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Oregon an 'ideal place to work' says filmmaker Aaron Douglas '83

by Laura Taylor '06

What happens when eight mental patients wake up one morning to find the nurse gone, the TV off, and think it's the beginning of the apocalypse? This is the plot of *Freedom State*, produced by Aaron Douglas, '83.

Douglas, a Springfield native and graduate of Thurston High School, still vividly recalls having to use manual typewriters while at the SOJC, but he also carries with him another memory. One of his professors (he can't remember whom) wrote, "You have an innate sense of PR," across one of his papers, and he's used that as a source of inspiration ever since. "As small a gesture as that was, it is something that I have always carried with me, and that has helped me to believe in myself," says Douglas.

A documentary he previously produced, *My Days of Awe and Grief, Part One: Dirk and Me*, won best documentary at the Forest Film Festival in 2004.

Aaron worked for the City of Eugene and at the Hult Center after graduating, and later as a reporter and a television writer. He decided to take classes at the Art Institute of Portland to learn more about filmmaking. The script of *Freedom State* was originally a project he did for his screenwriting class, and the idea grew from there.

Douglas then submitted his idea to produce *Freedom State* to the Oregon Media Production Association the first year the organization was giving away scholarships from its media arts education fund. "I actually had no idea how much money they were giving away," says Douglas. "I got \$500. I was in school and thought I couldn't make it on \$500."

It actually took \$85,000 to make the film. And that's "really, really cheap," he says. Douglas learned a lot about cutting corners and making things as inexpensively as possible. A one-and-a-half hour nationally syndicated broadcast typically costs around \$3 million, he said. And after the production costs, the rest of the money goes to special effects and actors.

So Douglas set out to find a nonprofit fiscal sponsor with only the director on board. "I didn't have a lot, but I had a really nice looking notebook," says Douglas.

He found help in the Oregon Film and Video Foundation, which owns and operates the Hollywood Theatre in Portland.

Douglas found his director, writer, and editor, Cullen Hoback, by putting an ad on craigslist, an online network that provides classified ads centralized to major cities. "He was just really impressive, just kind of getting



A scene from *Freedom State*, produced by Aaron Douglas '83.

started," says Douglas. Hoback's short film, *Gaining Miles*, had won the Grand Jury Prize at the 2004 New York International Film Festival.

The whole process was very collaborative. "I think that everybody has good ideas," says Douglas. "Everybody's able to add something."

Douglas didn't mind having to rewrite the script to suit the actors, either. Tom Hanks and Mike Myers don't bring the same qualities to a role, for example. "Actors bring whatever is unique about them to the picture," he says.

"We had this incredible group of people willing to work on the film for next to nothing because it was an experiment. It showcases the amazing talent of people in Oregon."

That's an aspect of the film that Douglas really enjoys. He wants to promote Oregon as an ideal place for filmmakers to work. "I see that as payback for the fiscal sponsorship and for being an experiment."

Freedom State was shown in October at Cinequest, one of the top film festivals in the United States, and at the famous Mann's Chinese Theatre at the Foundation for the Advancement of Independent Film (FAIF) Festival. In June, at the 2006 Moondance International Film Festival held at Hollywood's Raleigh Studios, *Freedom State* was one of eleven feature films screened from the hundreds of films submitted. 