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WFF2008: Interview with "Madison" director Brent Notbohm and actor Jim DeVita

Submitted by [Katjusa Cisar](#) on Wed, 2008-04-02 10:30. [Arts](#) | [Film](#) | [WisFilmFest2008](#)



One of the locally made films at the [Wisconsin Film Festival](#) this year is "Madison," a feature-length movie about the struggles a war correspondent faces after he returns from Iraq to Madison. It was shot last winter in Madison under the direction of Brent Notbohm, a 38-year-old Spring Green-native who teaches Communications at U.W.-Superior.

Lead actor Jim DeVita (who plays the journalist) is a 46-year-old Long Island-native whose tongue slips out an "ideer" instead of "idea" once in a while. He attended UW-Milwaukee and has been acting in the Madison area for more than 25 years. He's best known for his work at American Player's Theatre in Spring Green.

The film was shot in 13 frenzied days and includes many scenes shot on State Street, at the Plaza Tavern and on the Memorial Union terrace. DeVita remembers the crew desperately bribing ice fisherman with beer one cold day before a shoot on the terrace because it was the only way to clear Lake Mendota of visual obstructions.

Notbohm and DeVita spoke recently (Notbohm by phone, DeVita in person) about their experiences working on "Madison."

Where did the idea for the movie come from?

Brent Notbohm: "Madison" is my brainchild. I had wanted to make a film about war. It originated (four years ago) in my politics, in that feeling of helplessness – to sit by and watch helplessly as these things unraveled in Iraq. It's a sign of the hopeless situation that I could pick up the idea three years later (and it would still be relevant). It was at a time when people wanted to do something. Many people worked on the film because they believed in what it had to say – not for the paycheck but because they wanted to help you tell a story.

What was it like to work on a film that mirrors current events?

Jim Devita: Working with current events was a new experience for me. Most of my work has been in classical theatre, working with very old playwrights. When you're doing something like this, everywhere you look it seems to be in your face: you open the newspaper, you look at the TV. Whatever you do, it seems to be there. There's plenty of fuel every day when you go in. I enjoyed it.

Brent Notbohm: To be honest, it's a way that I can process things that really pissed me off. It was a truly amazing process. It was a labor of love.

What kind of research did you do to prepare for the film?

Jim Devita: I read Anthony Shadid's book "Night Draws Near" – he's a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. Brent Notbohm would send me little magazine articles and stuff from journalists who had been over there, their point of view. I didn't do as much research as I would usually do. This all happened very quick when I got the job. We had a window of two weeks to shoot the film, so a lot of it was just what was right there in the script. A 13-day shoot is unheard of -- it was a very amazingly intense period in my life. You ate, breathed and lived that film.

Brent Notbohm: I read a bunch of books by journalists, and have students who are veterans. "Night Draws Near" was influential. It's a book about Iraqis, not Americans. (When we see the news here) we see things through the lens of American journalists. Jim's character tries to do reporting through the lens of Iraqis.

Why Madison? Why not Cincinnati or Denver or Long Island?

Brent Notbohm: I have a very special feeling about Madison. A lot of my early political awakening happened in Madison. It's my favorite place in the world. Where would (the lead character) go to try to rediscover his humanity? The natural progression is to go to Madison.

Jim DeVita: I'm not even sure that he knows why he's coming back to Madison. He went to school for journalism here. I think one of the reasons he came back here is that (college) was a time in his life when he was being idealistic and had hope of

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possibility. He was in those classes, feeling idealistic. It's something we all go through. Then he comes face to face with these horrors, and things don't compute anymore for him. He can't write what he's seeing. He wanted to communicate that to his readers, but how can you write that? You can, but there's still an element of detachment until you see it and you're there. We can talk about Iraq all we want, I can read The New York Times every day, but to actually go there and see it alters you. And not always for the good. This is a man who has been psychologically scarred. He's seen horrible things over there. He comes back to the United States, and the world doesn't work anymore. He can't just sit here and talk like we are – there are 4000 people dead in Iraq. We're frustrated about it or irate, but he just breaks. He's ill, he's damaged goods.

What are some of the potential pitfalls of making a film about current events that has a strong political message? How do you avoid those pitfalls?

Jim DeVita: The biggest pitfall is if it sounds like a piece of activism or if you hear the message too strongly. Obviously we don't want to shy away from that, but if it's too strong, it just hits you over the head. We don't just want to preach to the converted, we'd love to at least provoke thought and questions and show that it's not all black and white, there is gray.

What's an example?

Jim DeVita: There were thoughts and ideas about freedom and democracy. You can talk about them and they can sound so hokey. Say if we had some line, "Everyone has the right to be free." It's better if you can craft that some way to have a real person talking about how he's not allowed to write what he wants, "they took my books away," etc. We're still talking about freedom but we're not saying "we should all be free," we're talking about a man who has lost his ability to communicate and write, his freedom of expression. It's the old adage of show don't tell. Act it out, don't describe it. Let's see a man wrestling with his invasion of privacy; don't have him say, "We deserve the right to privacy."

So, do you have any future film projects lined up?

Jim DeVita: I don't at the moment, but we're in conversation right now, Brent Notbohm, Nick Langholff (the producer) and I. We're trying to find the right script, the right time – and really, the most important thing for us is something we believe in. All good writing, good film comes out of a sense of something that you really believe in.

What was it like to film downtown and in the Plaza?

Jim DeVita: Well, the Plaza was a hoot because of course I, in my younger days, spent many a night in the Plaza. My buddy Brian is in the film, and he and I have shot pool in there. He's my best friend -- we've been friends for 25 years. He's a much better pool player than I and in the film I get to be a really good pool player. It was really kind of odd going back in there. We only remember it from, like, one-thirty in the morning, and getting chased out. The stuff hanging around the bar and drinking...we felt very at home that first night (filming) in the Plaza. That, and waiting for snow. We had all these exterior shots that had to be done in snow. I don't know if you remember last year, but we didn't get snow forever. And we had these really important shots, and one was a huge crane shot, which is basically a pulling-up shot on me in an alley. It's very expensive to get that crane and all the crew. I remember Nick Langholff was working his magic, trying to get snow for us and trying to get people to truck-load in snow. There was some event happening around the Capitol where they had fake or man-made snow, and we were trying to figure out how we could get it as they were taking it away. So, we were all nervous about this snow. Then the day we were supposed to start shooting the snow scenes, it started snowing and didn't stop for four days. We got that in by the skin of our teeth.

Brent Notbohm: It was a real thrill to have the opportunity to film places I knew as a kid. There's something very visually moving about the frozen lake and the upside down terrace chairs. It's sign of the times.

"Madison" plays this Saturday at 8:30 p.m. at the Chazen Museum of Art (800 University Avenue). It starts a commercial run at the Sundance Theatres on April 25.

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