A Brave, Mad, Strange, Wonderful Job
COM alum makes movie trailers that hook millions

By Jessica Ullian

It starts with a sound: footsteps on a metal staircase, or the choke of an engine. A siren’s wail follows, or an eerie xylophone. Then a voice comes in with an ominous message. No more than 15 seconds has passed, but looking away is no longer an option.

That’s the goal for Adam Finkelstein (COM’09), an editor and a producer at the Los Angeles movie-trailer production studio Trailer Park: no looking away once his preview hits the big screen. And with a maximum of 2 minutes and 30 seconds to introduce characters, highlight key plot points, and hint at the drama and action to come, there isn’t a moment to spare in his effort to create the most compelling movie trailers in the business.

“You have 5 to 10 seconds to get people very, very interested, or you’re gonna lose them,” Finkelstein says. After eight years at Trailer Park, where he started as an intern in his final semester at the College of Communications, Finkelstein has become an expert in wringing the most from those seconds. He’s cut trailers for a range of films, from the Disney animated feature Brave to the much-anticipated Wonder Woman, racking up accolades along the way for his chilling, madness-tinged cuts for Mad Max: Fury Road and Stranger Things, the Netflix science-fiction series. With a strong affinity for music and sound design and a well-honed instinct for visual drama, Finkelstein works according to one long-held belief: there’s no better entertainment than a great trailer.

“I’ll never forget when I was watching a movie in the theater, and got up to go to the bathroom, and then the trailer for Matrix: Revolutions came on,” he says. “It stopped me in my tracks. I said, ‘I have to see what this is.’ For me, the best part of going to the movies was always the trailers.”

In the film industry, trailers play an unprecedented role in marketing, awards campaigns, and even editing and development. Studios premiere trailers at fan conventions or release them online, intent on racking up record-breaking views in the first 24 hours (top performers include 2017’s Beauty and the Beast, with 127.6 mil-
Finkelstein prefers to start with a piece of instrumental music or sound design, then build on it at key intervals. “Each time it needs to kick it up a notch, I add something new, like another layer of drums, or another instrument to keep it going,” he says. “It keeps the audience intrigued, and never lets it get boring.”

The Stranger Things first-season trailer showcases Finkelstein’s method: three seconds of static from a boom box—the series is set in the 1980s—segues into a slow, haunting medley of xylophone notes. At the six-second mark, bicycle spokes begin to spin and click. The first line of dialogue comes in at 11 seconds. By then, it’s clear that something’s coming, and it isn’t good.

“I loved doing that trailer, because it was such a unique property,” he says. “And Netflix, as a newer player in the game, wants to be big and bold and lets us take a lot of creative liberties.”

Another personal and critical favorite is his trailer for 2015’s Mad Max: Fury Road. It opens with the choking engine that comes to life with a full-throated roar. Bits of dialogue, played against stark silence, are punctuated by muted explosions. Just before the one-minute mark, opera music begins.

“It was such a crazy film, I thought it would be cool to have crazy opera in the trailer,” Finkelstein says of the spot, which won three Clio Key Art Awards before release, for film marketing, plus a coveted Golden Trailer award—the equivalent of an Oscar among the trailer studios. “At the time it felt risky, but the client loved it, and it ended up being really dynamic, rhythmic, and unique.”

Unique can be tough to achieve: editors have to develop a bit of a formula to be expedient, since turnaround time is often only a few days. At the same time, “what editors do is try to break that formula and come up with something new,” Finkelstein says. “Clients are always asking us for a breakthrough, but there is a formula you go through before you figure out how to manipulate the work.”

Finkelstein learned the basics of trailer making when he was hired out of his internship as a nighttime assistant editor, working from 6 p.m. to 2 a.m., and in his spare time watching every trailer the company produced. Learning the inner workings of sound design, he says, was the most intimidating part. “What you don’t see is that there are usually about 40 different sound effects layered on top of everything you watch,” he says. After many efforts at mimicry, he began crafting his own work.

Now he works on two to three new trailers at a time, juggling pitches for new clients with edits for approved projects. For security reasons, none of the work ever leaves the studio, so 10-hour days are typical, and 12-hour stretches aren’t out of the question. Since his early days at the studio, he’s become adept at wrangling a wide variety of projects—Brave, for example, was an animated feature, so instead of working with film clips, Finkelstein had to determine the director’s theme from storyboards, and use them to present his ideas to the client.

Despite the rising prominence of theatrical trailers, Finkelstein says his work hasn’t changed much since he started out, apart from some upgrades in software—other departments create the social media and viral-marketing cuts, allowing him to focus on the kind of 2-minute-30-second narrative that first caught his attention all those years ago.

Someday, he says, he might shift into producing, or even open his own studio, but there’s no question what kind of work he’ll create. “Trailers are my passion, and always have been,” he says. “It’s the best part of the movie.”