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Strut and 'Dance

With the Mumpers' culture as a backdrop, a movie shot in the area will premiere at the national film festival Slamdance in January.

By [Caitlin Meals](#)

December 27, 2007

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It's not hard to stumble upon a local block this time of year that isn't going full-throttle into Mummer-frenzy. The parade is just days away, with final preparations going on. Someone from outside this unique culture might not "get" what all the hype is about.



Writer/director Tom Quinn shoots a scene for his Slamdance selection "The New Year Parade," which follows two siblings going through their parents' divorce.

Three years ago, that was Tom Quinn. Today, he knows as much about the Mumpers as many third-generation strutters. After all, he followed the South Philadelphia String Band for two years and has captured 80 hours of parades, practices, and the occasional beer afterwards, to use in his film "The New Year Parade," which will premiere at the Slamdance Film Festival in Utah next month.

The 85-minute movie follows a year in the life — from one New

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Year's to the next — of two siblings going through the first year of their parents' divorce. It is against the backdrop of Philadelphia's Mummer culture.

Quinn said his communications degree from La Salle University, where he graduated in 1998, sparked his interest in film. After talking to and interviewing many of his friends about the long-term effects of their parents' divorces, Quinn — who is an adjunct professor of film and media arts at Temple University and La Salle — decided he wanted to write a script that reflected the struggles many adult children face, a perspective most films don't portray.

"There were a lot of similarities," he said of the memories he heard. "There were things from 20 years ago that started coming back up. They were shared experiences and feelings, but they weren't sharing them together."

He began to write the premise in '03, but it wasn't until he served as a videographer at a wedding that it all came together.

"I didn't want to make a divorce movie like many others that were all high-drama structure," he said. "I was shooting a wedding for a friend in a string band and, when the band showed up and started playing, 300 people just got up and started dancing to folk songs. It was really incredible — I'd never seen anything like it before."

Quinn inquired about the group and came to find the Mummers weren't just a bunch of people dressed up marching down Broad Street once a year; they were a tradition steeped in family with close-knit bonds. It was the perfect setting for his debut film.

Quinn's first task was to call childhood friend Frank Voight, a fellow La Salle grad and a member of the South Philadelphia String Band. Quinn, a resident of Mount Airy, asked the Delaware County native if he could spend some time with the String Band for a couple of weeks to get an insider's look at the culture. Two weeks turned into two years. The filmmaker — along with pal Steve Beal as producer — took a cast of non-actors, including all 100-plus members of the String Band, and created the film that is receiving a lot of attention, including in Park City, where it will be shown in competition as one of 10 fiction feature-length films at Slamdance. The festival is a showcase for first-time filmmakers where, this year, upwards of

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1,200 movies were submitted, including Quinn's. The director sent it in himself, but "was shocked" to find out via phone in September it was selected.

When filming began, Quinn had his mind set on doing much of the work in Bucks County, where he and a majority of the cast lived. The further he got into the process, the more he realized he needed the authenticity of South Philly. He moved filming — most of which took place nights and weekends — into a house at Second and Wolf streets and to the Italian Market, Second Street and the waterfront.

"Once we started shooting, we quickly realized the neighborhood was a character in itself," he said. "It's such a close-knit community, we found that out quickly. We were shooting the family fight scene in the house, and the neighbors all came outside and wanted to make sure everything was OK. We realized quickly these people really look out for one another."

The more Quinn shot the drama following Jack McMonagul, the 25-year-old son of a string band captain and a Mummer himself, and his 16-year-old sister, Kat — which wrapped shooting for the most part in winter '06 — the more he became engrossed in making the details as accurate as possible.

"We decided to expand production and it just added value to the film. I didn't know much [about the Mummers beforehand]. I'd seen the parade on TV, but it's pretty different seeing it in person," Quinn said, adding he did watch the '01 Mummers' documentary "Strut" and did research prior to shooting.

Voight said the South Philadelphia String Band was more than happy to let Quinn in. "When he threw the original concept at us, everybody was for it," Voight, 31, said. "There are certain things that you do as a band you don't want others to find out until New Year's Day, and he knew about that."

Voight described the group as a "laid-back bunch of guys," and very family-oriented, which Quinn picked up on right away.

"Him being down [at the South Philadelphia String Band Club], I think he got the sense of [family]," Voight said, adding the group saw Quinn just about every week, and were accompanied by the filmmaker and five cameras — most of them and all the other equipment his from freelancing — down Broad during the '05 parade. "It was an honor for Tom to ask us to partake in this

and portray what it actually takes to be in an organization like this. He's almost like a member of the band."

Both Voight and Quinn said, to their knowledge, a fictional story with a Mummers' backdrop has never been done before. Voight said he's seen most of the film, and was just mailed a final copy.

Quinn said he hopes the movie will get picked up by a distributor at the festival, especially since the final touches, such as re-shoots on a few minor scenes that will be added to the version going to Utah, were being worked on right up through last week.

"The tough part was [the Mummers] sort of get summed up into one stereotype," he said by way of overall misconception. "What I got out of it was people who really care about tradition. The stereotype is that it's just about guys who are in a neighborhood. But these guys start January, investing time, money, effort when they don't really get any of it back. But they do it because their dads did it, their grandfathers did it and now their sons and daughters do it. Sometimes I think it's overshadowed in drunkenness and novelty, but to me, it's a lot of guys who really care passionately about what they do."

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