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Fall 2011 Directors Profile: Phil Morrison

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Phil Morrison

Creating "Mayhem"

October 21, 2011, Robert Goldrich --- While he has a penchant for capturing humor and humanity, director Phil Morrison of *Epoch Films* is also becoming known for getting the most out of actors playing "non-human" characters. An offbeat tongue-firmly-in-cheek specialty to be sure, but one that has proven successful as the Allstate "Mayhem" campaign out of *Leo Burnett*, Chicago, would attest.

Portraying the Mayhem character—who embodies seemingly anything that could go wrong, necessitating a good insurance company to make things right—is actor Dean Winters. This portrayal has spanned more than a dozen commercials with three of them—"Teen Driver," "Flag" and "Douglas-fir"—earlier this year winning the best of show Advertising Excellence/Campaign honor at the AICP Show.

"Douglas-fir" and "Flag" are darkly humored, absurd and yet relevant at the same time. The former spot, for example, opens with Mayhem standing in a Christmas tree lot amongst dozens of other trees, proclaiming himself boastfully to be "the world's greatest Douglas-fir. I'm the perfect shape. I'm the perfect color."

A little girl shopping for a tree with her family agrees, and she convinces her parents this tree is the one for them.

Of course, we've seen enough of these spots to know that as perfect as this tree may look, something bad is going to happen because of it. Sure enough, disaster strikes.

After purchasing the tree, the happy family is driving home with their find strapped to the roof of their minivan.

Unbeknownst to them, however, the twine holding the tree in place snaps, and Mayhem goes flying into the street as they turn a corner, landing in the path of an oncoming vehicle, which swerves to avoid running over the tree.

The TV commercial serves some food for thought as to why it's so important to have insurance that you can count on. But balancing the serious is the comical. For starters, the sight of our Mayhem protagonist being wrapped up in tree netting a few seconds into the spot is charmingly offbeat.

Morrison said the "Mayhem" campaign requires a delicate balancing act. "When it works best, it manages to be unsentimental but not mean spirited. When you show bad stuff happening, things can get mean. We don't want the Mayhem character to cross that line. At the same time, though, he's not a hero. He's the villain."

The other line Morrison prefers not to cross is to have the Mayhem character overtly scare people into buying insurance. "I try not to trade on fear. Instead Mayhem offers what can be quite an absurd representation of stuff you want to avoid—a Christmas tree falling off a car, something falling on your parked car. Again, it's a little bit of a needle we have to thread. The Mayhem character is a menace with a sense of dark humor. But it's not the kind of humor with a wink. Dean as Mayhem has to be an anti-hero who's fun to watch."

Embodiment strategy

As earlier alluded to, Morrison has a bit of a track record directing campaigns in which actors portray non-human characters. While Winters plays the embodiment of "Mayhem," Morrison several years back introduced the Apple Mac vs. PC series of ads that quickly became a part of buzz-generating pop culture. Actor John Hodgman played the awkward, buttoned-up PC character while Justin Long portrayed the Mac with a laid-back, progressive attitude.

The Mac vs. PC premise came out of *TBWA\Chiat\Day*, Los Angeles, as did another Morrison-directed campaign consisting of "Happy Breakfast" commercials for Jimmy Dean, again with an actor as a non-human character. In this package, a man dressed in a big yellow sun suit owes his sunny disposition to various Jimmy Dean breakfast foods and continuously attempts to drag his fellow co-workers—the outlandishly costumed Moon and Cloud—out of their gloomy funk. Here there was an element of misery that Morrison pushes over into comedic happiness thanks to the product.

Diversification, Enlighten-ment

Morrison's comedic and storytelling prowess extend well beyond the embodiment theme. Most recently, his endeavors include the AT&T "Spider" spot in which the picture of a spider on a cellphone screen is so realistic that when it's set down on a restaurant table, a woman screams at the sight of the arachnid, prompting a man to take off his shoe and smash the creepy crawly character into submission. The commercial out of *BBDQ New York* has blossomed into an audience favorite.

Plus Morrison earlier this year helmed a Norton Internet Security spot in which people whose computers have been hacked invent colorful unrecognizable cuss words because the normal expletives

aren't enough to do justice to how they feel. This clever humor teamed Morrison with a creative ensemble at Leo Burnett, the shop that came to him for "Mayhem."

Morrison's diverse comedic sensibilities also go beyond commercialmaking. He recently helmed an episode of the new HBO series *Enlightened* starring Laura Dern. While he's not at liberty to publicly discuss the premise of his episode in detail, Morrison said he enjoyed the experience which necessitated a balance between comedy and serious pathos. "Laura's character is both funny and heartbreaking at the same time," he observed.

Morrison is also keeping his fingers crossed on a feature film to which he's attached. With a working title of *Lucky Dog*, the movie is slated to star Paul Giamatti, Paul Rudd and Sally Hawkins. The story centers on a couple of ex-thieves from Canada who move to New York to make money the old fashioned honest way. Morrison described the film as "kind of a melancholy comedy but still quite funny."

The director is no stranger to either features or TV series. On the former front, he directed the well received *Junebug*, which was produced by [Epoch Films](#) and made its debut at the 2005 [Sundance Film Festival](#). As for prior TV show experience, Morrison directed multiple episodes of the *Upright Citizens Brigade* for Comedy Central.

Commercials, though, remain Morrison's filmmaking staple. He broke into the ad arena years ago thanks to a fortuitous circumstance. "It was all Stacy Wall's doing," he recalled, hearkening back to the days when Wall was a creative at [Deutsch, New York](#). Wall had a NBA Hoops Cards commercial with a challenged budget, requiring an inexpensive director. He took a flyer on Morrison who had recently graduated from [NYU Film School](#). The two knew of each other through a mutual friend. That job proved to be the springboard for Morrison's spotmaking career.

Wall meanwhile himself springboarded into directing some time ago and gained major recognition earlier this year. Wall, whose production house roost is [Imperial Woodpecker](#), was profiled in *SHOOT's* Spring 2011 Directors Series, having just won the [DGA Award](#) for Best Commercial Director of 2010.

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