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Filmmaker hopes his work can 'transcend color lines'

BY MARY O. BRADLEY
Of The Patriot-News

Garrett T. Thompson fell in love with the magic of movies when he was a child and became enthralled with the special effects of the "Star Wars" series.

"For a while, I thought I wanted to do monster make-up creating the whole world of fantasy," said Thompson, 28, a 1996 graduate of Central Dauphin East High School.

His career focus sharpened, however, when he realized the emotional impact of films after directing an 11-minute documentary titled "The Brotherhood" for a

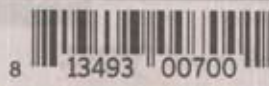


Garrett T. Thompson's film "Hope's Choice" won a student Emmy.

INSIDE 2 teens seek to make their marks in fashion merchandising and writing **G3, G14**

campus organization while a junior at Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove.

"I could see how you could Please see **THOMPSON** on Back Page



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take something off a page and make it really happen, and I loved that whole process. You can have so much influence on people, on their lives on an emotional level."

Now, through his work in films and music and his doctoral studies at the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts, Thompson is honing his cinematic focus.

"I want to be an influential person in terms of projecting great images but also specifically African-American images," said Thompson, whose 19-minute, 35 mm film "Hope's Choice" won several awards, including a Television Academy of Arts and Sciences Student Emmy.

The film was produced under a grant from the Peter Stark Special Project at USC. It aired on Showtime in February 2005 as part of the cable channel's Black Filmmakers Showcase. The film focuses on a man facing a choice between life with his pregnant girlfriend and thug life on the streets with his friends.

Thompson said a presentation by actor-director Tim Reid ("Frank's Place" and "Sister, Sister") to USC students had a tremendous influence on him. Reid told film students, "'African-Americans are the only people that allow other people to tell their stories,'" Thompson recalled.

"It's true," said Thompson, a son of Sterling and Barbara Thompson of Swatara Twp. "There's nothing wrong with that, but at the same time, I feel we as African-American filmmakers have to take on our own stories and tell those, or someone else will do it for us.

"I want to be able to tell stories about African-Americans that transcend color lines on a basic human and emotional level. A great film such as 'Good Will Hunting' or 'Antwone Fisher' transcends the race of the people in them, and at the same time, it gives representations for people who are watching them," Thompson said in a recent interview while on a visit home from the West

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: GARRETT T. THOMPSON



CHRISTOPHER MILLETTE, The Patriot-News

FAVORITE MOVIE: "The Color Purple." "It was a great story from the beginning to the end. It is a very powerful film for me," the Central Dauphin East graduate says.

FAVORITE ACTOR: Denzel Washington. "I just love the way he becomes a character. I think he's an amazing talent."

FAVORITE ACTRESS: Charlize Theron. "She is incredible, a wide range, and, like Denzel, can really transform herself."

FAVORITE DIRECTOR: Spike Lee. "He has a specific focus and vision for his films. He's not afraid to take risks. His body of work is incredible."

ALSO ADMIRES: "I have a lot of respect for Gordon Parks and Melvin Van Peebles because they are pioneer African-American filmmakers. Gordon Parks was such a Renaissance man — a filmmaker, photographer, music composer. He wrote novels, poetry."

ON THE NET: www.imdb.com (Internet Movie Database) and www.bfamstudios.com

Coast.

After graduating from Susquehanna University in 2000, Thompson worked for a year as an admissions counselor at the university while applying to film schools. He said he was elated when he was accepted to USC. He received his Master of Fine Arts degree in cinema and television production from USC in May 2005.

USC "is considered to be the No. 1 film school," Thompson said. "It's got the alumni network, the facilities and resources in terms of state-of-the-art equipment, editing stations, cameras. Many professors either work in the industry or had worked in the industry and were very successful. It's high-powered in the profile of people that work there." The school also routinely at-

tracts visits by such film luminaries as George Lucas, Steven Spielberg and Tyrese Gibson.

Thompson also performs as a hip-hop artist under the name LOGIC. His solo album, "A Beautiful Mind," will be released in the spring.

Thompson and Jarrett Lee Conaway founded BFAM Studios, an independent film, music video and commercial production company. In June, BFAM produced its first music video, titled "Hala," for the political Arab-American and Palestinian-American hip-hop groups the NOMADS and the Phillistines.

In July, BFAM produced its second music video, "Rock You," from Thompson's "A Beautiful Mind."

Thompson also is the associate director of productions

for Show-E Productions, an independent recording studio in Winfield, Union County, founded with his friend, Greg Mark.

Thompson said he was inspired to pursue a doctorate in black cinema and hip-hop culture after taking a class taught by Todd Boyd, a USC professor, author and expert on film and popular culture.

"That's when I really started seeing how I could bring what I do with hip-hop into the classroom," Thompson said. "Ideally, I want to write and direct films and music videos first, now, while I am young, and eventually, I would like to teach on the university level with youth." He has taken one year of course work toward his doctorate.

Thompson believes that a great story is the missing element in many of today's major movies, he said.

"Right now, you have a lot of great special effects, great cinematography, but the really great stories are fewer and far between," he said. "The industry is a money-making machine. Sometimes, art can fall by the wayside."

Technology, however, benefits independent filmmakers because digital cameras and editing systems are affordable and produce good images, Thompson said. The marketing of independent films also has evolved.

"You can put yourself on MySpace.com or Facebook.com and create an audience for yourself," he said. "If you are really proactive, you can build yourself an audience without being signed to a major motion-picture company."

Thompson said Los Angeles is the center of the film world for a young person trying to get into an artistic medium.

"It's the best because you are around so many creative people," he said. "A lot of my friends are artists. You can't help to be always improving yourself because you are like a sponge taking in other people's experiences."

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