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Texas Independence

Happy, Texas creators talk about breakthrough

Happy, Texas is one of the largest success stories of the year for independent filmmaking (*Blair Witch* notwithstanding). After debuting at the Sundance Film Festival, rights to this \$1.7 million movie were snapped up by Miramax Films. The deal was reported to be worth at least \$2.5 million and a share of the profits, possibly up to \$10 million outright. The film is slated for a limited release starting Oct. 8, 1999 and will show in Houston. *The Battalion* spoke with Mark Illsley, director, co-writer and producer of the film and Ed Stone, writer and producer, and asked them a few questions.

BATT Your film stands out at a time when many independent films are beginning to look alike. Why is that?

Ed Stone: We are not really your basic independent film. We're not kind of dark and gritty and looking at the underbelly of American society. We are really more of a mainstream film hiding out in independent clothing.

BATT Were you nervous about calling all the shots during the production, being a first-time feature film director?

Mark Illsley: I've worked on films before. I was a second unit director so I am pretty comfortable around the set. On the other hand, this is my first feature as a director. But I wasn't as nervous as you would think and I wondered why. I finally decided it was because I hired a really good crew, and I let them do their job.

BATT Did it make you feel more at ease when you assembled the cast?

Mark Illsley: I've always said that 50 percent of this movie is the script, 40 percent of this movie are the actors, brilliant actors, and everything else that we do is just the last 10 percent, including the directing, including everything else, it is just 10 percent

of the movie. People go, 'Wow you really underplay those other things.' If you think about a boat, it only takes a little hole to sink it, so that last 10 percent is absolutely crucial to make the boat float. The boat is still made up of the script and the actors.

BATT What were the circumstances surrounding hiring William H. Macy?

Mark Illsley: The days our lives changed was the day Bill Macy said he wanted to do the movie. We didn't offer him the part. The part was actually written for a 300-pound man. Bill Macy's agent had gotten a hold of the script and read it and called us and asked if we would consider Bill Macy and our first response was, 'But he's so skinny.'

BATT What is it like trying to make a film in Hollywood?

Ed Stone: We're the most successful Hollywood failures ever because we completely failed to make a movie in Hollywood. We completely failed to find financing and set it up and get distribution and all that stuff. So we went [and] made it ourselves. We got good actors, made a good movie, we sold it and we're getting a lot of distribution. But we couldn't do any of that before the film. Getting a movie made is like a miracle. I am amazed any movie ever gets made. Really, it's like a house of cards.

BATT Why do you think that films where filmmakers risk everything generally seem to come out with so much heart?

Ed Stone: I think that one of the things about independent films is that they tend to take on more of the personality of the filmmakers themselves, because the studio and some business executive isn't telling you that you have to have this in the movie or you can't have a character say this.

I think when you watch a independent filmmaker you look at who that filmmaker

I think another level of the are talking about it kind of ness to it on top of what I call it cumulative. The spend with the people, the ery affects you. Things that come much funnier because the character.

BATT Are you going to work together soon?

Both: Definitely.

BATT How is your life now after of *Happy*?

Ed Stone: Well, we never had to be in the Texas A&M paper.

Illsley: It is amazing how you get accustomed to things. It's how long in your life you don't get being differently, and then how fast you can just take it. Going from living in a trailer to the Ritz, you think 'Oh, I'm realizing the being at the Ritz for the first time. No, by the end of that first week a were going, 'Hey, hey, hey champagne!' So I checked in the first screening.

Ed Stone: Two biggest changes movie is: it's easier to get work other thing is it's a lot easier to

Mark Illsley: When there's a for plication and you fill it out and point you have to fill out 'occu used to put down 'none' and no down 'film director, I figure I can more movies out of Hollywood they realize I really am an

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