

reel ambition

How do you go from bridgemaker to filmmaker? Woodcliff Lake native Jon Doscher parlayed his construction gig into a chance to head his own movie company — and it all started with a box of cigars he sent to Jack Nicholson. You'll never guess what happened next

BY JIM WALTZER • PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN BLAISE

Some moviemakers are born clutching a camera. But long before founding the independent production company Starline Films, Jon Doscher was busy with more ponderous hardware.

"I was hanging columns, drilling steel, making good money," the Woodcliff Lake native says of his construction job right out of high school. "I said to myself, 'I guess I'm gonna be an ironworker.'"

It was a reasonable guess. His father was a third-generation ironworker whose construction credits included the World Trade Center, and the late-1980s boom was at hand. But there is more than one way to scale the heights. Doscher, now 35, has since selected a trade perhaps more treacherous than riding a girder.

Doscher's Starline Films, which is nearly three years old, is on the cusp of a breakthrough. With several movies either in the works or in the can, the Upper

Saddle River-based "indie" is courting big names and big dreams. And what's even more intriguing is its artistic aim. Current projects include a pair of searing true stories, one an echo of Truman Capote's chilling *In Cold Blood*, the other based on an ill-advised state police action turned cause célèbre. Each is being developed as a documentary and a feature film.

That's pretty heady fare for a fledgling production company.

Meanwhile, Jack Nicholson's agent has Doscher on speed-dial, and the local actor-producer has pitched a role to Morgan Freeman. The view can be dizzying, but Doscher is a realist. "In this business," he says, "you need a break."

Doscher has made many of his own breaks. That young ironworker launched a painting and power-washing business that ran for a dozen years which proved to be a conduit to the movie business. In

May 2000, Doscher's Restoration Co. had a job at the Saddle River home of veteran character actor Danny Aiello. "So here I am at Danny Aiello's house as a contractor," says Doscher. "I took a shot — it was totally unplanned."

Doscher, who had just begun studying acting at the famed Lee Strasberg Theater Institute in New York City, "auditioned" for Aiello by doing a dead-on impression of Jack Nicholson reciting a letter written to ... Jon Doscher. It was an *American Idol* moment in a private home.

What made it even more of a hit is that the letter was for real. Two years earlier, Doscher had sent Nicholson a letter seeking advice, accompanied by an expensive box of cigars. When the acting icon failed to respond, Doscher pressed the issue with a second letter. Finally, Nicholson, the pride of Neptune and Manasquan High School, wrote back.



Jon Doscher working the phones at the offices of Starline Films, located in Upper Saddle River.

"You seemed fraught," the letter from Hollywood said. "The cigars were lovely."

So Doscher heard the famous voice in his head and laid it on Aiello, who told him to leave the acting classes and start auditioning for roles in the real world. Doscher kept his day job and, in 2003, a producer/client cast him as an FBI agent in the organized-crime movie *This Thing of Ours* (starring Frank Vincent of *The Sopranos*). Later, he portrayed a drug-addled dentist in the offbeat thriller *Remedy*, which he co-produced as well. Doing that double duty was a body builder for Doscher. "It was shot for \$175,000," he says. "We proved we could make it and release it."

He hung the Starline shingle out in June 2004 and quickly identified material he wished to develop. Aiello's Revolution Earth Productions has joined Starline to produce four projects to date.

He calls Aiello a "mentor, partner, and close friend." That's a role that suits the versatile Aiello. "People like him," he says of Doscher. "He's bright and aggres-

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Although the tall, sandy-haired Doscher seems comfortable in his own skin and knows the value of humor, the material he chose at the outset is far from warm and fuzzy. Soon after acquiring the rights to the 1979 book *Anyone's Son*, he interviewed the book's subject and co-author at the latter's home base: South Woods State Prison in Bridgeton. Five months after graduating from Pascack Hills High School in 1976, Harry De La Roche had killed his parents and two younger brothers during Thanksgiving weekend in their Montvale home. At his

trial, his defense appeared to be less than stellar, and ultimately, De La Roche rejected a plea and was convicted on four counts of first-degree murder. He was sentenced to life in prison.

Starline is adapting the book into a movie, which has begun shooting. Meanwhile, Starline completed the companion documentary, *Harry: A Communications Breakdown*, which premiered late last year. Aiello, the documentary's narrator, portrays the defendant's attorney in the feature *Anyone's Son*, in which he is making his directorial debut.

Starline's other feature-doc duo, *4Chosen* and *4Chosen: The Documentary*, centers on an event just as disturbing, though not as deadly. In 1998, New Jersey state troopers on the trail of gun-runners stopped a van near Turnpike Exit 7A. Inside the rented vehicle were four young black men on their way to a basketball tryout in North Carolina. Flustered, the driver allowed the van to drift off the edge of the shoulder. The troopers opened fire, and 13 shots rang out, injuring three of the young men.

The case drew the attention of the Rev. Al Sharpton and Johnnie Cochran and prompted an investigation of racial-profiling practices by the state police. A civil settlement was ultimately reached, though criminal charges were dropped. After a lengthy pursuit, Doscher gained the rights to the story. He says the most compelling message is that the victims have come through their misfortune and "used it positively in their lives."

The company is developing some comedic properties as well, including an

adaptation of the book *The Bronx Zoo*, a peek inside the rowdy clubhouse of the New York Yankees in the 1970s.

Doscher, who hopes to expand financing for all his projects. So far "we're doing it with virtually no funding, people deferring income," he says.

Often, one big name can launch the enterprise. A Morgan Freeman or a Samuel L. Jackson in the role of Johnnie Cochran in *4Chosen*, for example, could make all the difference, but actors who command \$15 million per picture aren't wild about deferred income.

Indeed, the thicket of agents, managers, and potential corporate sponsors is not easy to negotiate. Yet Doscher and his company are committed to film projects with social heft.

Persistence has paid off; some "names" have signed on. For the *4Chosen* documentary, Doscher has secured a charismatic narrator in ESPN commentator Stephen A. Smith, a *Philadelphia Inquirer* sports columnist.

David Anspaugh and Angelo Pizzo, the directing-writing team of *Hoosiers* and *Rudy*, are on board. According to Starline, Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban has expressed interest in distributing the *4Chosen* films through his Magnolia Pictures.

Doscher plans to cast himself as the attorney who represented the four men in *4Chosen*. Which, as if life were conforming to a script, brings the filmmaker full circle to Mr. Nicholson. There's a part in *4Chosen* for the Los Angeles Lakers' No. 1 fan, and word is that he's interested. As the screenplay grows more polished through rewrites, there's hope he may become even more so.

For that happy ending, Starline probably will need hefty helpings of money, stamina, and luck. Their projects have momentum, though, and Doscher can handle the verdict, whatever it is. He knows that, in the motion picture business, you need an iron constitution.



Doscher on the set of *Remedy* (2004)