

■ filmmaking

KING OF CRASS

HANGOVER DIRECTOR TODD PHILLIPS REINVENTS THE SUMMER BLOCKBUSTER

by Kevin Fallon / CAS '09

Boy wizards, warring robots, superheroes in spandex, drunken pirates, and talking animals. These are the historic pillars of Hollywood summer blockbusters. But thanks to three men with splitting headaches and a rogue tiger, the industry has discovered a new way to sell tickets on a massive scale. Director Todd Phillips (TSOA '94) is the man behind the bawdy, box-office-shattering comedies *The Hangover* (2009) and *The Hangover Part II* (2011). The films each raked in more than \$480 million worldwide, rivaling the gross of franchise hits such as *Transformers* and *X-Men*—but without the costly special effects. In fact, *The Hangover Part II* is the highest-grossing R-rated comedy ever, only surpassing the first *Hangover* film.

This, of course, has made Phillips, 40, something of a Hollywood darling, which is “defi-

nitely bizarre, but flattering,” he says. The filmmaker, who built renown on the backs of gratuitous “frat comedies” such as *Road Trip* (2000), *Old School* (2003), and

Starsky & Hutch (2004), is perhaps most proud that his latest movie was labeled “the raunchiest mainstream comedy of all time.” And now he’s in demand as a producer as well, having just wrapped the ensemble comedy *Project X*, for which he’s credited with discovering a cast of unknown actors likely poised for big breaks. Is it all a little overwhelming? The Brooklyn-born Phillips concedes: “It’s a long way from living on Seventh Street and Avenue B and going to Christine Choy’s documentary class, for sure.”

Phillips grew up on Long Island, raised by his mother and two older sisters, and fed by the movies of John Landis and Ivan Reitman, which inspired him to go to film school. He describes his time at NYU as an education in culture—broadening his film taste beyond *Animal House* and *Stripes*. “You’re exposed to things you wouldn’t be on Long Island at your local

began as a project for Choy’s documentary-film course, which he took for four semesters. Phillips focused on documentaries because he imagined himself too inexperienced to write believable screenplays. “When you’re 18 years old, unless you’re a naturally gifted writer, which I wasn’t, you don’t have a lot of stories to tell yet,” he says. While interning at HBO, he shot his second documentary, *Frat House* (1998), about the darker side of Greek life—from frightening hazing rituals to dangerous party habits. It won the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998, and became emblematic of themes he would explore in his later works.

His first feature, *Road Trip*, could easily be viewed as a comedic spin-off of *Frat House*. Released in 2000, it was born out of an introduction with *Ghostbusters* and *Meatballs* director Reitman (who executive-produced the film) at Sundance. Rife with nudity and other explicit content, the film grossed more than \$120 million worldwide and set the tone

“Other comedies have bad behavior, but most of them spend the last 15 minutes apologizing for [it]. My movies revel in the bad behavior.”

video store,” he says. His early cinematic endeavors reflect that change. His first film, a documentary called *Hated* (1994) about controversial punk rocker GG Allin,



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PHILLIPS (CENTER) SHOT *THE HANGOVER PART II* ON LOCATION IN BANGKOK, THAILAND, WITH STARS ED HELMS, BRADLEY COOPER, AND ZACH GALIFIANAKIS.

for the, in Phillips's words, "unapologetic and aggressive" comedy he would become famous for—such as Will Ferrell streaking in *Old School*. *Borat* (2006), which Phillips co-wrote and which *Newsweek* called "game-changing" for how warmly audiences received its utter political incorrectness, even earned an Oscar nomination (for Best Adapted Screenplay). "Other comedies that come out of Hollywood have bad behavior, but most of them spend the last 15 minutes of the movie apologizing for [it]," he says. "Movies that I make revel in the bad behavior."

Nowhere is that more on dis-

play than in his *Hangover* films. The first movie featured, among other scenes of debauchery, characters simulating masturbation on a baby. In addition to rampant drug use and explicit language, *The Hangover Part II* boasts what has been described in reviews as "a shocking array of penises." Reitman credits Phillips with pushing the boundaries of what's commercially viable. "It's a last frontier thing," Reitman told *The Hollywood Reporter*, adding that Phillips is "upping the ante in terms of erotic explicitness." For his part, Phillips is equally unapologetic about that, too. "I'm an R-rated person in general and always have been," he

says. "It's hard for me to have conversations that are PG-13, let alone make a movie that is." But is there a line? Only occasionally, he maintains, does he stop and question, as he did during the baby scene, "how this will play in Peoria."

Phillips's *Hangover* star Zach Galifianakis once described him as having "this cockiness that, for a skinny nerd from Brooklyn, is really weird." Certainly a fondness for expletives and a summer fling with Paris Hilton attest to that confidence. But there's a self-deprecating humility and love for his craft underneath that. This combination enables his films to transcend mere tastelessness, tapping into the

heart in his characters. And the industry has noticed. After *Old School*, Steven Spielberg sent him a fan letter praising his work. The first *Hangover* film won the Golden Globe Award for Best Musical or Comedy in 2010, beating out two Meryl Streep films. But the icing on the cake was a handwritten letter from Emma Thompson. "It was about how much she just loved *The Hangover*, and how much she thinks a movie like that just adds joy to the world," he says. "I like when people put it in perspective. You're not really trying to change the world, you're trying to put a good movie out there. And put people in a better mood." ■

theater

A Playwright With Punch

KRISTOFFER DIAZ'S BRASH NARRATIVE STYLE HELPS EASE AMERICA'S "UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS"

by Justin Warner

Kristoffer Diaz's love affair with professional wrestling started as a kid in the 1980s, when flamboyantly macho characters such as Hulk Hogan, "Rowdy" Roddy

Piper, and future Minnesota Governor Jesse "The Body" Ventura ruled the ring. Diaz (GAL '99, TSOA '02) obsessively followed matches, collected action figures, and even immersed himself in role-playing games (think Dun-

geons & Dragons with wrestlers). Though his passion waned somewhat in high school, it rebounded in the late 1990s as a renaissance at World Wrestling Entertainment, or WWE, spawned Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson and Stone Cold

DIAZ'S UNCONVENTIONAL WRITING STYLE HELPED HIS LATEST PLAY BECOME A FINALIST FOR THE 2009 PULITZER PRIZE IN DRAMA.

Steve Austin. His encyclopedic knowledge landed him a side job as one of the first professional-wrestling bloggers. It wasn't high-brow work for someone with a master's from the Rita and Burton Goldberg Department of Dramatic Writing in the Tisch School of the Arts, but Diaz felt truly lucky to land the position. And that luck kept paying off—the gig inspired him to pen a play that was nominated for the 2009 Pulitzer Prize in Drama.

The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity—which uses wrestling's decidedly unsubtle milieu to explore thorny issues of racial identity, authenticity, and American culture—was originally produced by the Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago in 2009, and then off-Broadway by Second Stage Theatre the following spring. Reviewers swooned. *The New York Times*' Ben Brantley welcomed the "delicious crackle and pop of a galloping, honest-to-God, all-American satire." *Backstage* said that the play "will body-slam you to the canvas with a one-two punch of political satire and theatrical showmanship." In addition to being a Pulitzer finalist, *Chad Deity* snagged the Obie and Lucille Lortel awards for Best Play.

Chad Deity's narrative stems from a controversy that erupted during Diaz's stint in the early blogosphere. In December 2004, WWE introduced Muhammad Hassan, a patriotic Muslim-American wrestler facing harassment in post-9/11 society. (True to wrestling's artifice, Hassan was played by Mark Copani, an Italian-American from Syracuse, New York.) At a time when many pundits and politicians wore xenophobia like a badge of honor, presenting a beefy Muslim as a misunderstood good guy sparked tremendous buzz, with

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Diaz and others impressed by the risky choice. But Hassan and his creators soon retreated back into stereotypes. “It fell apart very quickly and turned into ‘Oh, you actually *are* a terrorist,’” Diaz recalls.

Diaz, who the *Times* recently presented with its 2011 Outstanding Playwright Award, had

is a Puerto Rican wrestler who gets paid to lose matches, and worries about the social and personal cost of being a Latino fall guy. The title character, a bling-laden showboat who refers to himself in the third person, represents a new black stereotype that obliterates any discussion of racial self-consciousness. And then there’s the

“Growing up in the MTV generation, and now the Twitter generation...I don’t think narrative can be simple today in the way it may have been in the past.”

spent a lot of time thinking about race as a Puerto Rican raised in a predominately Jewish enclave of Westchester County. At a young age, Diaz noticed how his own affect shifted from one environment to another. “You don’t think of it in racial or ethnic terms, but you know the difference between spending time with your Jewish friends in Yonkers and your Puerto Rican cousins, basically in the street in the Bronx,” he explains.

Such contrasts run throughout *Chad Deity*. Mace, the protagonist,

Fundamentalist, a terrorist “bad guy” played by an Indian-American ethnic chameleon, whom Mace plucks from obscurity and quickly loses control over. These characters inhabit an America that hasn’t fully shifted from a black-white concept of race. “You talk about Latino being a race constructed of other races—what the hell is that?” Diaz asks. “The whole language is insufficient. But at the same time, it’s a conversation that needs to be had.”

Just don’t expect that conversation to come about in a con-

ventional fashion. Diaz’s plays—which total six in all—interweave traditional scenes, direct-address monologues, PowerPoint presentations, and, in the case of his first play, *Welcome to Arroyo*’s, break dancing and beatboxing. Characters comment on the play’s theatrical devices, and then comment on the comments. “There’s something about that kind of style that helps me actually say what I want to say, which is not straightforward,” Diaz explains. “I think it also has to do with growing up in the MTV generation, and now the Twitter generation... I don’t think narrative can be simple today in the way it may have been in the past. Because we do bounce around.” Fittingly, Diaz says he usually writes in multimedia hurricanes of his own creation: “I have Facebook open, and Twitter open, and the television’s on—with no sound—and then I have music on, playing something else.”

When he’s not making art, he’s nurturing new artists. For years, Diaz has taught and mentored young writers at numerous public schools in New York, including El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice in Brooklyn. He’s also busy keeping up with *Chad Deity*’s ever-expanding calendar—new productions of the play are in the works at the Actors Theatre of Louisville and the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles. Meanwhile, L.A.’s Center Theatre Group, Chicago’s Goodman Theatre, and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival have all commissioned new works from Diaz. Although it can be overwhelming, the 34-year-old keeps perspective on how hard it is for most young playwrights to break through. “It’s unbelievable,” he concedes. “For a first production to explode like this, on a play that feels very much like my voice on my terms—I’m very, very lucky.” ■



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CREDITS

THE SPOTLIGHT'S ON ALUMNI—FROM FILM AND TV TO THE GREAT WHITE WAY

There's no shortage of singing in this fall's TV lineup, with **MATTHEW MORRISON** (TSOA '01) reprising his role as choir teacher Will Schuester on Fox's *Glee*, and the debut of NBC's Broadway musical drama *Smash*, directed by **MICHAEL MAYER** (TSOA '83) and starring **DEBRA MESSING** (TSOA '93) and Anjelica Huston... **GARRET DILLA HUNT** (TSOA '91) returns as the clueless patriarch for Season 2 of the Fox comedy *Raising Hope*, while HBO's *How to Make It in America* is back in the Big Apple with stars **BRYAN GREENBERG** (TSOA '00), **MARGARITA LEVIEVA** (CAS '01), and rapper Kid Cudi... **TOM SCHNAUZ** (TSOA '88) is a writer on the critically acclaimed AMC drama *Breaking Bad*, which was created by executive producer **VINCE GILLIGAN** (TSOA '89) and just wrapped its fourth season... **TUFFUS ZIMBABWE** (STEINHARDT '09) plays keyboard alongside fellow alumni **ROB BLAKE** (STEIN-



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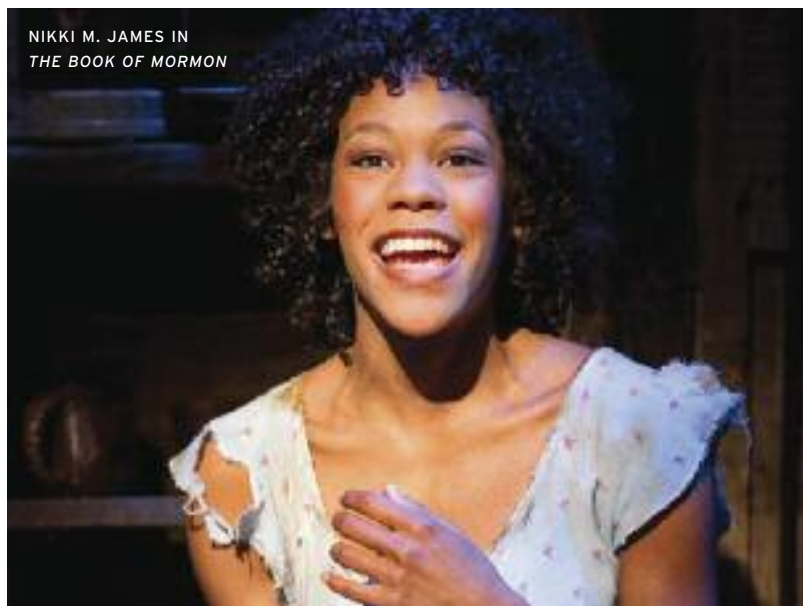
BREAKING BAD

HARDT '10) on saxophone and **JARED SCHARFF** (STEINHARDT '01) on guitar as part of the *Saturday Night Live* Band, led by musical director **LENNY PICKETT** (STEINHARDT faculty

member)... **MARYANN BRANDON** (TSOA '84) edited the summer hit *Super 8*, written and directed by J.J. Abrams, who also produced the upcoming *Mission: Impossible - Ghost Protocol*—co-written by **ANDRÉ NEMEC** (TSOA '94)... **BENNETT MILLER** (TSOA '89) directed the sports drama *Moneyball*, based on the true story of the Oakland Athletics' general manager Billy Beane, played by Brad Pitt and co-starring **PHILIP SEYMOUR HOFFMAN** (TSOA '89)... **ROONEY MARA** (GAL '10) stars in the highly anticipated Hollywood remake of *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, based on the best-selling novel by Stieg Larsson... The Judd Apatow-produced comedy *Wanderlust*

was written by **KEN MARINO** (TSOA '91) and **DAVID WAIN** (TSOA '91), who also directed the fish-out-of-water tale starring Paul Rudd and Jennifer Aniston as an urban couple visiting a hippie commune... *Paranormal Activity 3*, directed by **ARIEL SCHULMAN** (TSOA '04) and produced by **STEVEN SCHNEIDER** (TSOA '02), brings the fear for Halloween... At the 2011 Tony Awards, **NIKKI M. JAMES** (TSOA '03) scored Best Performance by an Actress in a Featured Role in a Musical for *The Book of Mormon*, which stole the show with nine wins in all. James beat out fellow alumna **LAURA BENANTI** (TSOA '02), who was nominated for the musical adaptation of Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar's darkly comedic classic *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*.

—Renée Alfuso



NIKKI M. JAMES IN
THE BOOK OF MORMON

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