

REEL TALK

BY BLAKE COLE

Tom Heller, C'95, has loved movies ever since he was a kid. Childhood classics like *E.T.* eventually gave way to science fiction, like *Back to the Future*, before Heller graduated to the likes of *Pulp Fiction*. What was once a childhood fascination has turned into a successful career as a producer at Everest Entertainment, a New York-based film finance and production company. With a resume boasting award-winning, critically acclaimed movies like *Precious*, *127 Hours*, *Mud*, *Mother and Child*, and *Win Win*, and more projects on the way, Heller isn't slowing down any time soon.

Q: Tell me about your time at Penn.

Penn was formative in how it impacted my career trajectory. I was an English major, and my literature classes expanded my love for great storytelling and honed my ability to identify and appreciate compelling narratives. My courses with [Kelly Family Professor] Al Filreis, in particular, stand out as among the most interesting and satisfying. I also took some film-specific classes, like "Film Theory and Screenwriting," and while at the University, I worked on my first film set as an intern on the Terry Gilliam movie *Twelve Monkeys*.

Q: How does one go about entering the film production business?

There was no one "big break," but a number of experiences had a large influence on what I am doing now. Working at a talent agency right after Penn helped me to develop the

skills to spot talent, recognize good stories, and most importantly, trust my instincts about filmmakers and their material. The time I spent at Miramax Films gave me invaluable insight into many aspects of the filmmaking process: development, production, business affairs, marketing, publicity, and distribution. Producing encompasses a lot of different roles. My career has been an ongoing process of learning and developing new skills.

Q: How do you go about selecting the movies you produce?

They've each come together in different ways, but persistence, research, luck, and a willingness to take risks all played a role in their conception. I look for stories that are unique, compelling, and possibly challenging, that can be told in an entertaining way. Good stories can come from anywhere, and I try to listen to my gut when I assess

material. It can be a very long process to get a movie made, so it is important that I am extremely passionate (almost to the point of being obsessed) about something before I get involved.

Q: Several of the films you've produced have been recognized by the Academy. How important is it to the film's success in the long run?

My goals for each film are that it gets seen by as wide an audience as possible and that it does well financially. Being honored by the Academy definitely brings attention and expands the profile of a film. Hopefully more people will want to see something if they know it has been nominated. On a personal level, it is nice to get validation from the Academy for my work and it's certainly fun to attend the Oscars. But as a film lover, I know that it is impossible to pick a "best film." I want each of my films

to be lasting, but I never set out to make an "awards movie" since it is impossible to predict what the Academy will go for in a particular year. The biggest reward for me is hearing how one of my films has affected, inspired, or impacted someone. I'm always amazed by the power of movies to inspire and move people emotionally, and I love playing a role in that process.

Q: Is there a hands-on aspect to producing? If so, do you have any anecdotes about time on a set, or interactions with an actor, writer, or director?

Producing is extremely hands-on, as I like to be involved in a project through the entire process, from its conception to its release in theaters. I've loved the experiences I've had on set, whether it was on the Mississippi River, a tenement in Spanish Harlem, an Indian reservation in New Mexico, or a high school gym in Long

Island. The hours during production can be long, but by the end, the cast and crew feel like a family. It is extremely fulfilling when everyone is working together well as a team and there is the sense of camaraderie that we are creating something special. Shooting *Precious* in Harlem in the middle of the winter was a particularly challenging shoot, but overall, it was one of the most satisfying experiences that I've had as a producer. I feel extremely lucky to have worked with directors and actors that I admire, filmmakers like Lee Daniels, Rodrigo Garcia, Danny Boyle, Tom McCarthy, and Jeff Nichols; and actors like Matthew McConaughey, Samuel L. Jackson, James Franco, Naomi Watts, Paul Giamatti, and Gabourey

Sidibe. It is amazing working with creative and passionate people and helping them realize their vision.

Q: What upcoming projects are you involved in?

My next film is *Foxcatcher*, which will be released in 2014. It is a fascinating and bizarre true crime story about the murder of Olympic athlete Dave Schultz by an eccentric multi-millionaire named John du Pont. It is a project that is very close to my heart, as I have been working on it for over 10 years. The director is Bennett Miller, who directed *Capote* and *Moneyball*, and it stars Channing Tatum, Steve Carell, and Mark Ruffalo. I am very excited to share it with audiences next year.



▲ Heller supports *Precious* on the red carpet at the 2010 Oscars.

On the set of *Win Win*, with director Tom McCarthy (right). ▼

