Benny and Josh Make Movies

They sneak cameras into the opera. They film strangers in the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They hide sound equipment in paper bags and smuggle it into the Central Park Zoo. They shoot private moments at random times in strange places: an old man playing a violin in a subway car, a woman watching as a beach umbrella tumbles off in a gust of wind, a bee struggling to take flight from the windshield of a moving car.

Later, in a dark corner of a fifth-floor Soho studio, the stolen moments are sewn into narratives born of little more than a single haunting memory—a child lost on a crowded beach. And before the Safdie brothers, Josh (COM’07) and Ben (COM’08), are done thinking about that memory and those moments, they will have created a film that asks some unexpected questions.


Like most of the Safdie brothers’ films, Yeah, Get on My Shoulders doesn’t exactly answer the unexpected questions. Instead, it sends the audience on a scavenger hunt to seemingly random places, where the clues lurk in the corners of profoundly ordinary lives.

Charles Merzbacher, a College of Communication associate professor and chair of the department of film and television, who is close to the Safdies, says their films “lull you into thinking that you are watching the classic mirror held up to nature, and then something will appear in the background that is a complete break with reality.”

“It’s a distancing device,” says Merzbacher. “People look at their films and see the French New Wave, but what they don’t see is that they are bringing something completely new: there is whimsy there.”

Also like most Safdie films, Yeah, Get on My Shoulders is a largely collaborative work, written in this case with help from Brett Jutkiewicz (COM’06) and produced with much support from other members of the tight-knit crew at Red Bucket Films, a BU-bred clutch of filmmakers that includes Sam Lisenco (COM’06), Zachary Treitz (COM’07), and the Safdies’ high school friend and first collaborator, Alex Kalman.

The particular chemistry of what is known as the Red Bucket brigade has been good for the Safdies, and according to many people, good for the indie film scene. Josh’s The Pleasure of Being Robbed, a seventy-one-minute chronicle of the wanderings of a beautiful young kleptomaniac, was the only American-made feature shown in last year’s Cannes Film Festival Directors’ Fortnight, which helped launch the careers of Martin Scorsese,
The Safdies, Josh (left) and Benny, are editing their first film made with funding from outside investors — one of the rewards of their recognition at Cannes.
BENDING THE RULES A LITTLE

Sam Liseno swings open the great steel shutter that separates the street noise of Soho from the forty-by-fifty-foot loft space where the Bucketeers gather most days around noon. Liseno winces. The shutter is heavy, and his rib, fractured two weeks ago during an impromptu wrestling match with fellow Bucketeer Alex Kalman, is tender.

“Sam and Alex have been wrestling every day,” says Josh, climbing down from the raised editing space Sam helped the Safdies build in one corner of their workspace. “I’ve been giving a prize to the winner. He gets a sandwich.”

At first glance, the Red Bucket lair offers little evidence of adult habitation. There is a thirty-year-old television set, a bicycle, a dartboard, a museum-worthy manual typewriter, and, leaning out from a plywood shelf, a stuffed polar bear that fans will recognize from the fantasy scene in The Pleasure of Being Robbed. A diminutive table and chairs, intended for use in the lower grades of an elementary school, squats before a well-worn couch.

Josh pulls up a chair and apologizes for his tardiness. With their latest project, Go Get Some Rosemary, in the final stages of editing, there is little time for anything but work. In fact, the Safdies’ customary twelve-hour workdays recently have expanded to sixteen hours. The night before, he says, they hadn’t lifted their eyes from their editing screens until four in the morning.

The project, the brothers confess, has had a difficult birth. “It started as a kind of amassment of four years of thoughts and scenes that we had scribbled in notebooks,” says Josh. “We knew there was a project called Go Get Some Rosemary, and we knew there was this guy and these two kids, and maybe there was this love that was on and off.”

After trying and failing to write a script in Soho, the brothers tried plan B. “We went upstate and rented a little room and just copied down every relevant note,” Josh says. “We had what would have been twelve or thirteen hours of movies, and we edited it right on the page. We never did write a script — we just had a forty-page story with dialogue.”

“We had to bend the rules a little,” Benny says.

“I actually think things would have gone better if we did have a script,” admits Josh. “But I still think this movie has been a great success personally.”

At least, he says, it will be, after a few more late nights and some ideas about where to trim the film’s ninety minutes. But already, says Benny, Go Get Some Rosemary has broken new ground. It’s the first project the Bucketeers have made with funding from outside investors — one of the rewards of their recognition at Cannes. Still, the brothers say, their daily existence depends on occasional commercial film jobs and services for barter. To complete Go Get Some Rosemary, for instance, they will trade editing services — sharpening the focus of a film made by a pharmaceutical company — for some high-tech design help with graphics.

“We do things cheaply,” says Benny. “But even if there was money, the things we do would look the same. Whatever we do, we do the way we want to do it.”

THE BOSTON YEARS

As Josh tells it, the first time the Safdie brothers came to Boston, they were lured on the long car ride with the promise of playing in a tree house in the Cambridge yard of their great-uncle, the architect Moshe Safdie.

“I think about what he did at his age, and it’s incredible,” Josh says, referring to his uncle’s design of Habitat 67, a multifamily housing project that was built for the Montreal Expo. “I mean, he was twenty-three when he designed Habitat. That’s how old I am now.”

The comparison is intended to posit the relatively modest success of the Safdies’ films against the inspired creation of one of the world’s acclaimed architects, but the implication is clear: in the Safdie family, the bar has been set high.

The two brothers, raised in Manhattan, attended Columbia Grammar and Prep School — the kind of place, says Josh, that did its best to eliminate students with any personality. “They tried to get rid of me too,” he says. “But they didn’t.”

At Boston University, the brothers discovered a new kind of learning experience, Josh says, one that gave them the tools and the freedom to reach, in their own way, for the lofty Safdie bar. The brothers studied what they wanted to study, which, according to their professors, happened to be practically every course that was offered by the film department.

Ray Carney, a COM professor of film and television, who is famous for his eccentric taste in film, says the brothers shared an uncommon certainty about what they wanted to learn. Benny, says Carney, took every course Carney taught, either for credit or not. Josh, on the other hand, showed up in only one of Carney’s courses and dropped it after the third class.

“He told me he couldn’t stand what I was doing to the films,” says Carney, who has high regard for the Safdies’ work, especially and unsurprisingly, for the clarity of its point of view. “If they
“ALL OF OUR FILMS COME FROM THINGS WE WITNESS RATHER THAN FROM CONVENTIONS OF FILM.”
Josh Safdie
“And I started imagining a lot of things than what was going on inside,” he says. “I was going on outside my apartment of her head, because that’s all he ever with her — or rather, with the back — a woman? And what if he fell in love coming: what if the neighbor had been people.”

“I started thinking about, he noticed a neighbor in an window to see what all the commotion was a student at BU. Leaning out his Boylston Street apartment when he got to BU,” he says. “Their father was another asset that the Safdies enjoy: the large-caliber cult status of hot indie filmmakers. In August, the magazine dolled up several of the Bucketeers in clothes by the likes of Yves Saint Laurent and Yohji Yamamoto, and played them across an elaborate six-page spread. Josh and Benny, dressed in outfits from Ralph Lauren, Adam Kimmel, Brooks Brothers, and Paul Smith, were photographed on the fire escape of the loft whose rent is paid partially by freelance gigs.

There, in the pages of the Times Magazine, we see Josh, looking slightly bewildered in a black bow tie and brown Paul Smith suit. And there is Benny, in white suspenders and too-shiny shoes, arm tossed over Josh’s shoulder, a wide smile stretched beneath oversize eyeglasses. There, in the Times Magazine, are two of the hottest filmmakers in New York City, in outfits that retail for more than the cost of some of their best work.

Really, the vision was strange enough to appear, fleetingly, in one of the Safdie brothers’ films, where Charles Merzbacher would appreciate its whimsy and understand it to be a distancing device.

Inside the loft, the Safdies know they should get back to work, but they can’t stop talking, at the moment about influences on their films — Nikolai Gogol, Ernest Hemingway, and so on. The Safdies, he says, “I realized there was actually a film movement alive in America. And when I met Bujalski, it was like, hmmm, this guy is doing something interesting. He’s doing something that I’ve seen in some older films. We kept in touch, sending films back and forth. Then we made We’re Going to the Zoo, which for me really put us out there and showed the world the kind of movies we want to make. It was me finding the way I wanted to express myself.”

**CULT STATUS, STRANGE VISION**

The way the Safdies want to express themselves is not, despite their success with festivals, universally admired. Reviews have run hot and not so hot. Salon film critic Andrew O’Hehir awarded The Pleasure of Being Robbed honorable mention in his list of the ten best indie films of 2008. New York Times film critic Laura Kern called the same film “a technically deficient bore with little on its agenda.”

That less-than-enthusiastic opinion, however, did not dissuade the fashion editors at the New York Times Magazine from exploiting another asset that the Safdies enjoy: the large-caliber cult status of hot indie filmmakers. In August, the magazine dolled up several of the Bucketeers in clothes by the likes of Yves Saint Laurent and Yohji Yamamoto, and played them across an elaborate six-page spread. Josh and Benny, dressed in outfits from Ralph Lauren, Adam Kimmel, Brooks Brothers, and Paul Smith, were photographed on the fire escape of the loft whose rent is paid partially by freelance gigs.

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Inside the loft, the Safdies know they should get back to work, but they can’t stop talking, at the moment about influences on their films — Nikolai Gogol, Ernest Hemingway, and so many still photographers they can hardly begin to name them. They have never had much trouble figuring out what they like, and they will have no trouble at all, says Josh, figuring out success.

“Success,” he says, “is not having a day job.”

Benny looks out the window past the empty fire escape where he last wore white suspenders and nods in agreement.
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Benny Safdie