



Issue 4.08 • Nov. 11 - 24, 1999

## Hollywood, PA Writer/Director Greg Swartz Tells All

by Lisa Hummel

It seems like every struggling actor/director has, at one time or another, lived some version of the same story. Packed their bags, gathered every bit of their money and, like the frontiersmen before them, headed to the west coast on a dream. Some make it and we know their name. Some struggle



and we've seen their face ... maybe. And some, no matter how hard they work or how

long they stay, are destined by the fates to repack, re-gather, and like many before them, head back from the coast in defeat. MODE recently had the opportunity to sit down with *Hollywood, PA* writer/director Greg Swartz, who took the chance to share with us his take on both the good and the bad versions of the story.

Swartz, born and raised in the Camp Hill area, graduated from high school in 1989, began college, got a job at a local newspaper, did a little script-writing, left college, and promptly started on a journey that took him to Los Angeles. In that order. "I became part of a comedy team that had a development deal with Comedy Central... then Comedy Central passed on the show," Swartz explains, continuing, "and, we had all of this material we had written, so we decided to make it into our own show and we shot a pilot, and I moved to L.A." Once there, Swartz never attempted to sell the show, and, for that matter, has never looked back.

In fact, he got his first gig three days after arriving in California — as a temp "just slapping

stickers on CDs" in the Warner Brothers Records warehouse. After his time in the warehouse, Swartz got his big break, a move to the sales office, which, in turn, brought him a permanent job offer. And, though he admits that he was initially pleased with the turn of events — and enjoyed the thoughts of being a newcomer with steady employment — it only took one night for him to decide that Warner Brothers Records was not where he was meant to be. "I went home and slept on it and said, 'you know what? I came here to make films'... and I went in the next day and said, 'no thanks'."

So, to teach himself the ins and outs of the business, Swartz volunteered on graduate thesis films at the American Film Institute, learning the ropes of lighting and sound and the other behind-the-scenes tricks that bring movies to life. But, ironically, it was not Swartz volunteerism at A.F.I. that gave him his first crack at working in the industry — instead, it was the time he spent at a literacy center for youths that led him on the path to where he is today.

"One of the other tutors in the group happened to be the executive producer for commercial production at Mattel and so he started getting me Mattel commercials, and from there everything just started taking off," he said, musing on the effort and days that it took to perfectly light an inanimate 11 inch doll. So, after spending time paying his dues on the sets of numerous commercials and a few small movies, Swartz decided it was time to make a film of his own. He collected some friends, spent a lot of money that he didn't have, and headed to Death Valley, where he filmed his first short.

Now, some time later, Swartz finds himself positioned exactly where he wants to be — happy, contented, and filming his first major motion picture on his home turf. The independent feature, *Hollywood, PA*, tells the story of someone whose life, minus the loser part, could have just as easily been Greg Swartz. Intent on making it big, Gordy leaves a coal mining town in Central Pennsylvania to become a star in L.A. As Swartz tells it, Gordy spends the next years struggling to simply make it at anything, so, heartbroken and frustrated, he gives up, returns home, and finds that his parents had long since made his bedroom their own — leaving his permanent address the living room couch. Determined to hold on to some part of his movie-making past, Gordy falls back upon the one film-related connection he has remaining — his daily video journal. Confident that he is at least good at that, he sets his sights on broadcasting his world live to the Internet community. "If he can't go to the film industry in L.A. he's going to make Holly Ridge, PA the new Hollywood — and the way he's going to do this is by making a film of his life, he's going to carry a digital video camera with him everywhere and live stream his whole life." And this is where the fun begins.

While the remainder of the story finds Gordy determined to hold true to his artistic intentions it also finds the people of his hometown riding the wave of his 'fame'. When his project draws attention from around the world, it seems that Gordy is the only one who doesn't cash in on the benefits of his dream as, while he is too blindsided by his goal to notice, the community profits on his idea — selling T-shirts, giving tours, and, ultimately, basking in the glow of his years of hard work.

Although you'll have to see *Hollywood, PA* to learn the outcome of Gordy's fate, the sneak peek at his life is something Swartz insists is not autobiographical — at least, not all of it. Last spring, Swartz returned to the area to attend a wedding only to discover that, like Gordy, his bedroom had been transformed, and his sleeping area was the couch. "I'm a big guy, and I couldn't sleep," he said, remembering. "So, I laid there thinking, 'I can never visit my parents again. What if this was my life?'" He attended the wedding, brainstormed with some friends, and, according to Swartz, never wrote a script "so fast in my life". More than just a good script, though, *Hollywood, PA* is garnering a lot of attention for one other real-world touch. Like Gordy, the filming of the flick will be simulcast on live stream video on the web for the world to see. Swartz swears that it will be an "anything goes broadcast", jokes that he becomes unnerved only at the thought that he "won't be able to walk around the set naked", and is extremely excited about the prospect of the whole thing. "We've had so many hits on our website already," he said, and he hopes that the attention will continue, especially after the filming gets underway.

So, does he see himself as a trendsetter? "I hope so," he replied, noting that, in addition to enjoying the access that it brings the fans and believing that other filmmakers will someday share his view, he also sees live streaming video on the web as "the next big thing on the Internet", much like the current use of digital video — which Swartz is using to film *Hollywood, PA* — has become a trend for filmmakers with the success of films like *Blair Witch Project*.

With the principal filming of *Hollywood, PA* slated to begin sometime at the end of November, Swartz has his mind set on making it in the industry, in fact, he even hopes that this is his big break. "I'm so confident that this is the right time, the right film... everything for me is where it's supposed to be and this is my time. I'm the happiest person in the world."

With his first five films planned out in his head, many of which take place in Central Pennsylvania and, according to Swartz are intended to be filmed here, the up-and-coming writer/director envisions nothing but blue skies ahead for him — both in L.A. and right here. "My head producer is from Chicago and he always tells me, 'you can say anything you want about yourself, but the bottom line is, you're still just a hick from Pennsylvania', and I said, 'you know what? You're right. I am just a hick from Pennsylvania, I don't think of myself as being from L.A.'"

No matter which coast he calls home or where he lays his head, it seems like the cards are right for Swartz.

If only Gordy could have been that lucky.

Keep an eye out for *Hollywood, PA* — you don't want to miss it!

Check out the whole project at: [www.HollywoodPA.com](http://www.HollywoodPA.com).