
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. ¶ “What is imagination?” asks Josh, citing one puzzle presented in their short film *Yeah, Get on My Shoulders*. “Why does imagination exist? Why do lies exist?” ¶ 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,

Extraordinary films about ordinary
lives propel the Safdie brothers
from COM to Cannes | BY ART JAHNKE





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.

Werner Herzog, Spike Lee, and Sofia Coppola. *The Acquaintances of a Lonely John*, a short film written by Benny Safdie, was also shown at the Directors' Fortnight.

In fact, the Cannes coup capped a streak of festival successes that started three years ago at BU, when Josh's short film *We're Going to the Zoo* — the story of a brother and sister who pick up a hitchhiker on their way to the zoo — took top honors at the 2006 Redstone Film Festival. The event, which is sponsored by Viacom CEO Sumner Redstone (HON.'94), showcases work by graduate and undergraduate Boston University students. Since then, Josh's twenty-one-minute *The Back of Her Head*, which was made for an advanced film production course at BU, was one of seventy-three short films chosen from more than 2,000 submissions to the Slamdance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, and *The Pleasure of Being Robbed*, which was recently made available on IFC's Festival Direct cable-TV platform, also screened at South by Southwest in Austin, Texas.

BENDING THE RULES A LITTLE

Sam Lisenco 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. Lisenco 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," says Josh, 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



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were writers,” he says, “you would call it a voice.”

“To the extent that I was a teacher,” recalls Merzbacher, “it was really just my job to let them run with their ideas. They were all working on multiple projects all the time. And they were always talking to everyone about their films. They were very open to listening to other people — a faculty member, a student, a custodian in the hall. It didn’t matter. They’d be up for it.”

Merzbacher attributes much of the Safdies’ enthusiasm to their conviction, unusual among students, that they could make a film about anything.

“They had been making movies of one sort or another long before they got to BU,” he says. “Their father was a compulsive video guy, and when they were kids they took the camera from him and started making movies.

WEB EXTRA
Watch an excerpt from *Buttons* at www.bu.edu/bostonia.

They understood that films didn’t have to be these lofty epic undertakings. Films could be part of their lives.”

In fact, the Safdies made some very good films about some very ordinary parts of their lives. Slamdance Festival contender *The Back of Her Head*, for instance, was inspired by the late-night rantings of someone in the street below Josh’s Boylston Street apartment when he was a student at BU. Leaning out his window to see what all the commotion was about, he noticed a neighbor in an apartment below doing the same thing.

“I couldn’t see his face,” recalls Josh, “but it was an amazing moment. We were both quietly observing this person for, like, a minute and a half. It made me see this weird relationship that doesn’t normally exist between people.”

And then the questions started coming: what if the neighbor had been a woman? And what if he fell in love with her — or rather, with the back of her head, because that’s all he ever saw when there was a commotion in the alley?

“I became more obsessed with what was going on outside my apartment than what was going on inside,” he says. “And I started imagining a lot of things

that could happen with four people living above one another.”

“All of our films tend to come from things we witness rather than from conventions of film,” he says. “At the very least, they are a hybrid of things you witness and things you wish you’d witnessed. For me, it’s the idea that certain things resonate. I’ll come back with something I’ve shot and I’ll say to Benny, ‘Check this out. This is what I just saw.’ And it will be a guy on the subway who’s singing to a woman next to him. Alex and Benny and I collected all these very short pieces and put them in a project called *Buttons*. It’s 170 movies in forty-five minutes — all observations. The longest one is probably a minute and the shortest ones are three or four seconds.”

Buttons, says Josh, was recently chosen as a centerpiece for the Disposable Film Festival, a traveling show of short films made on nonprofessional devices such as one-time-use video cameras, cell phones, point-and-shoot cameras, and webcams.

At BU, the Safdies say, they found more than course work and camaraderie: they found models that inspired them. There was the work of Ronnie Bronstein, creator of the 2007 film *Frownland*. There were the films of Azazel Jacobs, who made *Momma’s Man*, and there was Andrew Bujalski, creator of *Funny Ha Ha* and *Mutual Appreciation*, who taught at BU for a semester.

“When I saw *Mutual Appreciation*,” says Josh, “I realized there was actually a film movement alive in America. And when I met Bujalski, it was like, hmm, 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.

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 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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