

REEL CHICAGO

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Tim Horsburgh

“Stranger than Fiction” Writer Zach Helm Doesn’t Feel a Screenwriter Has to Move to L.A. to Work

Screenwriter, director, playwright and DePaul University Theatre School alum Zach Helm (*Stranger than Fiction*, *Mr. Magorium’s Wonder Emporium*) returned to Chicago to be honored at the School’s recent 2008 Awards for Excellence in the Arts.

Native Californian Helm, who came to Chicago to attend the Theatre School at 17 and left at 23, talks to the Reel’s Tim Horsburgh.

Did you specify that ‘Stranger Than Fiction’ had to be filmed in Chicago? How instrumental were you in that decision?

Actually, I didn’t intend to set it in Chicago, but when director Marc Forster, producer Lyndsay Doran and I talked about where could we film... I mentioned Chicago. We talked a lot about the architecture and how there are really great actors here.

It’s interesting; in movies you only think about stars in a way; you don’t think about people who can come in and do one scene and those people are vital. You want to go some place that has great actors, and Chicago is one of those places. I wanted to shoot ‘Mr. Magorium’s Wonder Emporium’ here but it was going to prove too difficult functionally for us.

In what way was it difficult?

[More so] about the economy of the situation and the proximity, oddly enough, of our production designer and the rest of our crew.

We had a British cinematographer, the production designer and the costume designer were based out of New York. It was easier and quicker for those people to work in Toronto.

Was there any studio opposition to shooting in Chicago for “Stranger Than Fiction?”

I think they [Mandate pictures] were really happy to shoot it in Chicago. People look at films as a one-off, each one has its own specific need.

I think that between the architecture, the great crews, the ability to cast the day part, if you will, I think that made Chicago a viable choice. Mark ultimately made the decision, and I think he made the right one.

Both “Stranger than Fiction” and “Mr. Magorium” feature a character, who is kind of frustrated as an artist, and struggling. Was writing about these characters a cathartic process?

[Laughs] I think it was definitely a cathartic process. I like the idea of internal struggle, of not being able to fulfill one’s potential.

There’s such a great canvas to be played with when you’re talking about an artist. Everyone goes through that in their life, not just artists, but I think its fun to dramatize it that way.

What are some of the new things you’re working on?

This play, “Good Canary,” which has been running for about five months in Paris, and is now going on tour in France.

It was directed by John Malkovich, from Steppenwolf. A good old Chicago boy, as well.

We have to figure out where it goes next. I wanted to adapt it into French, and it worked very well in Paris. I think I want to re-write it ... now that I am slowly coming out of the funk that was “Mr. Magorium.”

Was “Magorium” more than you expected?

It was much more than I expected. It was a BEAR! And for a first film, to do a \$40 million kids’ movie was for me, admittedly, too much too handle, and it was frustrating at times.

How did it turn out for you?

The movie was not exactly everything that I wanted it to be. That’s putting it lightly. But now I am in a place, fortunately, through directing that movie and through “Stranger than Fiction” where I can kind of do whatever I want.

What are you focusing on now?

More on the plays, and slowly matriculating this theatre company in L.A. We’re sort of feeling around to see if we can do it.

I’m trying to write things that are bold, and aggressive, and will push movies forward a little bit. We’ll see how it goes.

You’re writing some new screenplays?

I work on several at a time. I find I can’t tell if I’m the most disciplined writer I know, or the least disciplined writer.

I don't set time for myself to write, or say "this is the project I'm writing." Yet I'm constantly writing on multiple projects, and I intend to be remarkably prolific.

You do it like surfing the channels?

I do. Maybe that it. That's exactly it. You know, it's as if I have been given a new spaceship, I have been given the Millennium Falcon, if you will.

I have gun turrets, and missiles, and this amazing engine, and all of these things. I wind up playing with everything until there's one thing that demands my attention. So I'm waiting for that to happen.

Is one of those projects "The DisAssociate?"

We're still trying to figure that out. It is an incredibly weird script. And that script probably went out about six months after "Being John Malkovich," and "Being John Malkovich" changed everything.

I've heard all the comparisons, and they please me no end, but we're in a different place now. Even Charlie [Kaufman] is in a different place now, and making movies. We don't want to go back to that sort of approach.

Now it's about getting the script so that it works now, so that the script is functional now, and it doesn't just seem like I was trying to do something that was done better by someone else six years ago.

But "Magorium," you wrote that about 10, 12 years ago, and "Stranger Than Fiction" also.

[Laughs] I'm taking a long time.

With the Wachowskis opening a studio and big movies filming here, would you say this is a place where students can stay after they graduate?

That is a really great question. I'm interested to see how Chicago changes, and how much it magnetizes as far as the work from Hollywood is concerned, because the work is flowing freely now.

The great thing about Chicago is that it offers a lot as far as locations are concerned. And now, there will be a phenomenal Wachowski, state-of-the-art studio to build sets in as well. So that will have a large effect.

If there's a tax break that goes along with that, there will probably be a flood of work that comes here.

Or do you still have to move to L.A.?

If you're a writer, you can sort of work from everywhere, and if your movie is going to wind up being shot in Connecticut, or Shreveport, or New Mexico, then you might as well write from Chicago at that point.

There's no real need to move to LA. Obviously there's a lot of work there, a lot of work for actors, so that's a good draw.

When we will we hear from you next?

I'm hoping to have two or three things finished by June. But nothing will be released for a while, so people will have a rest from me for at least a year-and-a-half I think.