

# Despite Shortness of Money, BU Grad Zak Lee Directs First Feature

by Kevin McCarthy

The trouble started when the grant that was going to make up much of the funding for Zak Lee's first feature film didn't pan out. Then their ambitious letter-writing campaign yielded a set of paper-cut hands and a run on stamps. Then the free lawyer down at the free lawyer association told him he and his fellow alums from BU's graduate film production program were nuts for wanting to shoot a feature film – maybe they should get into plastics.

The cards are rarely stacked in favor of the independent filmmaker who wants to shoot on film, with a reasonable budget, and in Boston. But Zak Lee and his friends and cohorts – from BU and their own production cooperative film group, Roadside Pictures – have somehow managed to keep the wolves at bay, the rent paid, and their sanity in relative check. Oh, and their first feature, called *Shortness of Breath*, is in the can.

Pre-production started in January 2003. Shooting started in September. Lee is currently editing the film – and cutting a trailer to try to pry money from that grant that fell through when the picture was just a gleam in the filmmaker's eye and a hole ready to be burned through his wallet.

The film is about a guy who fancies himself as a character right out of a Jean Luc Godard film – let's say, *Breathless* (get it?). Things happen, and he and his lady friend are forced on the run. The idea came in a burst of inspiration while Lee sat in a French New Wave class at BU.

With the help of his producer, Joanna Jefferson, and his co-producers, Nina Farouk and Derek Frank, *Shortness of Breath* became the perfect first full-length project for Roadside Pictures, which started as a loose collective when Lee, Jefferson, Farouk, Frank, and fellow classmates Jeff Stern, Pegeen Quinn, Keith Brown, Mike Fleisch, and Matt Payne (like Lee, all 2002 graduates), all hit the road to shoot their graduate thesis films in the summer of 2002.

Aside from planning to shoot *Shortness of Breath*, the collective sought to encourage the ever burgeoning / occasionally submerg-



Lead actor Beno Chapman sits in a diner in a scene from *Shortness of Breath*.



Matt Payne (left) consults with director Zak Lee (right). Rob Peyrebrune looks on.

Photos by Lydia Kuhn

ing Boston film scene through weekly open screenings in Cambridge. Despite the challenges of fundraising, the group is actively involved in supporting Mike Fleisch as he currently shoots his first feature film, *One Degree*, in locations as far flung as Boston, Brazil, and Greece.

To learn a little more about Zak Lee's first-time feature filmmaking efforts, we spoke to him by telephone, while he was on a holiday break from his current job teaching film production at Fitchburg State College.

## What made you want to shoot a feature film?

I think part of me just wanted to see if I could do it, you know? It's sort of what you're building yourself up for, I think. I don't think anyone wants to make short films forever. I think I counted fourteen short films I've made – or something like that. So I figured it was time to make a feature film.

## Did you feel emboldened by modeling your efforts after anyone in particular?

Umm, I don't know. I think it was sheer stupidity, pretty much. I hadn't known anyone else who had done a feature. I really don't know what gave me the courage to do it, or why I thought I could do it, or anything like that. I think I felt like I was ready to make one, so I did.

## If you knew then what you know now, would you have gone ahead with it at this point?

Yeah. I think, obviously, I would have done some things differently. But you're always going to say that when you go back and look at something, but – really it was just curiosity to see what was involved. But being naïve is always helpful in those situations.

It seems that you had some unique timing in that you had a whole mess of free help living around here and willing to do this.

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[ Zak Lee, from page 8 ]

Yeah, and that was what sort of gave me the courage to do it. Realizing that not everyone was going to be here forever. And there were all these people that were really talented, and who would work for free and knew me. I knew I could do it with them, and it would be easier than not doing it with them, basically.

**Who spearheaded the financing of the film and how did you approach it?**

It was interesting. Funding is such a murky thing when you start talking about that. We had a big debate at the beginning about whether or not we were going to do it as a "for profit" or as a non-profit. I think we felt that if we went non-profit we could get grants. But there were still a lot of legal issues about how to go about doing that. So right away we had to get a lawyer, which we got through the Volunteer Lawyer Association of America. And he basically told us we were nuts and why did we want to make this movie, and what were we thinking – that sort of stuff.

So we sort of discounted everything he said and went ahead and made it a non-profit. And there was this grant – the LEF

Moving Image Fund – which awards up to \$20,000 or something like that. So, we figured, "we'll [apply] and hopefully get this grant and that will take care of all of our production costs." Of course, we got rejected.

That's when we started this letter-writing campaign, which turned out absolutely no money whatsoever. So we figured that wasn't going to work.

I think we were on "Plan D" when we finally figured out we would – basically – ask all of our friends and family, have a fundraiser, invite every human being we know. Try to get as much [free] stuff as humanly possible, hopefully get enough money to shoot it, and... It was down to the wire, basically. The rest of it was just asking people here and there for whatever they could spare, and that's how we did it.

I pretty much – we all – burned every bridge we had [laughs]! There are plenty of people that probably never want to do us a favor again, but we got the film shot! I guess that's what counts in the end.

**What's the plan for the film once it's finished?**

We just enter every festival that seems like they might accept the film. Then hope that we get into some of them, and that people like it and want to watch it or whatever. If we're extremely lucky – which probably is the same chances of being struck by lightning – we'll find a distributor and hopefully they'll do a theatrical release.

But I think the more likely thing is to get into as many festivals as possible and generate enough interest that maybe we can find people to fund another project. And hopefully do this whole thing over again. I think that's the ultimate goal right now.

**How does that make you feel when you think of doing it all over again?**

Yeah, it's frightening – like right now, I'm definitely planning my next couple of projects already, which I'm sure just terrifies all my friends and family. But you have to keep going.

*Get more information on the film, the filmmakers, and Roadside Pictures at [www.roadsidepictures.com](http://www.roadsidepictures.com). Roadside Pictures will soon be resuming their monthly Open Screening series. Check out the website for more information.*