standards, but for a first independent effort, it's a lot of money," explains Burnett. "I think we were able to make it look like even more. I had amazing people to work with, especially my line producer, Bob Roath. I said, 'This is the money we have; how can we get the most out of it?'"

Coolidge, wearing the hat of associate producer, began calling in markers across the Sooner state. A sportswear company based in Norman gave them free uniforms for the teams, and a car dealership provided the vehicles used in the film as well as transportation for Mac Davis.

Burnett rushed the rough cut to judges at Robert Redford's Sundance Film Festival in 1997, but without much success. "In our first attempt at Sundance, we didn't have a finished product. And," he adds emphatically, "we didn't have my brother's music."

Justin Burnett is another OU success story. "Talk about a golden child," Max Burnett muses. "He goes out to LA and in a couple months is working with Hans Zimmer." One of the top composers in the business, Zimmer wrote the music for Disney's "The Lion King" and was an Oscar contender this spring for the score of "The Thin Red Line."

James Faulconer, OU professor of music, says Justin was one of the first of his peers to realize the importance of being technologically proficient as well as a competent musician. "He is a leading example of what hard work and tenaciousness can accomplish."

"As long as I've been directing plays and Justin's been writing music, we've been collaborating," says Max Burnett. "I always feel so lucky to get the opportunity to work with him. I think he's one of the most talented composers I've ever heard."

The polished cut of "Possums," complete with Justin's moving score, sailed through the advance screening at Sundance in 1998 and received rave reviews from the festival's head programmer and movie critic, Geoffrey Gilmore, who called the film "charming and poignant." As a director, J. Max Burnett had arrived.

In April, Coolidge and Burnett took home field advantage as "Possums" made its Oklahoma debut at Hollywood Spotlight 14 Theaters in Norman. The Oklahoma Film Commission hosted a barbecue for the conquering heroes in an evening that blended black velvet with bolo ties and blue jeans. The audience was peppered with stars, like Coolidge and Switzer, who had seen the film many times, and nearly the entire population of Nowata, for whom this truly was a premiere.

The extras hooted and clapped each time a familiar face popped up on screen. "There's my truck!" one Nowata resident exclaimed excitedly, while his father, sitting beside him, beamed with pride.

It is precisely this type of unpretentiousness that Burnett captures so adroitly on film. "Possums" is permeated with the genuine fondness of the director for his characters, allowing them their rural idiosyncrasies without exploitation or condescension.

"For a first movie 'Possums,' was stunning," says Professor Herstand. "There's a lot of Max's sweetness in it. Most



Oskie, the Akita, arrived at the Hollywood Theaters in Norman appropriately attired for the Oklahoma premiere of "Possums." Oskie won the part in an audition arranged by his stage mother, Kathy Miller, daughter of former OU football coach Barry Switzer, who also is in the movie.

“Being in Oklahoma, you feel so far removed from either Broadway or Hollywood. When I was an undergrad, I had always wanted somebody to come back and say, ‘Yeah, it can be done.’”

Ignite Entertainment

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Making no attempt to evade type-casting, former OU and Dallas Cowboy head coach Barry Switzer was a natural as the state’s “winningest” high school coach in the independent film, “Possums.”

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Ignite Entertainment

On location in Nowata, Oklahoma, writer/director J. Max Burnett, center, discusses a scene in “Possums” with fellow OU alumnus, Greg Coolidge, left, and Monica Lacy.

young writers never make the breakthrough to reveal their own emotions in their work. It’s a risk to look inside yourself and expose that to your audience. But Max made himself explore what he had to explore emotionally, and the film reflects that tenderness. I look for Max to grow and grow.”

So does Hollywood. The first weekend in Norman, “Possums” doubled anticipated attendance figures. The next weekend, Burnett’s film outgrossed all other pictures in the multiplex where it opened in Tulsa. In May, the film was sold to Stars Network, which plans a major run on cable television this fall, with video distribution to follow.

Both Coolidge and Burnett currently are enmeshed in other projects. Coolidge and co-author Joe Jarvis, also an

OU theater alumnus, are putting the finishing touches on “Truth or Dare,” a teen comedy they recently sold to New Line Entertainment. Meanwhile Burnett is going out with his new script, “Stealing Sam,” the story of a young man who has lost sight of his dreams and “kidnaps” his best friend and an ex-girlfriend on a road trip to self-discovery.

While Coolidge and Burnett are busy fulfilling their dreams, they are also nurturing a growing contingency of OU graduates who are following theirs.

“Whenever a new OU person comes into town, we have a party so they can be introduced and

have a large group of contacts,” says Coolidge.

“When Greg went out there,” adds Burnett, “there were only one or two OU alums. Now there’s 40 or 50 of us.”

While in Norman for the “Possums” premiere, both men took time to visit their alma mater, sitting down with students in theater classes for an informal Q and A.

“Being in Oklahoma, you feel so far removed from either Broadway or Hollywood,” explains Burnett. “When I was an undergrad, I had always wanted somebody to come back and say, ‘Yeah, it can be done.’”

With Coolidge and Burnett stars rising, those needing reassurance will have to look no further than their local theaters.