

[return to article](#)

Wisconsin Film Festival: Friendly rivalry spurs two filmmakers with Madison ties

Rob Thomas

March 26, 2009



Doug Pray, a filmmaker with Madison ties, will see his new documentary "Art & Copy" screened at 6:45 p.m. Thursday at the Wisconsin Union Theater. - Photo provided

For the last 10 years, Doug Pray and Marc Webb had a semi-serious bet going between them -- who would be the first to make a dramatic feature film that would land on the big screen?

The two filmmakers, both with strong Madison ties, have been successful in their fields. Pray has made several acclaimed documentaries, including "Scratch" and last year's "Surfwise," while Webb is one of the most prolific music video directors in the country. But they still egged each other on to take the next step and make a narrative feature.

"The bet was that whoever's movie reaches Madison first, the loser owes them the amount of the opening night box office at Hildale," Pray said. "It's hysterical."

On Thursday night, the opening night of the Wisconsin Film Festival, Webb officially wins the bet. His first dramatic feature, a romantic comedy called "500 Days of Summer," was a huge hit at this year's Sundance Film Festival. The film won't hit theaters until this summer, but Webb is bringing it to Madison to screen in the Orpheum Theatre at 6 p.m. Thursday. Advance tickets for the show are sold out, but some rush tickets should be available at the door.

Pray is thrilled at his longtime friend and filmmaking colleague's success, and he said he plans to make his own dramatic feature next. (And he may have a loophole should Webb ever try to collect on the bet, since Hildale was torn down in 2007.)

Both Pray and Webb will be in Madison to present their films, which are coincidentally screening head-to-head at the festival. "I was joking with him about that," Pray said. "I just talked to Marc yesterday, and we were saying, 'Why are we competing against each other for the same audience?'"

Pray's new documentary "Art & Copy" screens at 6:45 p.m. Thursday at the Wisconsin Union Theater.

The two first met at the 1996 Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. Pray was a young filmmaker with his first documentary "Hype!" premiering in the festival. Webb was a college student who worked as a volunteer at the festival parking cars.

Webb, a Madison West grad, knew that Pray was also from Madison and went over to introduce himself. The two got

to talking and realized they had a ton of additional connections -- their moms knew each other, and both of them attended Colorado College in Colorado Springs.

A year later, Webb moved out to Los Angeles and started working for Pray, helping him secure all the legal clearances he needed for "Hype!" so that it could be commercially released.

"He literally worked in my garage in the summer, and he just faxed people all summer long and helped me out," Pray said. "It was just cool. From that moment on, it became clear he wanted to do music videos, and in the next year or two he started getting better jobs. I think I helped him get his first music video. I'm just so proud and impressed with his career."

Pray continued to make documentaries, and although initially known for making music-themed docs ("Hype!" was about the Seattle grunge movement, while his next film "Scratch" was about DJ culture), he soon was tackling other topics.

"Art & Copy" takes a look at some of the most creative minds in the world of advertising, including the minds behind the Nike "Just Do It!" campaign and the iconic 1984 Apple "Big Brother" Super Bowl ad. At first, Pray might seem like an unlikely filmmaker for such a project.

"I wouldn't be lying to say I hated commercials," he said. "For whatever reason, I don't watch TV, and I always thought I was just supposed to hate commercials and commercialism, that that was just selling out completely."

But Pray said his mind was changed by two things. The first was the dawning realization that some of his favorite documentary filmmakers, such as Errol Morris and Barbara Kopple, also did commercials. The second was when he was asked to shoot a commercial himself. Far from finding it a soul-draining experience, he found it to be very creatively satisfying (along with a lucrative way to finance his documentaries.)

Pray said his film isn't necessarily pro-advertising, but it does acknowledge that advertising is a powerful medium ("the cave paintings of our time," Pray said), and the film seeks to find the beating creative hearts that exist inside the massive marketing machines.

"What my movie shows is that even advertising is surprisingly human. Even though it's for a product and it's commerce, it's somehow an innately human form of communication. The people who do it the best, they're really communicating in the same way that an artist does."

"Art & Copy" will be released in theaters later this year. When Pray brought the film to this year's Sundance Film Festival, there was Webb, with the world premiere of "500 Days of Summer."

"It was really cool," Pray said. "I thought, 'Wow, here we are again, 13 years later.' It was a little emotionally overwhelming to watch the movie ("500 Days") ... and think, 'He did it.' It seemed like yesterday he was in that parking lot."