



FROM LEFT: Drew and John Dowdle on the set of their horror film, *Quarantine*.

TITLE

NO BUSINESS LIKE SHOW BUSINESS

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PAGE

41

DATE

2009

SUBTITLE

Drew Dowdle, BBA '97, Trades Wall Street for Walk of Fame

STORY

ANDREW "DREW" DOWDLE, BBA '97, AND HIS BROTHER, JOHN, traveled in very different circles just a few years ago. Both took divergent paths from their Minnesota home — Drew toward a career on Wall Street and John on the route to starving artist.

But their paths came together whenever they talked about movies — making them, to be specific. The desire started in high school, when John would bounce ideas off of Drew and together they would refine a plot. And though Drew's professional reality was steeped in the ways of an east coast banker, he continued to dream about making movies with John.

One day, he woke up. And everything changed.

ou go to Michigan's business school, you work in investment banking, and making movies starts to feel like a pipe dream," Drew says. "I knew at some point if I didn't take a full shot at it, it might not happen. I was single, no kids, so I did it."

Starting with low-budget flicks for indie film fests, the Dowdles worked their way up movie by movie. Their first studio film, *Quarantine*, was released on DVD in early 2009 after some good reviews and a better-than-expected theatrical release. These days, they're teamed with writer/director M. Night Shyamalan (*The Sixth Sense*) on a production called *Devil*.

It's a nice payoff, considering they gambled everything with no guarantee of being noticed in a very crowded field. Today, the brothers often are compared to Joel and Ethan Coen, another fraternal movie-making pair from the Twin Cities. They even divide labor according to the Coens' blueprint, with John directing, Drew producing, and both writing. The formula seems to be working.

"It was a wonderful decision, but it was a long fight and scary as hell a lot of times," Drew says. "I thank John for twisting my arm more and more."

Says John: "And I thank Drew for getting me out of the poorhouse."

WANTED: INVESTORS Drew says he's glad he waited a bit before getting into the movie business. Raising money for and distributing an independent film tapped every bit of business acumen he acquired at Ross and in the field. And the budget for their first film, the raunchy comedy *Dry Spell*, was only \$50,000.

"Financing any film is difficult," Drew says. "People don't believe in the business model, and it's a long-shot business. It requires a level of salesmanship."

The idea was to make *Dry Spell* memorable enough to get a little press and prove to people in the industry they could make a coherent film. But getting even that was tough. The movie was rejected by a number of festivals, including the edgy Slamdance. Then John re-edited it and gave it a different name.

Finally, Slamdance accepted their picture in 2005. The movie didn't lead to fancy agency representation or a major studio contract, but it garnered just enough hype to buy the Dowdles a bigger bankroll next time around.

"With a \$50,000 budget, there's only so much you can fix, and you can only get so close to what you imagine," John says. "Between fast, cheap, or good, you can only pick two of the three. It became a very do-it-yourself production."

PICKING THEIR FEET IN POUGHKEEPSIE

Their next film grew out of the routine the Dowdles had perfected in high school: John generated ideas, and Drew gave a thumbs-up or thumbs-down. When John pitched the idea of a faux documentary about a serial killer, Drew was intrigued. The treatment for *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* was born.

The brothers scored a sweeter budget this time — \$500,000 from individual investors — and in a different genre. *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* is about the discovery by police of a trove of videotapes made by a serial killer. A combination of fake news reports and the killer's own "footage" pieces together the tale of an untold number of sadistic murders.

It was quite a departure from the gut-laughs in *Dry Spell*.

"We're trying to make stuff that's not forgettable, and horror lets you create scenes that are burned into people's brains," Drew says.

John attributes their mutual fascination with dark films to their childhood roots in Minnesota. "You grow up with those Midwest winters and you get that Nordic bleakness in you."

As *Poughkeepsie* neared completion, though, Drew began to assess the liabilities associated with such a macabre picture. The businessman in him wondered where it would screen.

"At certain points during production I'm saying, 'There may not be a film festival that accepts this one,'" Drew says. "It's not really a festival film. We show this and we'll be burned at the stake. But we stuck to our guns. We knew it would take getting it into the right programmer's hands."

That it did, and the movie was shown at the Tribeca Film Festival

Drew Dowdle's Top Three Influential Movies

THE OMEN

I was a seven-year-old Catholic school kid when I first saw *The Omen*. I'll never forget how terrified I was, and I was instantly hooked on horror. The fact that my mom thought I looked exactly like Damien probably didn't help. I spent many sleepless nights wondering if I could be the devil.

THE GODFATHER

I love character-driven drama, and no one did it better than Coppola in *The Godfather*. I first saw it in grade school, and I remember for the first time being riveted by a screenplay. A truly perfect movie.

RAISING ARIZONA

That came out when I was 13, and it was the first Coen Brothers movie I had seen. My brother and I also grew up in the Twin Cities, and for the first time the notion of making movies seemed possible. Although we make very different movies, the Coens' talent and originality have been the main source of inspiration for us in our careers.

“We came at it with everything we had.”

in 2007. Reactions ran the gamut. But the buzz was big enough for *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* to emerge as the game-changer for the Dowdles' career.

The movie led to representation by Creative Artists Agency, or CAA, one of the most venerable entertainment agencies in Los Angeles. It also led to Vertigo Entertainment approaching the Dowdles for a U.S. adaption of the Spanish film [*REC*]. The English version: *Quarantine*.

“We immediately knew it was right in our strike zone,” Drew says. “It was terrifying, intense, and such a fun ride. It was an obvious fit. We came at it with everything we had.”

And what they had was considerably more than they were used to. The budget was \$12 million, all from the studio. That meant actual stunt doubles, longer takes, an army of extras, better actors (Jennifer Carpenter is the lead), and a real soundstage.

The thrill of making their first studio movie couldn't be dampened by a letdown with *The Poughkeepsie Tapes*. MGM originally planned to distribute the film nationwide in 2,500 theaters. But it cut *Poughkeepsie* from the rotation, along with a few other films. Its status remains in limbo.

“Even if *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* never comes out, that film did everything we needed it to do for us,” Drew says.

BUILDING THE BRAND *Quarantine* was shot in parallel with the Spanish screenplay from which it was adapted. All the Dowdles saw at first was the original script. That helped elevate the film above the typical remake, allowing the brothers to add scenes.

The movie is shot from the point of view of a television news cameraman, who accompanies a female reporter embedded with a company of firefighters and paramedics.

A call takes them to an apartment building, where a resident is acting strangely. With the rescue and TV crews still inside, the authorities forcibly seal the building. A terrifying situation ensues, as a mysterious illness turns victims into rabid, zombie-like creatures. Meanwhile, the camera keeps rolling as everyone is locked inside.

Quarantine could be described as a more mainstream “popcorn” film compared with the twisted *Poughkeepsie Tapes*, something the brothers welcomed. Screen Gems, a subsidiary of Sony Pictures, picked up the picture and, according to Drew, did an excellent job marketing it.

The film was number one in ticket receipts on opening day and finished its first weekend number two, grossing \$14.2 million. It garnered a positive review from *The New York Times* and beat out the Ridley Scott movie *Body of Lies*.

“Nobody saw that coming,” Drew says. “Screen Gems is so good



Drew (left) brings a bit of Michigan to Hollywood.

at marketing and opening new films and competing with much larger films. That was a godsend. The same exact movie opened by another studio would have had a different result.”

The success of *Quarantine* has Drew and John managing a number of projects. Shyamalan plans to produce a three-movie series called *The Night Chronicles*. The Dowdles are helping to develop the final script for the first movie, *Devil*, with Drew attached as a producer and John as director.

The deal represents another good challenge for the Dowdles. *Devil* will be a PG-13 movie, more of a suspenseful thriller than straight-on horror. The two also are preparing to shoot a film from their own script, *The Coup*, about an American family caught in the crossfire of a political uprising in Southeast Asia.

In addition, the Dowdles are executive producing a documentary — a real one this time — and are considering a period film. The documentary, *Transcendent Man*, is based on futurist/inventor Ray Kurzweil and his theory of “the Singularity.”

Much like the Coens, the Dowdles are eager to establish their own identity in Hollywood while producing a variety of pictures.

“We really want to expand, do some drama, a period piece,” John says. “We’d like to go in a lot of directions, but do it one step at a time so people know what to expect from the brand.”

For Drew, running the business end — and some of the creative parts — of what’s becoming a movie-making enterprise is the completion of a circle he and his brother started when they conjured up crazy ideas in high school.

“It was always the dream for me to work with John and make films,” he says. “It took awhile for us, or me at least, to think we had enough to make a go of it. It’s worked out great.” ✦