

WALKING THE LINE

Commercial Vs. Creative: The Balancing Act At Studio 108

by Adam Sledd photo by Grant Pullman

As Jack Hartmann and Chris Williams settle in to spend the next forty minutes swilling Diet Pepsi and talking about their company, the rest of Richmond's Studio 108 team is gearing up for what Jack considers a typical day at the office: "Let's see, we've got two edits for different clients, graphics for something else, and audio work for the Jamestown edit." Chris chips in with location scouting in the afternoon, followed by two meetings on "Beast of Burden," their upcoming co-production with Mark Joy. Says Hartmann, "And all of this is going on in a room that's what? Seventeen feet by twenty? The structure of the room helps us out. Everyone knows what everyone else is working on, so we can act as a

backstop for each other. Other places I've worked it's all cubicled off. This is the best feel of any place I've ever been."

For anyone looking a for way to eke out a living in the Virginia film industry, Studio 108 stands out for good reason. Created by Hartmann in the late 1990's as his commercial production business grew, the studio has a steadily growing roster of clients, a Virginia Filmmaker of the Year award, and solidifying plans to move into television and feature films. The extremely shortened origin story goes as follows: arriving in Richmond in 1992, Hartmann moved steadily from radio advertising into television commercials. After years of working with a handful of different companies and after acquiring enough equipment, he opened Studio 108 at its current location in a carriage house behind the Virginia Garden Club. Then, in 2003, Chris Williams entered the picture, looking

for more short films to add to a festival at the Byrd Theater. Over the course of their meeting, Hartmann wound up watching a cut of Williams' film "Solitude," and came away with a vital member of the Studio 108 team: "I was really impressed with his edit. What happens is you get into making commercials to make money so you can start making movies, but then you make some money and the next thing you know you're in the trenches everyday trying to make a buck. It really takes the planets aligning to bring someone new into the fold to remind you of what you were trying to do in the first place."

Chris came on with the goal of pushing the studio in a film-oriented direction, only to find himself following Jack down the rabbit hole of commercial production. Says Chris, "You're making money doing this, but it's constant practice. The downside is that, with a retail job, you're giving fifty percent on your day job and a hundred and fifty percent at night on making movies. Here we just get so busy but you forget about it because the productions are fun, then it's editing, and it doesn't feel like work." "We love what we do," Jack adds, "but we realized that we had to get back to what we really want to do, which is make films. Films that make money, but are the films we want to make."

The pair got started on their goal in 2005, adapting a story by Hartmann's father into the short film "La Bas," which Jack directed. They entered the film in the James River Film Festival and came away with the Virginia Filmmaker of the Year award. While "La Bas" is an auspicious start, Williams realizes that it's going to take money and more to get the studio on his preferred track: "We are an independent film company. Our goal isn't to be those filmmakers who scrape together money and try to shoot on weekends, because in the end that doesn't work. You forget you'll need

money for posters, for submission fees, or just to fly out to Sundance if you get in. *Dismal*, which was just shot out in Virginia Beach, is a great point. They blocked off the time they needed to shoot, they got the actors, they had a great co-producer who was able to raise the money. I hope that they're successful because that will send the message that if you can do things right you really can make movies here."

Ideally, the studio's success in commercials and editing services will lend itself to feature film production. While Hartmann and Williams both agree that finding money is the most difficult part of getting a project off the ground, by building the studio's capabilities—including the recent purchase of a grip truck-- they are easing future production costs. Williams estimates that their existing abilities and equipment could save a hundred thousand dollars or more on a feature film budget. As Hartmann puts it, "We may still have to go outside the company for a key grip, but we can do a lot with just the group here. Graham does editing and works on systems, but he's also a DP (Director of Photography). Our sound guy Andrew just came back from Russia where he was studying lighting design. Chris directs and edits, and he's doing pre-production work on "Beast of Burden." "I direct some, and edit, and sometimes I'll produce. I'm the weakest link. I better be good at this because otherwise I'm unemployable."

Jack knows that commercials have gotten him to this point, and he's adamant about maintaining that part of his business: "We're going to do more films, but we love commercials. I love them. You get thirty seconds to tell a story. There are so many great ideas out there, these moments that might not work for a full movie but are great as a commercial." As they move into new territory, the question facing Studio 108 is one of



balance. Hartmann and Williams are walking a line between paid work that they take pride and joy in and finding the money to further their creative goals. On one hand, a commercial job is guaranteed money. But while Chris subscribes to the indie filmmakers mantra, "If I can make a movie people come see, I'll get money to make the next one," he acknowledges that the financial pressures on a feature film will be much different: "When we work with an ad client, they have a creative input that influences how successful the final product is. But when you're talking about a movie, you're talking about limited partners who give you this money just to make a script. And now you have to take their money that has no guarantee of returns and you've got to put together something that they're going to like how it comes out. You have a responsibility to the people who gave you that money, because they know they have little chance to get that back."



As they look ahead to a long road of raising money for future projects, Hartmann and Williams share the hope that Studio 108's success will help the Virginia film community as a whole. Any project that brings added attention and production dollars to the region should lead to more work for everyone, even if it's a rival commercial house. "In this town it's not so competitive, because everybody needs the work. Everybody's clients have different needs so we're not going after the same stuff," says Chris. Jack looks up from his Diet Pepsi and adds, "I don't know if everybody feels that way, but that's what we believe. The best thing that we can see is for another company going gangbusters." It will take more than one company's success to put Virginia on the filmmaking map, and the group at Studio 108 knows this. All the same, for those of us wondering who here can get the ball rolling, there aren't many better places to look than an old carriage house behind the Virginia Garden Club.