

5-2008

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Recommended Citation

Liberty University, "Lights, Camera, Action!" (2008). *May/June 2008*. Paper 2.
http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lj_2008_may/2

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Lights, Camera, Action!

June 25, 2008 | Tara Maxwell

Two Liberty University theater students will make the momentous leap from stage to silver screen this fall — as sophomores.

Cast in major roles as brothers T.W. and Grady Wilson in *Billy: The Early Years*, Cody Carwile and Josh DeVries got a rare opportunity for young performers who had never even had a screen test.

The film, directed by Robby Benson, follows the life of evangelist Billy Graham starting in his teenage years, including his courtship of Ruth Bell and the early days of his burgeoning ministry. The Wilson brothers were friends and close associates of Graham, traveling worldwide with him on crusades.

“This is the type of thing that you never actually expect to happen, especially not as a sophomore in college,” DeVries said. “It’s nothing other than a God thing ... it seems God is up to something and I’m just along for the ride.”

Linda Nell Cooper, chairwoman of Liberty University’s Theatre Arts Department, walked the students through the casting process and oversaw their screen tests on Liberty’s stage. Cooper, who worked closely with the producers and the director, said they were impressed with the students’ talent.

“He [producer Bill McKay] called me into the room and shook my hand and said, ‘I have hired both of them. They are wonderful.’ The producers were all standing there and applauded them and said they were incredible. I said, ‘I have 150 more.’ McKay said, ‘I look forward to meeting the other 148.’”

The producers got a chance to meet more Liberty students in April, when they cast close to 50 as extras for several scenes shot in Watertown, Tenn. The theater students were transformed, with

the aid of a team of talented makeup artists, hair stylists and costumers, back to the 1930s — complete with rolled hair, striped suits and saddle shoes.

The students were put through their paces in a 12-hour day on the set and got to be a part of the action.

“The help of Liberty University was most appreciated, especially with the work of its gifted acting students,” said producer Martin Shiel.

Senior Liberty University Theatre major Erica Smith said she was in awe of the movie-making process and hopes to one day teach theater.

“It’s really eye-opening to see how they run everything. It’s quite a system, and it all comes together.”

Billy: The Early Years, produced by Nashville-based 821 Entertainment Group, features Armie Hammer as Billy Graham and co-stars Martin Landau, Lindsay Wagner and Stefanie Butler. The film is slated for release this fall.

“We have carried into the film the dream of making a true homage to the dedicated life of Billy Graham,” producer Larry Mortorff said. “We trust that the dedication we showed will be appreciated by film audiences for years to come.”

Mortorff and McKay said a team scouted for actors at several Christian schools, and they knew they had found the perfect Wilson brothers when they auditioned DeVries and Carwile.

“They [Josh and Cody] were the best candidates for T.W. and Grady. Liberty flew them in and we auditioned them both for both parts. In the middle of it Robbie and I turned to each other and said, ‘Let’s just hire them both and we’ll figure out which one is T.W. and which one is Grady,’” Mortorff said. “They are the right look and feel and had Christianity to their backgrounds.”

DeVries and Carwile's backgrounds in theater worked to their advantage in landing the roles.

“Both had studied at their craft and had stage experience. Robby has tremendous stage experience – we figured that from stage actors to this they could work with him. They have been terrific at picking up his pace, his instructions, his suggestions and also some of the levity,” Mortorff said.

Filming the movie has been challenging and rewarding for DeVries and Carwile who both hail from Lynchburg, Va., and had not planned on being film stars. Carwile is a Communications major with a minor in theatre and DeVries said his dream has always been to be a filmmaker.

Both students, who received full support from Liberty University Chancellor Jerry Falwell Jr. and the Liberty community to pursue the movie roles, are appreciative for the experience and are excited about what the future will bring.

“The main thing about acting is networking and meeting new people and of course we met all sorts of cool and interesting people with all sorts of different aspects of the job,” Carwile said. “You really couldn’t ask for a better group of people to do your first movie with, we have very supportive producers. Mr. Benson — he’s just amazing.”

DeVries and Carwile aren’t the only people at Liberty University with a unique interest in the movie, though. Billy Graham’s great-grandchildren, Hope and Stetson Tchividjian, both attend LU – and T.W. Wilson’s 24-year-old granddaughter, Emily Pereira Meyer, works as an admissions counselor in the university’s Visitors Center.

“It was definitely a surprise. It’s a big honor to have part of his life commemorated in a movie,” said Pereira Meyer of her legendary grandfather. “He was a wonderful man of God and somebody I strive to be like.”