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Director plans Potter parody

Short films will tell 'real' story of Putter

BY PAUL TOSTO
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Computer science and religion are his majors, but it's a resemblance to Harry Potter and a desire to direct films that'll make Jeremy Gustafson's summer interesting.

Gustafson, 20, just finished his sophomore year at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn., and will spend his summer months directing short films that parody the Harry Potter stories — a "mockumentary" with interviews of Harry Putter, the "real" boy behind the Potter legend.

Putter, for instance, is expected to explain how Harry Potter author JK Rowling embellished or cut important details of his life. Diagon Alley, for instance, the shopping spot where Potter and his wizard friends bought their owls, books and wands, is really the far less mysterious Mall of America. Putter also will confess to using his invisibility cloak for some adolescent mischief that didn't make the books (Gustafson says it's all G-rated stuff).

"I've been interested in filmmaking since second or third grade" when a friend's father let them play around with a video camera, said Gustafson, who lives in Minneapolis. By high school, he was making 10-minute comedy videos.

Eventually, he was able to get work on some local independent films. He also said he helped cast extras for the "A Prairie Home Companion" movie shot in St. Paul and made it on screen for a few seconds in the final cut.

Looking for other projects, Gustafson realized that Harry Potter seemed like a natural fit. He looks like Daniel Radcliffe, the actor who has portrayed Harry in the popular movie series. He recalled hating the resemblance when the first movie came out but later thought a parody would be fun. The documentary idea was born.

A few years ago, a teacher introduced Gustafson to Matthew Feeney, a local actor, and they became friends and eventually business partners. Besides their work on Harry Putter and other films, the pair also run a local business renting filmmaking equipment.

Feeney says Gustafson has the skills needed to direct.

"He has got it in his head, the eye for exactly what he wants. He knows what the shot is going to look like. He knows the lighting," Feeney said.

"He knows when to say 'This is what needs to be done. I'm not budging on this.' And knows when to say, 'This is a good idea. Let's incorporate this and go.' He's honest, and it's tough to find that in the movie business."

Gustafson says he doesn't expect any trouble from the real Harry Potter creator. He plans to distribute his films for free on the Internet and might parody several of the books. "We're just doing it to have fun and to learn."

Beyond Putter, Gustafson says he'd like to work on a big project — a teenage version of the biblical story of Job that will examine human suffering and real life. He calls it sort of a "Lemony Snicket" meets "Saved," an amalgam of two recent movies that offer insights into life, death and religion, with some occasional humor.

Film school might seem a logical next step, but Gustafson says he's a firm believer in learning by experience. While his computer knowledge will no doubt guarantee him a good job, he's also looking at seminary after St. Olaf. "I haven't quite figured that one out."

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