



Posted on Sun, Apr. 29, 2007

## Ready to make an impression **EMERGING ARTIST K. Ryan Jones**

By ROBERT W. BUTLER

A couple of years ago K. Ryan Jones learned he had to make a short film as part of a video production class at the University of Kansas (he'll graduate this spring).

The Wichita native chose as his subject the controversial the Rev. Fred Phelps of Topeka and his "God Hates Fags" anti-homosexuality campaign.

Jones said it was surprisingly easy to get close to Phelps, a disbarred lawyer who once was active in the civil rights movement. Once the minister and his fellow congregants (most of them members of the Phelps family) felt secure that Jones wasn't planning a hatchet job, they gave him full access. Jones filmed them for an entire year, even attending birthday parties for Phelps' many grandchildren.

The result is "Fall From Grace," a feature documentary that examines Phelps, his beliefs and controversial practices (like picketing the funerals of AIDS victims and, more recently, servicemen killed in Iraq) in intimate detail.

Now "Fall From Grace" could be taking Jones to the big time. The thoroughly professional movie (virtually a one-man effort) was given three screenings at last month's prestigious South by Southwest Film Festival in Austin, Texas. It was a heady experience for a movie novice.

"I was supposed to be taking midterms," Jones recalled. "Instead I was down in Austin watching movies, making connections and meeting people." Among his new contacts was Morgan Spurlock, maker of "Fast Food Nation," who requested his own copy of "Fall From Grace."

Jones went to the festival ready to make an impression. He printed 1,000 postcards advertising the three screenings and handed them out to everyone he met. "I never went anywhere without a stack of them.

"My producer's rep told me there have been times when people have gone down to Austin and only five or six persons have shown up for the screening. She effectively scared me into pounding the pavement. Basically I'm a pessimist who figures nobody will show up. That way I'll either be right or pleasantly surprised."

Color him pleasantly surprised. All three "Fall From Grace" screenings were near sell-outs, and the Q&A sessions that followed were lively. "People were surprised that it was a student film," Jones said.

In fact HBO, PBS, Paramount, Sony Picture Classics and several other studios and cable networks asked for screener copies of Jones' documentary. He's hoping for a theatrical release or at least a nationwide TV airing.

And he's brimming with ideas for other films. He wants to make a documentary about reclusive writer J.D. Salinger and hopes to option the short story "Haunted" by *Fight Club* author Chuck Palahniuk. In that tale, astronauts discover that the planet Venus is actually a paradise to which human souls go after death.

"My immediate goal is to make a couple of shorts to get my feet wet with narratives and to prove to other people and to myself that I can do it," Jones said.

And to think it all began as a class assignment.

"I'll tell you what," Jones said. "Anything beyond a good grade is just frosting."