

**Stars North—*Putting the “Tinsel” In “O”-town***

*By Nathan Benson*

(Orlando, FL) Todd Thompson is one of those rare people you meet in life. He exudes an infectious mixture of optimism and raw determination that could create a believer out of even the most pragmatic of hearts, and you quickly find yourself hanging onto every word he speaks. Although you may not necessarily be familiar with the arsenal of short films he has written or produced or directed, he is one of the key figures influencing Orlando's transition, from simply a television-and-commercial production center, to a powerhouse filmmaking community. With production of recent major feature films like *Monster*, Orlando is bustling again - and Thompson knows this. In fact, he's been an ardent believer in the town's potential for years now, ever since destiny brought him here from Cleveland, Ohio eight years ago.

"There's a huge opportunity in Orlando to really do something special," he explains with his affective brand of optimism. "And that's what we're going to do."

By "we," Thompson is referring to Stars North, his local production company that is making strides in stirring up a film industry pot that has seen its delusions of a "Hollywood East" label fade away.

That is, until now.

"He [Thompson] succeeds because of his positive attitude and 'never say die' approach," says Thompson's producing partner Balinda DeSantis. "He doesn't let setbacks get him off track once he has decided to do something."

His determination, perfectly accentuated by DeSantis' strong business sense, was the basis for the 1999 creation of Stars North. Both are avid film lovers and veteran volunteers of the Florida Film Festival - a place where they've made invaluable contacts and learned one very important piece of advice: If you want to make films, start by making a short.

And that's what they've done - four times over!

Together Thompson and DeSantis have released *The Paper Route* (1999), *King Pathetic Creep* (2001), *The Chad Effect* (2001) and *Time & Again* (2002), which stars Academy Award-nominated actor Seymour Cassel (*Rushmore*).

And the most amazing part is how relatively easy everything has come for them.

*Time & Again* was filmed in only four days with virtually no budget, yet it starred a reputable, Hollywood name and was shot on industry-standard 35mm film. It also had a crew made up of Central Florida's veritable all-stars—veterans like cinematographer Stephen Campbell and art director David Kahler.

Thompson attributes this miracle of sorts simply to good work ethic. But none of the cast and crew would have signed on for free, had they not first been sold by Thompson's charm.

Having personally met and participated in conversation with this fast-talking dynamic of a man—who, in his demeanor, holds a striking resemblance to a young Steven Spielberg—it's very easy to understand how these people garnered such faith in his abilities.

"I think it's because they believe in us and they believe in our vision," says Thompson.

DeSantis attributes much of their early success to Thompson's poise in battle. "He is very inclusive as a filmmaker, and very positive in his direction," she explains. "And he doesn't lose his cool - there is no ranting and raving - which I think everyone appreciates since situations can sometimes get tense on a movie set."

Their current project, a short film called, *Once, Not Far From Home*, is now making its way around the festival circuit.

And why produce another short?

Because they're essential in providing Stars North with fundamental storytelling and filmmaking experience, and an ever-growing fan base among top talent and crew.

And so far, their plan is working. It seems that with each passing day, more and more people are buying into that confidence, and the "Stars North" name is becoming more and more synonymous with star power.

The cast of *Once, Not Far From Home* includes Erik Per Sullivan (TV's *Malcolm in the Middle*), Daniel Hugh Kelly (*Star Trek: Insurrection*), Skye McCole Bartusiak (*The Patriot*) and veteran actor James Best (TV's *The Dukes of Hazard*).

But as Thompson and DeSantis will tell you, in the grand scheme of things, short films are only the beginning. "They're stepping stones that give us the experience we needed to get where we're going," says Thompson.

And where they are going includes the development of a \$3.5 million feature film called *Shooting Blanks* - a labor of love Thompson and DeSantis have been anxious to bring to the big screen since first reading screenwriter Bob DeRosa's script over four years ago.

But the journey has not been without its pitfalls.

Thompson and DeSantis kicked off the project raising \$50,000 and used the money to generate a business plan and to travel to Los Angeles, Boston and New York to meet with various investors—a campaign that paid off 20-fold.

"We had a million dollars committed to us on Sept. 10, 2001," says Thompson. "But we all know the worldwide impact of the following day's tragedy. And the unsteady atmosphere it created cost us any hope of financing that was on the table.

But time would pass and, as luck would have it, their investor eventually returned to the project and purchased the script, granting them exclusive rights to produce the film.

So what's so great about *Shooting Blanks*?

"The nice thing about *Blanks* is it's a great script, and I think that's what actors look for beyond anything else. That's why Seymour [Cassel] did *Time & Again*. He knows us and believes in us, sure, but he also really liked the material."

And he's not alone in his enticement.

Michael Rapaport (TV's *Boston Public*) was slated to star in *Shooting Blanks*, as well as other actors who have shown interest, including Samuel L. Jackson (*Pulp Fiction*), Adam Goldberg (*Saving Private Ryan*), Jennifer Tilly (*Monsters, Inc.*) and Breckin Meyer (*Road Trip*).

Thompson's confident in Stars North's abilities—both in what they've already accomplished and what remains down the long road ahead. He is also confident there is no better place to do it than right here in Central Florida.

"Hollywood's on the West Coast and it's time to stop thinking of Orlando as Hollywood East. Orlando is Orlando, and it's always going to be Orlando - and that's an awesome thing. There are tons of talented people who decide to call Central Florida their home. Writers, producers, actors—they're all here, it's just a matter of tapping into them and everyone working together," Thompson explains.

"We need better projects here, and more of them home-grown. And we want to help drive that," DeSantis says with an air of anticipated destiny. "When people walk past a Stars North set, they know that a quality project's being made. That's the reputation we want to have."

And Stars North is making that happen through their determination to produce quality films right here, by both collaborating with name talent that attracts attention and by utilizing the talent pool already living here.

"I really believe in the Florida film community," Thompson adds. "Your life kind of takes you certain places, and it's brought me here. There's a huge opportunity in Florida to really do something special. And that's exactly what we're going to do."

Without a doubt, Thompson and Stars North are carefully, methodically and passionately breathing a much-needed breath of fresh air into Orlando and the ill-fated "Hollywood East" label that has haunted it since the day of its premature assertion.

And maybe, just maybe, Stars North is the shining light we've been waiting for—sent here to finally lead us and our fledgling local film industry out of film-famine and into the Promised Land.

*For more information on Stars North and their projects, please visit  
[www.starsnorth.com](http://www.starsnorth.com).*