

Professor Hollywood: Between grading papers, filmmaker juggles his own projects

by Lisa Petrillo

Jonathan Berman does more than make movies about the 1960s free-love era. There are the bipolar bank robber and the maternity ward, which Berman turned into the subjects of critically acclaimed documentaries.

In addition to his directorial duties, Berman is juggling the launch of two new documentary projects, writing a screenplay and grading term papers for his students at California State University San Marcos.

Such is life for Professor Hollywood.

PROFESSOR HOLLYWOOD - Documentary filmmaker Jonathan Berman discusses the movie 'The Truman Show' with his mass media class at California State University San Marcos. CNS Photo by Dan Trevan. "Being a professor's really rewarding because you share your knowledge, what you know, with people who are interested in receiving it," said Berman, who teaches mass media studies.

Berman's latest film, "Commune," profiles a Northern California utopian community founded in 1968 that still exists. The movie features actor and activist Peter Coyote, who was an occasional member of Black Bear Ranch in Siskiyou County, and it has been making the rounds of festivals and screenings since 2005 to strong reviews.

The film was reviewed in The New York Times, and the film-industry trade paper Variety raved: "Often mocked and rarely understood, the movement in communal living that blossomed with Flower Power in the '60s gets its most honest appraisal yet on film with Jonathan Berman's 'Commune.' "

Critics have lauded Berman's deft weaving of vintage footage and his contemporary interviews with the founders, countrified commune neighbors and sometimes-troubled former residents of the commune.

Berman avoids turning the film into a freak show, and instead lets his subjects show how they stayed true to their ideals then and now.

The man behind the camera, Professor Hollywood, sits in his tidy, well-lighted, windowless university office filled with computers, book-lined shelves and surprisingly little show-biz glitter, considering his rising success in the indie film world. His films play on the big screen and on The Sundance Channel.

Being in academia helps Berman retain his artistic independence and intellectual stimulation.

"L.A.'s a factory town and I'm a lover, not a mechanic," he said.

Quiet, however, his life is not.

Berman talks about his work like a hummingbird hunts nectar, darting among the subjects he finds so enticing. His acting lessons. His search for the next new thing in media delivery, beyond e-mail and the mainstream press. His excitement over the potential of YouTube.com, the popular Internet site that lets anyone with even a cell phone camera become a filmmaker by posting images on the Web.

"It is a great coup for CSUSM to have someone of Jonathan's caliber teaching on campus," said Alyssa Sepinwall, history professor. "It is an amazing opportunity for our students to be able to work with someone like that, and it is stimulating for those of us on the faculty who teach with documentary films to have a colleague who is such a highly regarded producer of them."

Three years ago, Berman left his teaching post at Sarah Lawrence College in his native New York to become an assistant professor at CSU San Marcos, an 8,000-student public university. What attracted him was Cal State's emphasis on community service and the university system's role as "the people's university."

His film work focuses on subcultures, underserved groups and alternative ideas, redefining them beyond their stereotypes.

Also new to the faculty is documentary filmmaker Minda Martin, who was attracted to the university for its new major in mass media, in which she and Berman both teach. Their students learn not only the technical aspects of how to create media, through film, TV, the Web and journalism, Martin said, but they also learn its history and how to analyze the media.

"It offers students employable skills, not just technical skills," Martin said. "They'll have critical media skills and that will help them learn to be more responsible when they're out in the working world about what images they choose."

What also drew Berman to San Marcos was the siren call of the West.

"I've always been interested in California as a place where people come to re-create themselves; the idea of the promised land," he said.

For his next project, he plans to explore spirituality and how people have come to California looking for answers to eternal questions.

His first film, "Shvitz," featured the patrons of one of the last of the traditional steam baths in New York. Next came "My Friend Paul," about his childhood best friend on Long Island, who turned to drugs and bank robbery. Berman interviews Paul in prison; what follows is an exploration of friendship, mental illness and society's perception of criminals. "Maternity Ward" was produced for New York Times Television.

For Berman, balancing the intellectual with the artistic is a matter of juggling. He keeps several sets of juggling balls on his bookshelf, which he brings into the classroom to toss to students or to juggle himself. It gets the energy level up and helps reinforce the unexpected.

"Teaching is performance," he said.

That's Hollywood.

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