



## Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017

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Volume 17  
Issue 1 *Spring 2008*

Article 9

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Spring 2008

### The Reel Deal

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#### **Recommended Citation**

Hatch, Rachel (2008) "The Reel Deal," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol17/iss1/9>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [iwumag@iwu.edu](mailto:iwumag@iwu.edu).

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# THE REEL DEAL

**Filmmaker Brian Udovich '98 finds success  
blending business skills with movie magic.**

**Story by Rachel Hatch**



**A poster for *The Wackness*, which won this year's Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival. The movie is Udovich's second collaboration with director Jonathan Levine.**

**"There is so much glitz and glamour around you, but you have to focus and know that you are there for a reason."**

In the snowy hills of Utah this past January, Brian Udovich '98 received two things he didn't expect— a really bad cold and a major award at this year's Sundance Film Festival.

*The Wackness* — a dark, coming-of-age comedy co-produced by Udovich and directed by Jonathan Levine — won the festival's coveted Audience Award for best dramatic film.

"Going into the festival, you never have any idea what the reaction will be," says Udovich. "After that first screening, I knew we stood a chance."

The largest independent film festival in the United States, Sundance has grown into a major media event, attended by celebrity actors and Hollywood executives. Kevin Smith, Quentin Tarantino and Steven Soderbergh are among the filmmakers who got their first big break at Sundance, which also helped bring wider attention to such movies as *Reservoir Dogs*, *Little Miss Sunshine* and *Napoleon Dynamite*.

"It's unnerving to enter that festival setting," says Udovich, who grew up in Joliet Ill., and now lives in Los Angeles.

The movie is Udovich's second collaboration with Levine. The first, *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane*, was purchased by famed movie mogul Harvey Weinstein after its screening at the 2007 Toronto Film Festival and is slated for major distribution this May.

*The Wackness* centers on a teen pot dealer (Josh Peck) in mid-'90s Manhattan who finds a mentor in his psychiatrist, played by Academy Award-winning actor Ben Kingsley. "It's a character-driven piece," says Udovich, "and you're never sure if people are going to identify with that, but the movie is also a lot of fun and people were entertained." Sony Pictures Classics picked up North American rights to release the film in theaters later this year.

Udovich wasn't born with Hollywood stars in his eyes. A business administration major at IWU, he first developed an appreciation for the art of filmmaking as a student, when he began watching movies with a friend that had been suggested by a professor. "I remember seeing *A Clockwork Orange* and I was blown away," he says. Still, he didn't consider it as a potential career after graduation, instead landing a job as a telecommunications consultant for Chicago-based Ernst & Young. When the consulting division was purchased by French firm Cap Gemini, Udovich found himself traveling the world.

"It was definitely a very cool lifestyle," says Udovich, "but it was easy to leave behind." Easy because "the feel of the 1990s, all the creativity and energy, slipped away" after the dot.com bubble burst in the early 2000s. "Relaxed guys in jeans and T-shirts thinking of the next new idea changed into people in suits saying, 'Here's what I can do with your money.'"

Udovich decided to enroll at the American Film Institute (AFI) with a focus on producing films. He says, "It really wasn't a tough transition" from the telecommunications business to the business of making movies.

A letter-winning defensive lineman for the Titans when he attended Illinois Wesleyan, Udovich compares his role as a producer to that of "a coach who puts together a team and gets the best out of his players. In this case, you're putting together a director, production designer, editor, cinematographer — and making sure everyone works together and everything runs smoothly from start to finish. You're the first one on the job and the last one out the door."

His love of teamwork fit well with AFI's rigorous emphasis on collaboration. "AFI is an intense boot camp showing how the real world of movies works," says Udovich. "In small films, you can have an all-in-one package with the writer also directing and editing a work. But that can't happen on a larger picture, even if it's an 'indie' film. Everyone has to have a separate role, and the producer makes sure everyone is working to potential. There is a reason a Best Picture Oscar goes to the producer."

Udovich says he learned more than just the business at AFI — he learned how to fail. "After I finished producing my first student film, I thought it was brilliant," he says. "When I showed it to the other students for critique, they ripped it apart. Now either you learn from that or you give up. If you fail, what is the worst that can happen? You fall flat on your face?" he says. "If you want to succeed a little, you need to learn how to fail a lot."

AFI also taught Udovich how to make impressive-looking films with very little money, often by relying on people to volunteer their talents or offer locations for shooting. "It's surprising how many people are willing to help," he says, "because it's exciting to be involved in making a film." Because independent films like the kind Udovich makes are produced outside of the Hollywood studio system, such resourcefulness is essential.

In his final year at the film institute, Udovich proved his talent by producing *The Monster and the Peanut*, which won the Emmy for best dramatic student film and was recently released for purchase on iTunes.

It was also at AFI where Udovich met Levine. "Jonathan has an amazing vision, and believes in what he does," says Udovich. "Plus he's just a really great guy and it's fun to work with him." That relaxed atmosphere leads to an environment of trust, says Udovich. "One of the great complements I received was from a grip on the set in New York, who had just come off of *I Am Legend* to work on *The Wackness*," he says. "She said she'd never seen a team work so fluidly



**A business administration major at Wesleyan, Udovich (above) worked in telecommunications before switching to the business of making movies.**

together. All of us try to enable Jonathan's vision, and he is strong enough to feel comfortable asking for advice."

During the shoot for *The Wackness*, Udovich also encountered something new: the paparazzi. "You see so many celebrities in Hollywood every day that it's like walking around an issue of *US Weekly*. You get used to it," says Udovich. Nonetheless, he was stunned by the way photographers hounded actress/former child star Mary-Kate Olson on the New York set. "It's bizarre to think that people are standing 15 feet away from her all the time because legally they have to stand 15 feet away. That kind of unrelenting attention is tough to imagine."

Flashing cameras aside, the challenge of making movies is a draw for Udovich, who loves the idea of conquering a summit, whether in Hollywood or in the heights of Mt. Kilimanjaro. An avid hiker, Udovich and his girlfriend scaled the mountain several years ago. "Why climb it? Because it's there," says Udovich simply, laughing that he faced every environment possible while ascending to the peak. "You start out in the rainforest and end up in the *Star Wars* ice planet of Hoth," he says, unable to resist the movie reference.

Adapting to change is easy, says Udovich, because of the lessons he learned at Illinois Wesleyan, where last fall at Homecoming he was awarded the University's Outstanding Young Alumnus award. "Call it the Minor Myers jr. influence," he says of the late University president. "He always said life will change, professions will change and you will grow throughout your life. Just be ready for that."

As for his next move, Udovich plans to make more movies and always be on the lookout for the next big change. He is finishing up *The Key Man*, featuring *Lord of the Rings* star Hugo Weaving, which is due out this year. "I always thought my dream would be to either own the Chicago Bears or make movies," he says. "Of course, if I make enough movies maybe I can afford to buy the Chicago Bears."