

THE SOUTH DAKOTAN

THE MAGAZINE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

FALL 2009



BEHIND THE CAMERA

John Bebring instructs some of Hollywood's finest as director of episodic television dramas and network commercials

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COVER STORY

Dakota Kid

*John Bebring makes
his mark in Hollywood*



from **Dakota Kid**
to 'Reel' Deal
John Behring
is making his mark on Hollywood

By Ben Carstens



(left) Behring directing on the set of *The Lazarus Man*. (above) Behring working with famous actor/director Clint Eastwood shooting a promotional marketing campaign for the film *Unforgiven*, which won Eastwood an Oscar.

If you have ever sat down on the couch and turned on the television, chances are you've come across the work of John Behring, a USD alumnus who has been climbing the ranks of Hollywood as a director and producer of episodic television dramas and network commercials.

In 2009 alone, Behring directed episodes of series like *Crash* (Starz), *Miami Trauma* (NBC), *Lie to Me* (Fox), *Ghost Whisperer* (CBS) and two episodes of *Life* (NBC). In between stints in the director's chair for hour-long television shows, Behring is also busy doing a variety of commercials and network image campaigns that launch new television shows and syndicated series.

Behring has directed more than 50 episodes of 20 different series and served as supervising producer of the series *NUMB3RS* (CBS), but being a television director of such high-demand in Hollywood wasn't something that happened overnight.

"There's an expression in Hollywood that you're only as good as the last thing you've done," said Behring, a native of Canton, S.D. "It's very true. While it's a large industry, I've learned that reputation is built one successful job at a time, one relationship at a time. I've been lucky, but that luck has come about because I haven't been afraid to work hard. That's a credit to my family and my South Dakota work ethic."

Shutter Bug

Behring admits he's been obsessed with photography for as long as he can remember. He brought that passion with him to USD when he began his studies in the communications department during the early 70s. His talent at the craft was so apparent that he started teaching photography as an undergrad and continued as a graduate student. He spent a lot of time in the labs and darkroom in Vermillion before George Lindblade, creative director at KCAU in Sioux City, Iowa, took notice.

"I started working in their internal commercial production company, learning from George, doing commercials and lab work," Behring said. "I shot a lot of video for local commercials while finishing my master's."

While working on his bachelor's degree, Behring met his wife-to-be, Shari Tarver, daughter of the campus minister, Russ Tarver. Russ and his wife, Virginia 'Jinny', now reside in Sioux Falls.

"My relationship with Russ and Jinny has been a significant factor in my success," Behring said. "They not only raised an amazing daughter, but they've been strongly supportive of my career and what I've done along the way."

Behring also spent time working as a production assistant for Richard Muller at the television station, KUSD, while in school and credits him with being a significant part of his early start in filmmaking. Muller included him on some of his projects, including a series of biographical documentaries on Native American artists. They filmed all over South Dakota for the project and took the finished film to the Folklife Festival sponsored by The Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C.

"John was good then and he is great now," said Muller, an instructor of marketing and management at the Beacom School of Business and host of *South Dakota Focus* for South Dakota Public Broadcasting. "He's rock-solid consistent. He has a certain quality that allows him to have a lot of control, but at the same time be willing to listen and take advice. We learned a lot from each other and it isn't a surprise to see him doing well."

John and Shari were married while at USD, and after finishing their master's and bachelor's degrees, respectively, in 1977, they moved to Milwaukee, Wis. Shari began attending Marquette University in pursuit of her master's and John went to



Behring (far left) works on shooting the show opening and network marketing campaign for the hit show *Spin City* starring Michael J. Fox (center).

work for television station WISN directing, shooting and editing a television magazine show.

After about a year at WISN, The Jerry Smith Studio, a local commercial production company, brought him in to start shooting commercials and broadcast promotions for their clients all over the country. Behring continued to work for them after Shari completed her master's and went on to the University of Wisconsin to get her Ph.D. in educational psychology.

Upon graduating with her doctorate, Shari started applying to numerous post-doctoral internships and was accepted for one in Los Angeles. In 1984, the Behrings headed west to stake their claim in Southern California.

"We didn't know a soul in California, but we packed up our two Ford Pintos, our cat and our two-year-old baby girl (Marisa) and out we came," Behring said.

Breaking Through

Early on in his career, Behring spent a lot of his time shooting commercials and advertising campaigns for television stations. He also developed a long working relationship with Joe Slade White & Co. doing political advertising for Democratic candidates, including then-Senator Joe Biden and General Wesley Clark. Behring then began working with L.A.-based company Imagine One as a commercial director and producer.

Behring spent many years working with Imagine One, and over the course of that time, began shooting main titles and opening sequences for TV shows. That's when he met Robert Ulrich while shooting the main title for a period western called *The Lazarus Man*.

"Robert had flown in from Santa Fe where they were shooting the series and we spent about four hours together creating some amazing iconic western images for the show open," Behring said. "At the end of that time, he asked if I'd be interested in coming to New Mexico to direct an episode of his show."

The only other long-form project Behring had under his belt was a CBS Schoolbreak Special, *My Indian Summer*. With Ulrich's

"I feel like the most innovative drama and filmmaking has actually been taking place on television in the last six or eight years."

encouragement and political muscle, he was able to get seated as director of an episode. It went so well that they immediately asked him back to shoot another.

"My episodic work took off after that in 1996," Behring said. "The hard part is getting that first one. The episode I did with Robert turned out very well, so I got another and then another opportunity on a different show. I've been cycling between commercials and episodic television drama steadily ever since."

In the time Behring has been working in the medium, he's noticed television experiencing a renaissance of sorts. In the past, big name film actors like Dennis Hopper, Tim Roth, Gary Sinise, Olympia Ducaucas, Jennifer Love Hewitt and Damien Lewis wouldn't work in television. Now, Behring has had the opportunity to work with them, and others of their level on a regular basis.

"I feel like the most innovative drama and filmmaking has actually been taking place on television in the last six or eight years," Behring said. "The creative ambition of it, the level and

quality of execution, and craft of filmmaking in these shows is every bit as ambitious and technically successful as any feature film that's being made—with the exception of the big-budget special effects movies.”

For someone who grew up a fan of television and film, working with actors that are the caliber of the ones Behring sees week in and week out can be intimidating. He has found that the key to gaining their respect is to know what you're doing and to not waste their time.

“You've got to be savvy enough to know when you've got the best performance and the best shot, and it's time to move on,” Behring said. “I've found that I have a very good relationship with these folks, personally and professionally, because as a director, I know what I want, I know what I am doing and they understand that. There's a level of trust that is established very quickly and from there it's a matter of maintaining that credibility and trust.”

Evolution of a Show

According to Behring, it takes approximately one month to complete an hour-long episode of television. There's an eight-day process of pre-production and preparation, an eight-day window of filming and production, and a four-day process of post-production. In that stage of the process, Behring will make his “director's cut” of the footage and turn it in to the show's executive producers. They will then do their editorial version of his film and turn it over to the network.

While a producer on *NUMB3RS*, Behring was charged with the task of preparing directors coming in to shoot the various episodes. He would also take their cuts and work with other producers to tighten them up and create the finished product. In addition to producing, Behring directed numerous episodes.

“Part of what keeps me really enthusiastic is that in television, the work is extremely ambitious,” Behring said. “The scripts are produced remarkably fast by amazing writers who are as talented as any writers working in feature films today.

“If I were doing feature films, I might be doing one movie every two or three years. Working in television, I get to do anywhere from six to 10 shows in a year. That consistent level of creative output is what I love about working in TV. It's challenging, it's rewarding and it allows me to produce a large body of work in a year.”

Most recently, Behring finished his director's cut of *Miami Trauma*—a new Jerry Bruckheimer series that has yet to hit television. He is scheduled to travel to Vancouver to shoot an episode of *V* for ABC this month and then another episode of *Ghost Whisperer* in January.

“After that there's the great unknown of what's to come,” he said. “It's exciting to see what that will be when it shows up.”



John and his wife, Shari Tarver-Behring.

Family Man

When the day is done and the film is in the can, so to speak, Behring loves to get back to being a husband and father at his home in Canyon Country, Calif. He and Shari have three children—Marisa, Andrea ‘Andi’ and Chuckie.

Shari serves as chair of the Educational Psychology Department at California State University, Northridge. Marisa (Rosenblatt) is recently married (Michael) and working on her master's in special education at Northridge while teaching at a charter school for autistic preschool children. Andi is on a track scholarship at California State University, Sacramento and Chuckie is deep into music as a sophomore at Kenyon High School in L.A.

Behring's parents, Dan and Bonnie, are now retired in Phoenix, Ariz., living near their daughter, Karen, and her family. John's brother, Dale, and other sister, Tabby Sehr, live in rural Sioux Falls.

“I've been lucky to be as busy in my career as I've been,” Behring said. “I'm on the road filming a lot so when I finally get home, it's important that I get plugged back into the details of our busy family life. It has been a challenge for me to be gone as much as I have and still maintain the balance and priority in family life, but Shari and I have made it work. My family is the most important thing in my life.”

Star Struck

Working in the business he does, Behring has found himself working face to face with some of the most talented and creative people of our time. He often finds himself in awe of those around him, in some respects each and every single day. From working with British actor Jeremy Northam on *Miami Trauma*, an actor Behring credits as being one of the “finest actors working today in any medium,” to collaborating with some of the best film directors and producers ever—he's had one great experience after another.

One of those experiences was when Behring was shooting an episode of the new *Dagnet* (ABC) series in 2003. While walking off the sound stage for a lunch break, a bearded man came wheeling around the corner in a golf cart and stopped by Behring.

"Hey, I know you," he said. The man was famed director Steven Spielberg.

Spielberg and Behring had worked a decade earlier on a commercial campaign for an animated series he was producing called *Tiny Toons*. The two sat and talked shop for 15 minutes as members of Behring's crew on *Dagnet* strolled by and took notice of him chit-chatting with the best in the business.

"That was sort of a culmination for me, that my directing and my career had reached a certain level of credibility and recognition," he said. "He had just finished these great films like *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan*, and for some reason he remembered me. I must admit, it felt pretty cool."

Another memorable moment for Behring occurred while working on *NUMB3RS*. The series is produced by Tony and Ridley Scott's company,

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Scott Free. One day, Ridley was visiting the set and gave some helpful feedback on various aspects of the show. Then he and Behring retired to John's office and spoke for an hour and a half about the art and nuances of directing.

"We had a really amazing circular and collegial conversation about Ridley's philosophy of directing," Behring said. "What was so satisfying and exciting was that, and by no means am I comparing myself to Ridley Scott, but a lot of what he talked about were things that I had believed in and had been doing instinctively since my early days at KCAU."

That long chat with the man who directed classics like *Gladiator*, *Blade Runner* and *Alien* was an eye-opener for Behring and a moment he said will always stand out for him. He knows he's privileged to do what he does and is thankful for the opportunity every day.

"Coming from South Dakota and growing up in Canton, I never thought I'd get the opportunity to have the great adventures I do day in and day out," Behring said. "I never take it for granted though. It's extremely challenging and yes, stressful, but I love it."

"I celebrate every day that I get to walk on to a set, work from a great script, stage a scene with amazing actors, have it photographed by the best cinematographers and most talented crews in Hollywood, and be the kid who gets to call out 'Action!'"



John Behring Filmography

Director

2009

Crash
Miami Trauma
Life (2 episodes)
Lie to Me
Ghost Whisperer

2008

CSI: NY
NUMB3RS (3)
The Mentalist

2007

NUMB3RS (3)

2006

NUMB3RS (4)

2005

NUMB3RS
Surface
The 4400
Wildfire

2004

One Tree Hill

2003

Dagnet
Charmed
Touched by an Angel

2002

Charmed (2)
Resurrection Blvd. (4)

2001

Charmed (2)
Resurrection Blvd. (5)

2000

Charmed (2)
Resurrection Blvd.
Dawson's Creek

1999

Charmed (3)
Roswell

1996

The Cape
The Lazarus Man (2)

Supervising Producer

NUMB3RS (40, 2005-2008)