

film

THE PRIZEFIGHTER

SCREENWRITER GEOFFREY FLETCHER PROVES THAT GOOD THINGS COME TO THOSE WHO STAY ON THEIR FEET

by Jason Hollander / GAL '07

At the end of a nearly hourlong phone interview with Geoffrey Fletcher (TSOA '99)—who became the first African-American screenwriter to win an Oscar last March for the film *Precious: Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire*—I note that we'd both referenced *Rocky* several times and ask whether he would be all right with me drawing some parallels when I write his story. "Certainly," he answers after digesting the question a bit. He adds: "We're not all prizefighters, but *Rocky* inspires us."

It would be a much easier analogy if Fletcher had been a Philly bruiser, resigned to think of himself, like *Rocky* did, as "just another bum from the neighborhood." That story line is pretty distant for

years in obscurity, Fletcher spent more than a decade pushing papers as an office temp by day and grinding away at his scripts each night. And like *Rocky*, who got an out-of-the-blue call about a heavy-weight title shot, Fletcher remembers picking up his phone in 2006 to hear director Lee Daniels talking about a new movie he was co-producing with Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry. Fletcher had sent him a copy of his award-winning NYU student film, *Magic Markers*, assuming "nothing would happen." But upon one viewing, Daniels was convinced that he'd found just the person to bring Sapphire's novel to the screen. "It seemed too quick," Fletcher says. "I'd heard no so many times, I didn't think he meant it. I hoped he did. So I ran out, got the book, and was crazy about it from page one."

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the New London, Connecticut, native, who is a product of Choate Rosemary Hall for high school, Harvard University for undergrad, and the Tisch School of the Arts graduate film program. But like *Rocky*, who labored at his craft for

And then Fletcher, like *Rocky*, made the most of his once-in-a-lifetime chance. The grim but poetic tale of *Precious*—chronicling the struggles of an impoverished, abused teen who finds a ray of light in a caring teacher—earned nearly

FLETCHER BECAME THE FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN TO WIN AN ACADEMY AWARD FOR SCREENWRITING.



\$50 million at the box office. And along with the Oscar, Fletcher's screenplay captured a Film Independent's Spirit Award, an NAACP Image Award, the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance, and a slew of nominations from awards ceremonies around the world. *Variety* called him one of "10 Screenwriters to Watch," and the film even earned an endorsement from former First Lady Barbara Bush. He is currently writing two new features—the girl power-themed

Violet and Daisy, which he will direct, and a film based on the 1971 riot at the prison in Attica, New York, to be directed by Doug Liman (*Swingers*, *The Bourne Identity*). It seems that, at 40, Geoffrey Fletcher has officially arrived.

The journey, however, started with Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull*, which Fletcher saw as a kid and which opened his eyes to the art form. "As a means of expression, I got a glimpse of what film could be," he recalls. He received a video

camera from his parents at 14 and, like the story of so many filmmakers, he was rarely caught without it. Years later he would apprentice under Scorsese (WSC '64, STEINHARDT '68, HON '92) and he studied at Tisch with Spike Lee (TSOA '82, HON '98). But anyone who "knows" Hollywood will tell you that a first-class education and A-list connections don't guarantee a thing. Fletcher had to do the work and, just as importantly, not lose faith. He spent

much of his twenties and thirties snagging data-entry stints to pay the bills, and in the midst of watching friends with stable jobs buy houses, he admits, "I wondered if I were, in my seemingly endless pursuit of this dream, missing out on life." But storytelling was his life; he knew nothing else could make him happy. In the end, it was the years of writing and rewriting, of pursuing agents, of hustling to make contacts and keep focused that helped him understand a character as different from himself as Precious. "I could relate to feeling like an outsider and underestimated and rejected," he explains.

While Fletcher has gotten slightly more comfortable hobnobbing with actors and directors he grew up admiring, he's still only a little more than two years removed from waiting in line outside a New York City comic book store to have Quentin Tarantino autograph a special-edition DVD of *Reservoir Dogs*. Back in March, Tarantino was also a nominee that night for Best Original Screenplay. And when Fletcher became the first African-American winner in the Best Adapted Screenplay category, he hoisted the statue in tribute to his predecessors and his family. "When my name was called, within that utterance, there were so many others," he says.

Now an adjunct screenwriting professor at both Columbia University and NYU, Fletcher often finds himself answering questions about how he finally broke through. "The advice I give is to constantly hone your craft and try every door into the industry," he explains. "It may not be the front door. It may be the basement door. And sometimes it takes all that a person has." But perhaps the best message he could have sent was that in his Oscar speech, which he delivered in his slow, soft cadence to an American TV audience of more than 41 million: "This is for everybody who works on a dream every day." ■



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documentary

DIARY OF A SOLDIER

A MARINE DOCUMENTS THE REAL LIFE OF THOSE SERVING IN IRAQ

by Kevin Fallon / CAS '09

"Here's the truth about being a Marine that you won't find on the local news," says First Lieutenant Michael Scotti (STERN '07) in the recent documentary film *Severe Clear*. "We're loud, we drink too much, fight too much, swear too much, and truth be told, our rifle is the only thing we think about more than sex." Scotti, as both narrator and cinematographer, offers an unusual firsthand portal into the lives of Marines fighting in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Shot using his handheld mini-DV cam, the film follows Scotti and his comrades from the barracks, where they binge drink and bond frat-boy style, to the streets of Iraq, where, in one scene, they're caught reeling at the sight

of a young girl whose brain has come out of her skull after being shot in the head.

The title *Severe Clear* comes from a term pilots use to describe a post-storm sky so pristine that visibility seems infinite—conditions famously present in New York City on the morning of September 11, 2001. However, these same conditions can also create the illusion of no horizon, dangerously blurring the sky and ocean, and the film shows how the "clarity" Scotti and his comrades project on the way to war gives way to confusion and unpredictability in the heat of battle. *The Hollywood Reporter* called the film a "visceral true-life portrait of the brutality and chaos of war," and it has earned acclaim from *The New York Times* and *Variety*, among others. It was an official selection at this

year's Salem Film Festival, where it took the Jury Prize, and the International Rome Film Festival, where it won Special Mention for Cinematic Excellence.

The documentary's power lies in its unique vantage—the soldier's eye view. As a forward observer responsible for calling in the coordinates of enemy artillery, Scotti

turned to New York in 2003, fresh off tours in both Afghanistan and Iraq, he went to the Tisch School of the Arts in search of an editor to make sense of the nearly 22 hours of video. He was referred to Kristian Fraga (TSOA '97) of Sirk Productions who, upon viewing it, changed everything. "He told me to screw the book,"

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was able to film action scenes without neglecting his duties. Initially, he'd intended to use the footage as a video diary for a memoir, finding it easier to record a quick 40 seconds here and there than scribble a few sentences. When he re-

Scotti recalls. "This is a movie."

Over the next few years, Scotti balanced the creation of the film with MBA classes at the Leonard N. Stern School of Business. He also founded the NYU Stern Military Veterans Club, which recruits



MICHAEL SCOTTI'S 22 HOURS OF FOOTAGE, RECORDED AS A VIDEO DIARY DURING OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM, WAS MADE INTO AN ACCLAIMED DOCUMENTARY.

MOVIE STILLS COURTESY SIRK PRODUCTIONS

veterans, helps with their transition into business school, and raises money for military families. After graduation, Scotti managed debt for distressed companies, but as *Severe Clear* gained traction—Grammy nominee Cliff Martinez (*Traffic*) agreed to compose a score and the film was set to debut at SXSW Film Festival in 2009—promoting the film became a full-time job. Since then it has enjoyed a limited release in the United States and been featured on CNN, NPR, and FoxNews.

Unlike most war flicks, where Hollywood actors play the soldiers, these characters are just boys—real boys. One scene in which a group of soldiers play football could be mistaken for a group of sophomores on the commons of some university—

were it not for the battleship that served as the playing field. In another moment, the viewer is with them when one hears “Incoming!”—before the screen goes black to the sounds of gunshots and screaming. But stolen conversations, where soldiers candidly resent their status as the “shitheads defending your freedom” or gossip about Jennifer Lopez, deliver perhaps more “reality” than any war story to date. “The poster-boy image of the Marine Corps is true—we have honor, we love our country, we’d die for anybody,” Scotti says. “But then you take the Marine off the poster, and this movie—that’s what happens.” ■

The Severe Clear DVD can be ordered at severeclear.wordpress.com.

CREDITS

SPOTLIGHT ON ALUMNI STAGE AND SCREEN STARS

At the 2010 Tony Awards, **CHRISTINE JONES** (TSOA '92) took home Best Scenic Design of a Musical for the Green Day rock opera *American Idiot*, while **ROBERT KAPLOWITZ** (TSOA '95) won for *Fela!* in Best Sound Design of a Musical. Fellow alum **DAN MOSES SCHREIER** (GAL '79) was also nominated in that category for both *A Little Night Music* and *Sondheim on Sondheim*, which won the Drama Desk Award as Outstanding Musical Revue... **ELENA SHADOW** (STEINHARDT '02) can be seen on Broadway alongside Kelsey Grammer in *La Cage aux Folles*, which scored the Tony for Best Revival of a Musical... **TOM WIRTSHAFTER** (STERN '79) was a co-producer on the record-breaking off-Broadway production of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, which closed last month as the longest-running staging of the play in its 72-year history... *The Sopranos* vet **TERENCE WINTER** (WSC '84) created HBO's new drama *Boardwalk Empire*, which centers around Prohibition-era Atlantic City and stars Steve Buscemi. **MARTIN SCORSESE** (WSC '64, STEINHARDT '68, HON '92) directed the pilot episode and is an executive producer... Fresh off of *Lost*, **DANIEL DAE KIM** (TSOA '96) returns to TV in CBS's remake of the classic *Hawaii Five-O*... **JASON RITTER** (TSOA '02) can be seen on NBC's cryptic conspiracy thriller *The Event*, while **REGINA HALL** (GSAS '95) plays an assistant D.A. on the network's spin-off *Law & Order: Los Angeles*... **CHERRY CHEVAPRAVATDUMRONG** (LAW '02) is a writer and co-producer on the animated comedy *Family Guy*, returning for its ninth season on Fox... **MAURA TIERNEY** (TSOA

'89) stars in the Jerry Bruckheimer-produced legal drama *The Whole Truth* on ABC. Other new shows on the alphabet network include *No Ordinary Family* with **JULIE BENZ** (TSOA '94) as the superpowered matriarch, and *Happy Endings*, a comedy about keeping a group of friends together after one couple breaks up, starring former *Saturday Night Live* cast member **CASEY WILSON** (TSOA '02)... **BARRY BLAUSTEIN** (WSC '76) directed the indie comedy *Peep World*, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival last month and stars **RAINN WILSON** (TSOA '89), **MICHAEL C. HALL** (TSOA '96), and Sarah Silverman as part of a dysfunctional family reunited for their father's 70th birthday... Composer **ALAN MENKEN** (ARTS '72, HON '00) wrote the music for next month's *Tangled*, Disney's 50th animated feature film, which reimagines the story of *Rapunzel*... **RYAN FLECK** (TSOA '00) co-wrote and co-directed the recent dramedy *It's Kind of a Funny Story*, starring Zach Galifianakis and Viola Davis... **STEVEN SCHNEIDER** (TSOA '02) is an executive producer on *Paranormal Activity 2*, the follow-up to last year's surprise horror hit, which will haunt theaters just in time for Halloween... **MORGAN SPURLOCK** (TSOA '94), **RACHEL GRADY** (GAL '94), and **CHRIS ROMANO** (TSOA '02) were among the team of directors behind *Freakonomics*, a documentary based on the best-selling economics book... **ARIEL SCHULMAN** (TSOA '04) directed the indie twist-ending documentary *Catfish*, which has been the subject of buzz since its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival.

—Renée Alfuso