

Our Town

[snip] **Not-so-intelligent design.** “Would an intelligent designer create millions of species and then make them go extinct, only to replace them with other species, repeating this process over and over again?” asks the University of Chicago’s Jerry Coyne in the *New Republic*. “Would an intelligent designer produce ani-

mals having a mixture of mammalian and reptilian traits, at exactly the time when reptiles are thought to have been evolving into mammals? Why did the designer give tiny, non-functional wings to kiwi birds? Or useless eyes to cave animals?” —**Harold Henderson** | hhenderson@chicagoreader.com

Up and Comers

Naked Truth

Joe Swanberg’s first feature takes a long, embarrassing look at postcollegiate sex.

By Ryan Hubbard

In the summer of 2003 Joe Swanberg was just another floundering college graduate. He had no job and no savings, and he was living with his parents in Naperville. Many of his friends were moving to Los Angeles and New York, but he had a girlfriend he didn’t want to be away from. Though close to his family, he worried about “getting stuck,” about not “breaking in.” He promised himself that by the fall he’d move into Chicago, even if he had to work at McDonald’s.

Within a year and a half, he was premiering his first feature-length movie at the South by Southwest film festival. Since then he’s taken the picture, *Kissing on the Mouth*, to Montreal’s World Film Festival, and this week it’s featured in the Chicago International Film Festival (complete schedule, Section 2).

South by Southwest isn’t Sundance, Montreal isn’t Toronto, and Chicago isn’t New York, but Swanberg’s hat trick is still impressive—at each of the three festivals, he says he was the youngest filmmaker in the house and *Kissing on the Mouth* was the lowest-budget production on the roster. The two studio movies that open and close the Chicago festival, Cameron Crowe’s *Elizabethtown* and the Nicolas Cage vehicle *The Weatherman*, cost \$57 million and \$35 million respectively. *Kissing on the Mouth*, shot on digital video, cost less than \$2,000. Besides Swanberg, the cast and crew consist of his girlfriend, Kris Williams, their Southern Illinois classmate Kate Winterich, and his high school buddy Kevin Pittman. (One other actress appears in the film briefly.)

The story is about a young woman (Winterich) who’s trying to salvage a friendship-with-benefits with an ex (Pittman) and her roommate (Swanberg), whose repressed sexual desire for her is channeled into an audio project. This consists of interviews with other twentysomethings



Joe Swanberg

who talk openly about breakups, family anxieties, and other issues germane to the main characters’ lives. Swanberg says these interviews are “genuine”—real people talking about real life—and in a strange but fruitful hybrid of documentary and narrative techniques, they serve as the “score” for several scenes. (Swanberg says he borrowed the idea from a Super-8 short Williams made in college.)

Festival screenings have been well attended, and the movie has gotten a fair bit of press attention for such a low-budget entry. Reviewers and bloggers talk about the film’s refreshingly unflattering take on nudity and sex—Pittman rolls on a condom, Winterich scrutinizes her body in a mirror, Swanberg masturbates (and ejaculates) in the shower, Williams trims her pubic hair while seated backward on the toilet—and its equally intimate images of mundane details like crumpling clothes and spongy paint rollers, the indelicate frying of eggs and the lazy applica-

tion of deodorant.

To Swanberg’s chagrin, observers have been quick to reference the un-Hollywood-like sex of other recent indie films. “I’m sick of getting compared to films like [Michael Winterbottom’s] *9 Songs* and [Larry Clark and Harmony Korine’s] *Ken Park*,” he says. “It’s really telling of the state of cinema when three very different films continue to be compared simply because they all feature some degree of real sex.”

Swanberg was born in Detroit but moved around a lot as a kid because his father works for a military contractor. By the time his family settled in Naperville they’d lived in eight states and on one Pacific island. He’s six-foot-three, and his earliest ambition was to play in the NBA. “In my freshman year of high school,” he says, “I saw *Raising Arizona* . . . and making movies is all I’ve ever wanted to do since.”

He does much more, though. He plays the One Man Jam guitar—the

Fender Stratocaster of Toys “R” Us—in a duo called the Electronic Toys Band. He maintains four Web sites: filmbrats.com (movie reviews, mostly by a friend, some by him), kissingonthemouth.com (with making-of journals and tips on navigating the festivals), lolthemovie.com (showcasing his nearly finished second feature, about the technology-influenced love lives of three men), and joeswanberg.com. He doesn’t drink and still obeys his mother—there’s a haircut scene in *KOTM* because his mother asked him to get one before he came home for Easter. (Yet he’s made a film that will likely earn an NC-17 if it’s rated at all.)

In 2003 Swanberg and Williams both got jobs with the Chicago film festival—he was a travel coordinator, she still runs the Future Filmmakers program. They came to Chicago that August and spent the fall engrossed in one long conversation about what they thought was missing from the “landscape of mainstream and inde-

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[snip] “**The economic recovery is not reaching the Chicagoans who need it most,**” states a report by the Illinois Poverty Summit, citing census figures on Chicago’s poverty rate—17.2 percent in 2000 and 21.1 percent in 2004. “Programs such as Food Stamps are needed by an increasing number of people.” —HH

pendent cinema.” She hated it when a woman sat up in bed with a sheet over her chest. He couldn’t figure out why movies seemed afraid to show a man masturbating. And neither was sure where the condoms were in all those steamy sex scenes. “We didn’t start out saying, ‘Hey, let’s make a graphic sex movie,’” Swanberg explains. “The question was, ‘Why aren’t there films that deal seriously with these sexual issues?’”

In December Swanberg pitched Winterich. “I can’t pay you. It’s going to involve nudity. It’s going to be emotionally difficult. I don’t know how it will end because I have no script. I can’t even guarantee that I will finish it or that it will go anywhere if I do finish it.”

The following March the first audio interview took place, and Pittman came aboard (he’d studied cinematography at Columbia College), though not before he cautioned Swanberg, “You know, a lot of movies about people our age are bullshit.” Now all they needed was a script. Swanberg relied heavily on the others to improvise their own dialogue and steer the behavior of their characters. He offered prompts like “Ellen and Laura sit on bed and talk about things girls would talk about.” The more they shot the more comfortable they became with one another, but they were all tight-lipped with family and friends about what they’d been up to in their spare time. By spring

they needed some feedback. So in April the group took 30 minutes of edited footage down to Carbondale for a “work in progress” screening. Not even a year out of school, they were nervous about exposing themselves (literally) to so many old friends. But the reaction of the small crowd of mostly undergrad film majors overwhelmed them. “For the first time,” Swanberg says, “there was a public response that said, ‘This is unique and exciting. You’ve gotta keep going.’”

Shooting wrapped up in July, but Swanberg still had a lot to do, editing the film and marketing it. Enter Dan Brown, an Austin-based filmmaker. While perusing avary.com, a filmmaking-advice site, Brown

came across a ten-second clip that caught his eye. “I’m friends with the film programmer of South by Southwest,” he informed the clip’s creator. “Can you send me a DVD of the full-length feature?” Swanberg had gone to the site seeking criticism from other filmmakers; when he heard from Brown he was “ecstatic.”

In late October the DVD was mailed to Texas. Brown handed it to his friend at SXSW, Matt Dentler. The waiting began. “Several times a day I’m checking my e-mail,” Swanberg remembers, “just dreading opening my in-box.” Given *KOTM*’s commercial unviability, this figured to be his only decent shot at any exposure. A week went by. Still

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Our Town

[snip] **The more you read, the less you know.** Media reports overstate the amounts of campaign contributions and emphasize corporate contributions and soft money over the more prevalent individual contributions and hard money, report MIT political scientists in a recent issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly*. “These biases are

reflected in public perceptions,” they write. “Survey respondents overstate the amount of money raised and the share from different groups by roughly the amount found in newspapers, and better-educated people (those most likely to read newspapers) showed the greatest discrepancy between their beliefs and the facts.” —HH



Kevin Pittman and Kate Winterich in *Kissing on the Mouth*

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nothing. Is this normal? Swanberg asked Brown, who reported that Dentler’s TV had broken.
Dentler’s name finally appeared in Swanberg’s in-box: “Would you consider SXSW?” Swanberg freaked out again. “I was like, ‘Holy shit, what does that mean? Is that an official invitation?’” He called Kris. She said it was a good sign. The Thanksgiving break prolonged his agony as he waited for Matt’s response to his unqualified yes. When it came he immediately called Kris.
“We’re in!”
With SXSW’s announcement of its 2005 lineup, which included *KOTM*’s world premiere (a condition

of Dentler’s acceptance of the movie), unsolicited e-mails started trickling in from reps and sales agents gauging *KOTM*’s prospects. Most turned away after hearing the synopsis and Swanberg’s speech: “You should know right away that it wasn’t made in New York or LA. It has no famous actors. It was shot on handheld digital video. Graphic sexual content will make it impossible to sell to TV or Blockbuster. And I’m not willing to edit it down to an R.”
One guy kept listening. Shortly after SXSW, Chris Pizzo of Washington Square Films, which specializes in independent film sales, signed a contract with Swanberg to become *KOTM*’s sales agent. Pizzo

has been marketing *KOTM* to dozens of festivals, some overseas.
A good showing at CIFF may encourage quicker responses from other festivals. After those, Swanberg hopes, the movie will get a life of its own with a distributor. *KOTM* remains a tough sell, and he and his crew are warming to the idea of a straight-to-DVD release with an art house distributor like TLA Releasing (*Ma Mere*) or Tartan Films (*9 Songs*, ironically enough).
“There are a million filmmakers just like me,” Swanberg says, “so my only hope is to be a little bit smarter and little bit more creative and hope to stand out from the pack. It’s hard to tell if I’ll be able to do that.” ■

Things People Believe

She Talks to Angels

They like soft music, they can help you find parking, and they’ll never refer to you as “dude.”

By Lori Fradkin
In preschool I had an imaginary friend named Kim. She was a character in *The Care Bears Movie*, and though I’d outgrown her by the time I started elementary school, people tease me about her to this day. But recently I received some unexpected news: Kim could have been an angel.
“I’d like to see more parents be open to that, instead of saying, ‘That’s your imaginary friend,’” says Cecily Channer, a former event planner who teaches classes on angels in and around Chicago. “It wasn’t easy for me, coming from a corporate environment, to let people know about this side of me. It’s not like you can come in on Monday morning and tell the boss, ‘Oh, all these angels visited me over the weekend.’”
Channer says she first came in contact with the spiritual realm a few months after 9/11, when she awoke to find a colorful sparkling orb with white wings hovering beside her bed. “This energy burst open, and I saw hundreds and hundreds of angels smiling down on me,” she says. Two days later, she thought she felt a muscle spasm in her toe and looked down to find another angel perched by her foot: “It was surprising when it happened, but very calming and beautiful.”
After these experiences Channer attended a reading by Doreen Virtue, continued on page 21

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