

BY KATHRYN JENSON WHITE

HOORAY FOR SOONERWOOD

For every big name in film,
there are thousands working their way
through the industry in
hundreds of different ways.
A number of them started at OU.

University of Oklahoma students who dream the Hollywood dream learn before they step upon the commencement stage that access to a sound stage will not come easy, that acing a chapter test is infinitely more likely than even getting a screen test and that reading any textbook is a snap compared to reading for a role. Want to direct, write a screenplay or produce, they are asked? Well, they are told, join the crowd—the very big crowd—of those looking for a break, an “in,” a someone who might be able to say something to someone who knows Someone.

Despite the daunting odds, many OU graduates have carved out satisfying film careers. They are not household names like former OU students James Garner or Ed Harris; they are the film industry’s version of the working stiff, nourished by what they do and, in some cases, inspired by ever-renewed dreams of what could materialize at Tuesday’s meeting or develop at Friday’s dinner.

“There is no one way to a career in this industry,” says Andy Horton, Jeanne Hoffman Smith Chair of Film and Video Studies and FVS program director. Horton knows the complex industry as a scholar and professional. His screenplay, “Dark Side of the Sun,” was made into a 1989 film starring then-newcomer Brad Pitt. He has another screenplay under way.

continued



Photo provided

Actor Darryl Cox, above at right in a scene from the movie *Robocop*, has accepted that stardom is not in his future, but his success in supporting roles fulfills his need to act, while teaching on-camera techniques to other aspirants helps pay the bills.



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As a screenwriter, OU's Andy Horton has followed a well-traveled path to a career in film. As the Jeanne Hoffman Smith Chair of Film and Video Studies and FVS program director, he explains to his students that there many other ways to be a part of this very demanding industry.

"If you go to med school, you assume you're going to be a doctor and specialize and affiliate with a hospital," Horton says. "Law and business work much the same way. It's not the same in film. You might end up working on a Web site or creating and designing video games. Students might study production design, but they might be happy working at *Variety*, a trade magazine. Or maybe they end up interviewing people who will be in the extra features on DVDs."

Below are five of hundreds of stories of OU graduates contributing in some way to the film industry.

The Actor

Darryl Cox, who graduated from OU with a bachelor's in English in 1977, is a Screen Actors Guild card-holding character actor, one of many who fill the silver screens behind or beside the stars.

"Many do it because they want a lot of recognition," the 51-year-old says. "I like to be part of the scenery. I want them just to *believe* I am that character, that person who is doing whatever he is doing. I like the idea that I help create this reality and give it life. I'd be lying if I said I didn't have an ego, but I'm not going to be a star. I've accepted that."

Cox began his career as an extra, then earned his SAG card with a part in the TV miniseries "North and South." Over the last 24 years, he has landed roles in *Robocop*, *Twister*, *Arlington Road* and others. His latest roles were in the 2007 season of the TV hit, "Prison Break," and in *Four Sheets to the Wind*, Oklahoman Sterlin Harjo's first feature.

"Sometimes I think I'm an actor because there is something very, very wrong with me," he says. "I can't accept living life on some sort of safe, mundane level



Photo provided

A joyful Sterlin Harjo acknowledges the enthusiastic crowd attending a 2007 Sundance Film Festival screening of his first feature, *Four Sheets to the Wind*. With no stars and no hype, Harjo's indie effort was well-received and is set for DVD while still looking for a theatrical distribution deal.

and there are no star names in it. We've had talks, but we haven't done a deal.

"We screened it about six times during the festival. All our shows were sold out. We didn't have a lot of hype because it had no stars, but word of mouth drew people. The last screening had 1,250. Many told us it was their favorite film of the festival. Three people cried during the Q&A, just thanking us for making it. It was pretty cool. Every review that's come out has been good. A multimillion dollar deal would be great, but I can't ask for a lot more my first feature."

Harjo has written a second feature, *Before the Beast Returns*. In May 2006, that screenplay won the \$10,000 Tribeca Film Institute's All Access Connects award in the Narrative Section. The competition drew more than 450 submissions for two categories: narrative and documentary. He has found financing to make the film.

"It's a hard career, and you never know whether people are going to like what you do, so it's always scary," he says. "Year round I have anxiety. For now, I'm fine with the uncertainty. You have to always be willing to shift your career."

"Very few of us are going to be rich and famous. Just stay in the game. That is success enough."

The Production Assistant/Screenwriter

Matt Payne, 29, graduated in 2001 with a degree in film and video studies. Today, he works for the executive producers of the hit TV show "Without a Trace." His script, "Woodpecker," a small film about bird watching, is in preproduction with an independent producer. He has another script on the market. Before going to work for "Without a Trace," Payne worked on the set of *The Metro Chase*, a film set in Paris; as a set assistant for two years on Kiefer Sutherland's major TV hit, "24"; and at a talent agency. The final job in that list helped him clarify his career goals.

"I wore a coat and tie and schlubbed around working 14 hours a day, never getting a lunch break, taking calls all weekend," he says. "I read probably a million scripts and covered hundreds of television pilots. It was in the misery of that

experience that I thought 'I really want to be the creative person. I don't want to facilitate them.'

"To succeed, you have to be 1,000 percent confident and realize that no one is going to give you anything. You have to be 100 percent sold on your capability and have an end vision of what you want to be. You have to be willing to work like a dog. It takes forever. Then you finally get to where you thought you wanted to be the year before, and you'll still be frustrated because it will take even *more* time to get to where you *now* know you want to be."

Despite the frustrations of the amazing race that is Hollywood, Payne says he has created a very satisfying life for himself that includes 20 to 25 friends from Oklahoma in various areas of the film industry.

"I have made it my goal that I will make everything I do the best I can, and then it stops being mine," he says. "I walk away from it with the thought that I did the best I could, and I'm proud of what I've done, and now it's for the world to judge—and that doesn't affect me."

The Director of DVD Postproduction for Paramount Studios

Jeremy Miller did not go to California dreaming the standard Hollywood dreams.

"In all honesty, I was just looking for a job," says Miller, who earned a bachelor's in education in December 2000 and a second in film and video studies in May 2001. "So many people, when I was going through the programs, had grandiose ideas. I didn't. I threw myself into school, and that was all I knew. I got to the point of, 'I just want to go work a 40-hour-a-week job.' It was analogous to going away to work at a factory. I didn't want pressures or expectations for a while. Because I loved film, it was the ideal factory to work in."

Family connections got Miller internships at Miramax Studios and The Film Colony, a development company. Then came a Miramax job as an assistant to a vice president of postproduction. His current job is a small niche in the acquisitions area of Paramount. Miller is an upper-level manager who works with studios to send DVD content to vendors who do everything from quality check to putting the product together. His metaphor is that he collects the ingredients for the cake that his cooks and chefs bake.

"You know, I wrote a screenplay at the end of my degree," he says. "I thought about editing. But, ultimately, I came out here eager, humble and ready to work and made a career out of it. I could move up the ladder, but, honestly, I always have had the yearning to teach, and I may follow that calling someday."

Those looking for a career in the film industry might do well to heed the advice found on a T-shirt Horton had made for film and video studies students: "There is no one way." Then they might read the words of actor/screenwriter Ben Stein and producer Al Burton in their book, *26 Steps to Succeed in Hollywood*. Stein and Burton close with this: "Very few of us are going to be rich and famous," they write. "Just stay in the game. That is success enough."

Freelance writer Kathryn Jenson White is an assistant professor of journalism in the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication.

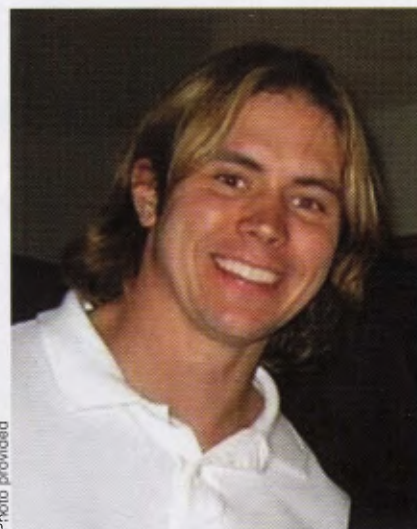


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ABOVE: Having experienced the grunt work of a TV and movie production assistant, Matt Payne yearns to be the creative person in the equation. Meanwhile his Hollywood life includes a group of like-minded friends from Oklahoma. BELOW: Jeremy Miller views the film industry as a business—a job like any other. In the back of his mind, he speculates that his career path may lead him back to the classroom as a teacher.

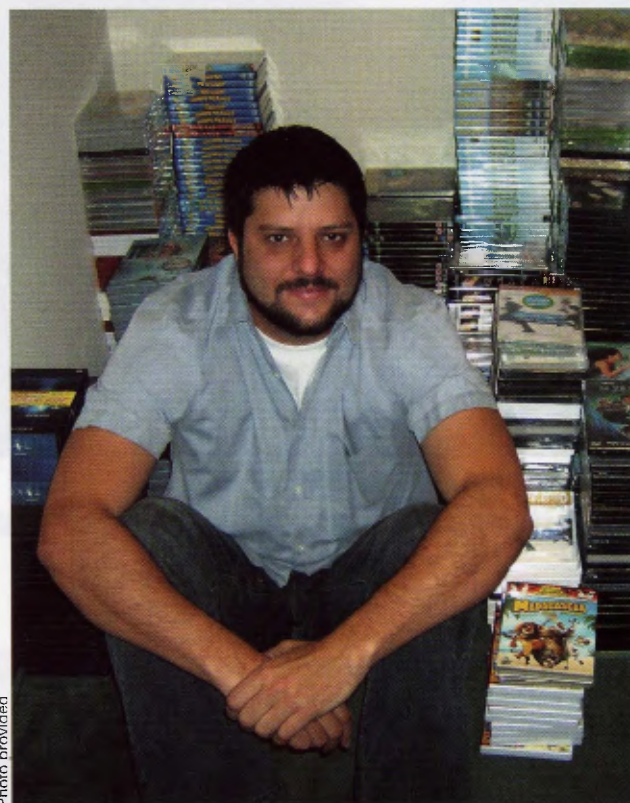


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