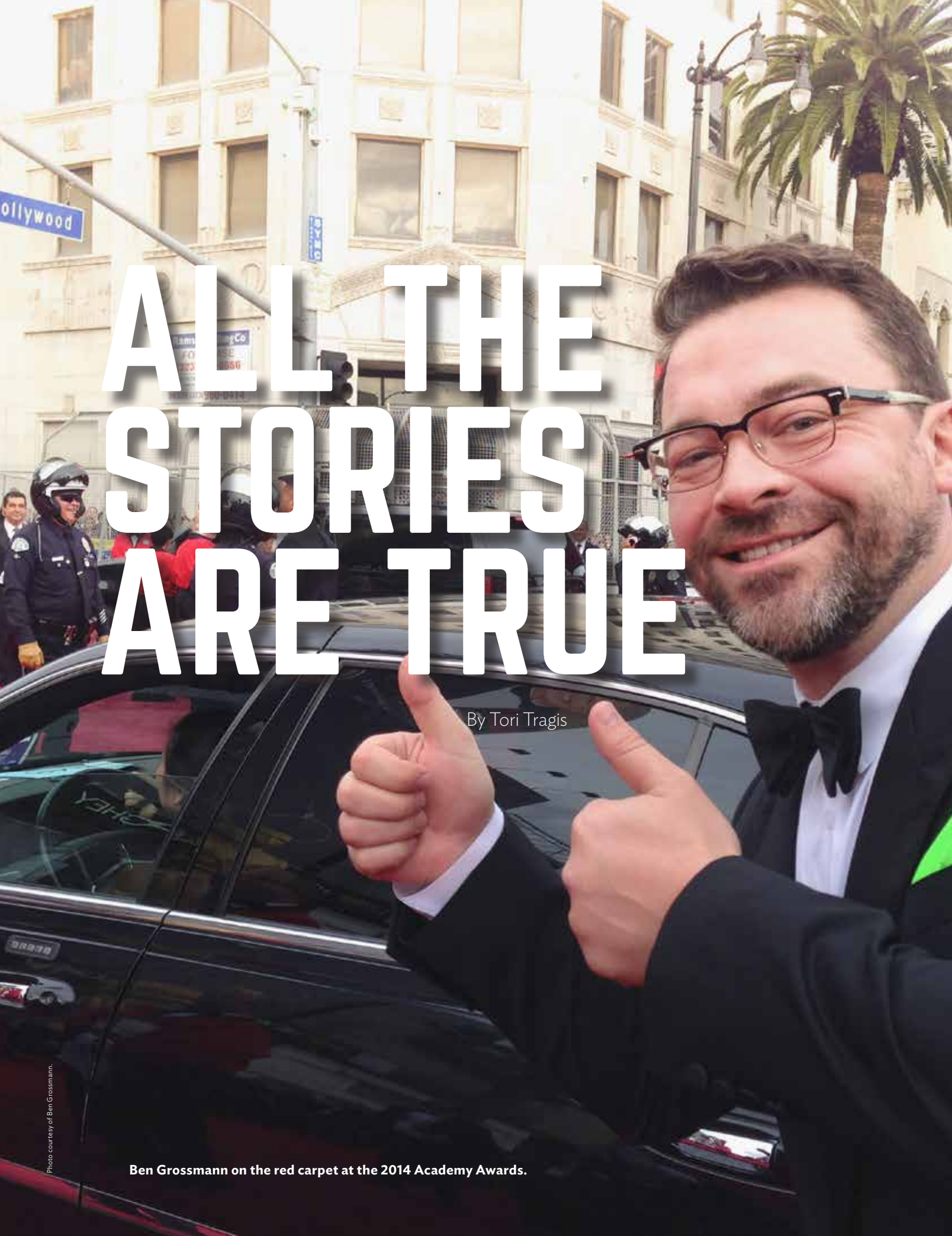
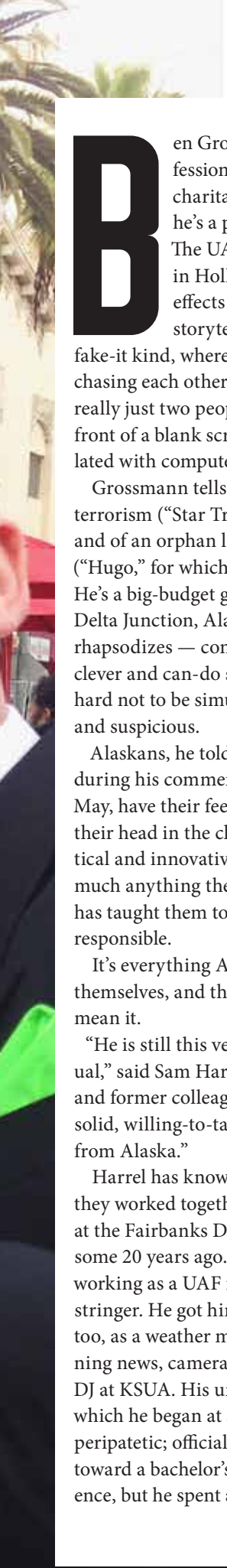


ALL THE STORIES ARE TRUE

By Tori Tragis

Photo courtesy of Ben Grossmann.

Ben Grossmann on the red carpet at the 2014 Academy Awards.



Ben Grossmann '95 is a professional liar. Putting it more charitably, and accurately, he's a professional storyteller. The UAF grad is a hot ticket in Hollywood, making visual effects for movies, so his storytelling is the ultimate fake-it kind, where the villain and hero chasing each other across a cityscape are really just two people running around in front of a blank screen that's later populated with computer-generated images.

Grossmann tells tall tales of interstellar terrorism ("Star Trek Into Darkness") and of an orphan living in a clock tower ("Hugo," for which he won an Oscar). He's a big-budget guy from small-town Delta Junction, Alaska, so when he rhapsodizes — convincingly — about the clever and can-do spirit of Alaskans, it's hard not to be simultaneously seduced and suspicious.

Alaskans, he told the class of 2015 during his commencement address in May, have their feet on the ground and their head in the clouds. They are practical and innovative. They can do pretty much anything they want because Alaska has taught them to be resourceful and responsible.

It's everything Alaskans believe about themselves, and the thing is, he seems to mean it.

"He is still this very grounded individual," said Sam Harrel, a longtime friend and former colleague. "He's still this solid, willing-to-talk-to-you nice guy from Alaska."

Harrel has known Grossmann since they worked together as photographers at the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner some 20 years ago. Grossmann was a kid, working as a UAF intern and then as a stringer. He got himself other media jobs, too, as a weather man on the local evening news, cameraman for commercials, DJ at KSUA. His university education, which he began at age 15, was equally peripatetic; officially he was working toward a bachelor's in political science, but he spent a lot of time learning photojournalism from Professor Charles Mason.

"I'm in Hollywood now," Grossmann said, "working side by side with the world's most famous, most financially successful photographers, and in numerous cases my expertise in photography — which comes from classes I took in journalism and broadcasting at UAF — outweighs the classes of people who went to the best cinematography schools in the world. I'll get into arguments with them and I'm like, 'I'm telling you, I know I'm right because I learned this in college.'"

"Almost always I'm right."

Grossmann was born in Washington, D.C., but moved as a baby to Alaska when his father was posted to Fort Wainwright. The family eventually settled in Delta Junction, where Grossmann spent his teen years until his early entry to UAF. In Fairbanks he did everything he wanted to and most of what he had to. Attending class was sometimes a problem. And when he was done, he was done, never mind the handful of credits needed to get his bachelor's. (He eventually applied for and got his associate degree.) When the starter on his decrepit Saab broke down around Christmas 2001, rather than wait for the part to arrive, he decided to get it himself.

"I had a friend push-start the car and I drove straight to San Francisco without turning the car off," he said. "I shut the car off there because I could jump-start it again on a hill."

His next stop was Los Angeles. "Might as well jump right to the hardest place to break into the business," he reasoned.

It was, quite literally, his road to success. "Push-start your car and drive without stopping," he recommended, not totally tongue-in-cheek. "Seek out something you've never done before or that seems impossible at the time. And then try to do it and that's how you end up here."

"Here" is the Hollywood of success, one he shares with his wife, Ariane, and their young daughter, Scarlet. "Here" is Martin Scorsese and J.J. Abrams asking him to make movies with them. "Here" is lots of hard work — some nights Grossmann sleeps just two or three hours, if at all. He is very clear on two points. One, he puts in many hours at a very fast pace. In that sense, he has earned his spot on the awards stage. Two, his achievements are rooted in being Alaskan.

"There's no shortage of ways Alaska will kill you for the stupidest little things," he said. "In Alaska you develop this sense of responsibility that says I am going to do great things and I am going to take great risks, and at a minimum I am going to rely on everything that I do to prepare to make it successfully through those circumstances. Because Alaska is beautiful and it encourages you to take risks and do great things and go to great places and see things that no one's ever seen before.

"It's not telling you that you can or can't do anything. It's only reminding you that if you fail for any reason, that it's going to kill you."

Having lived Outside for many years now, Grossmann sees key traits Alaskans learn in balancing the extremes of phenomenal beauty and potential disaster. There's a willingness to go it alone but also a readiness to help each other, especially at 40 below. An understanding that not everything comes with an instruction manual or a safety net. An acceptance that sometimes you don't know what's going to happen next, but you better figure out how to deal with it when it does.

"Alaskans arrive with this natural problem-solving ability that comes from engaging in this situation or place or encounter that they've never experienced before," he said. "Alaskans approach everything fresh like a child but with the responsibility of an adult, and you just can't get that anywhere else. So when you come to a place like Los Angeles you're a fish out of water but you can pretty much just plow right through any problems you encounter."

Grossmann's version of the Alaska character — no rules, plowing on through — is equally applied to himself,

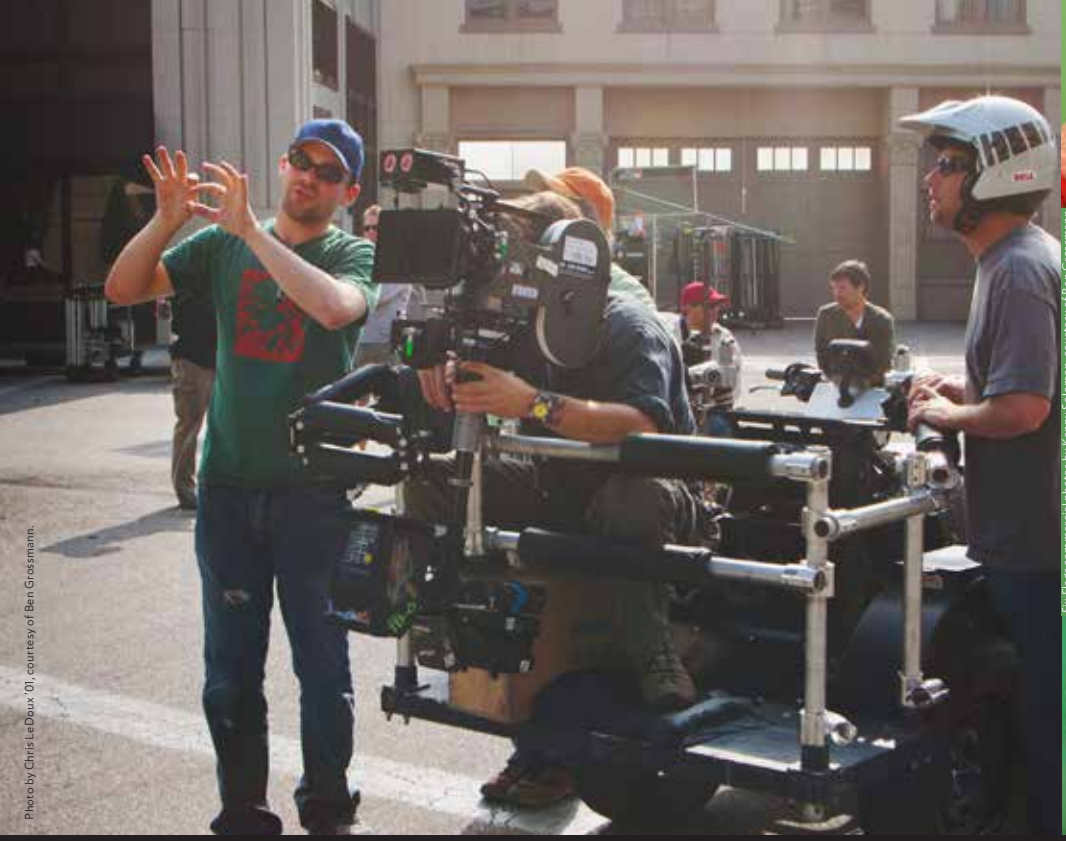
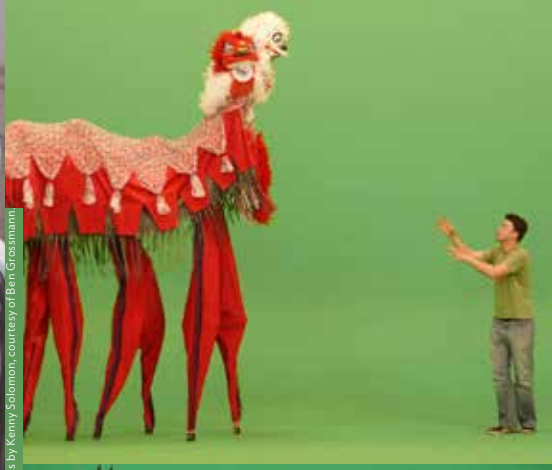
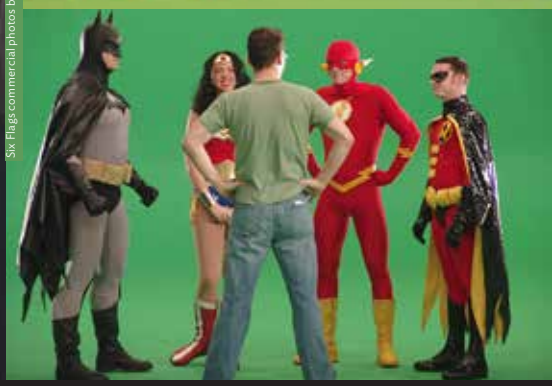


Photo by Chris LeDoux '01, courtesy of Ben Grossmann.





Six Flags commercial photos by Kenny Solomon, courtesy of Ben Grossmann.

Left: Grossmann discusses a Steadicam shot with a camera crew on the Warner Bros. backlot in Burbank, California, in 2006. Top and bottom right: Grossmann directs a team of Chinese acrobatic performers and members of the Justice League during a commercial shoot for Six Flags in Hollywood in 2005.

"Immense talent, just greatly talented," said photojournalism professor Charles Mason. "Of course I didn't know exactly what he'd end up doing. I probably didn't think about Hollywood, but you knew he was going to do something great."

of course. His former professor, Charles Mason, recalled a photo assignment the young Grossmann submitted for a class. The assignment was art, Grossmann said at the time, and therefore didn't have to follow the basic rules of photography. Mason's contention was that you have to learn the rules before you break them.

"I don't know if I ever actually said this to him or if I just thought it," Mason said, "but I remember thinking, 'You know, you're going to go far, just not in this class.'"

He did learn the rules eventually, starting with the basics: Get a job. His very first gig in Hollywood was as a temp, mostly running errands and doing fill-in desk jobs. Then he got hired to work on a Disney TV show as a wire- and rig-removal artist — someone who makes the wires holding up the actors disappear on screen; he did the same thing for the 2002 movie "Spider-Man." His curiosity and energy took care of the rest.

"He knows everything about the technical side but he also understands art," Mason said. "Not everybody can do that. I think he's become kind of a fixer [in Hollywood] that way, talking to the technical and artistic sides and bringing them together."

As a visual effects supervisor, Grossmann spends a lot of time bridging the many gaps between vision and execution. He sees his job as being that of a project manager as much as — perhaps more than — a creator himself. He might oversee teams in several countries working on individual aspects of a project (which might be just one shot in one scene), each one in its own time zone, scheduled to hand their part to the next time zone over, clocking out as the next team clocks in.

"It is such a complex, highly challenging orchestration of moving parts speaking different languages with different cultures," Grossmann said. "The difficulty and truly the real art of this job is being able to produce art through that assembly line. That's the hard part."

Grossmann is probably not going to live permanently in Alaska again. His friend Harrel,

"PUSH-START YOUR CAR AND DRIVE WITHOUT STOPPING"

who has visited him in California, said the fast-paced LA scene suits him.

"He was always moving too fast and thinking too far ahead to stick around here," said Harrel, who still lives in Fairbanks.

But Grossmann returns often to his home state. Maybe that's why his praise of the Alaska character rings true. Instead of vacationing in Greece, he goes to Girdwood, maybe in part to keep his frontier skills sharp and his northern cred intact.

"You don't fully appreciate what you learn by being in Alaska until you're not in Alaska anymore."

Tori Tragis is a writer and editor for UAF Marketing and Communications. She knew Ben casually in college. His language was a lot saltier then, but what he had to say was always interesting, and that hasn't changed.

Web extra: Watch Ben Grossmann's entertaining commencement speech at **http://bit.ly/uaf060822**.

Outtakes

Worlds within worlds

"A movie set is batshit crazy insanity where you have to be prepared to do anything at a moment's notice, and everything that you do is costing $1,000 a minute, or sometimes $2,000 a minute, so the amount of pressure to over-perform and exceed and excel … You're literally on a floor where some people are making $6 an hour and they're standing right next to someone who's making $600,000 a day. You take all those people and put them in a pressure cooker and then you don't tell them what they're going to do until you need them to do it. Now imagine the protocol and the decorum and the rules that are unspoken and unwritten for how that society plays itself out. It's pretty amazing. I think it's actually what separates really successful people from people who never get the job again, because if you can't learn how to do that then you're not part of the team. You're not part of the family. You get left behind and that's it. And you'll never really know why because if you didn't get it, you don't get it, so you don't know."

One second can take forever

"Look at the movie 'Hugo.' [There is one shot] doing something that we didn't do in any other shot of the entire movie. That was a one-off. That was a prototype. I couldn't take a team of people that did a bunch of other stuff and say, OK, now do this. I had to go hire a completely different specialized team of people whose whole lives were built around doing that one thing, and they did that one shot, and I had to babysit them through the entire process. And then I had to present it to Martin Scorsese and get it approved and in to be edited and into the studio, and that's one shot, and I have 800 to go."

Magical thinking

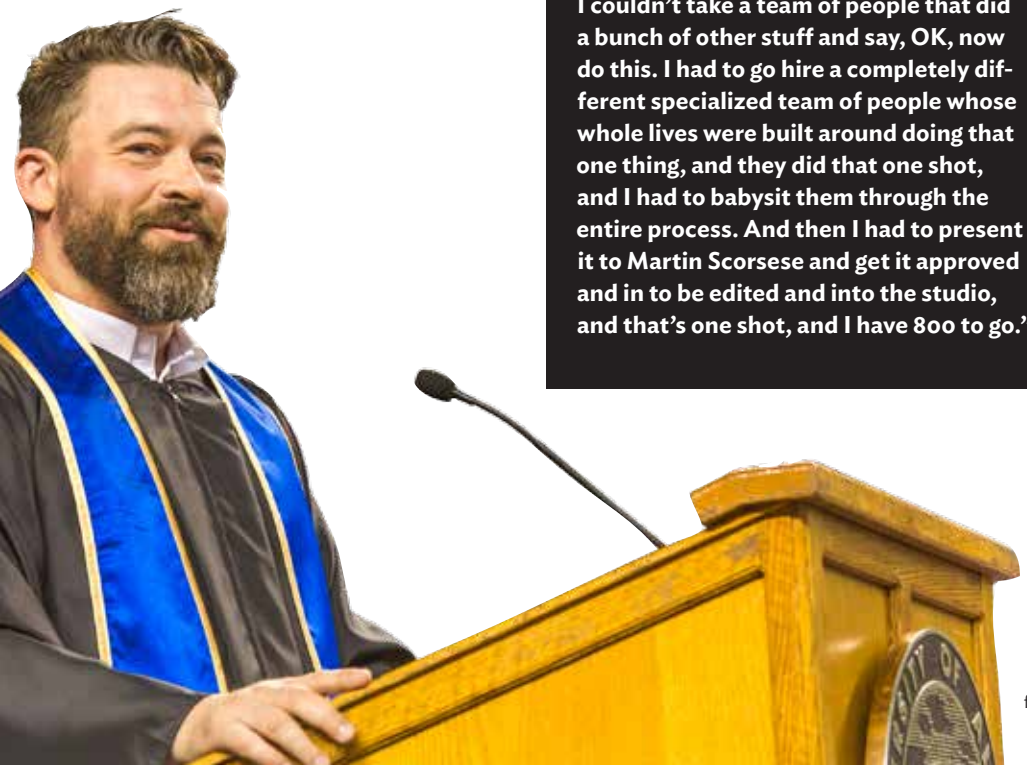
"People think you just go on set and you wave your hand and you drink a mocha and you go like, 'Ah, I think we should have dinosaurs over there!' and people go wow! and then it happens. But if you actually saw the complexity that goes on behind the scene, it would take forever to understand just what the hell is going on."

On working for Martin Scorsese

"Of all the movie sets I've ever been on, a Martin Scorsese set is the most challenging. It is the most exceptionally focused, rare set because everyone is expected to be the best. One mistake and your career is over. It is a very intense place to be. To do a Martin Scorsese set right is really difficult, and then to do it so you're doing it acceptably — that's like above and beyond anything. But then do it with grace and humor and show off a little bit — it takes years to get to that point."

Photo by Alex J. Berliner/abimages, courtesy of the Visual Effects Society and Ben Grossmann.

Ben Grossmann, Karen Murphy, Rob Legato, Martin Scorsese, Adam Watkins and Alex Henning the night they won the award for Outstanding Supporting Visual Effects in a Feature Motion Picture at the Visual Effects Society Awards in 2012.



"When you're failing and dropping out of college you think, someday I'm going to do something so good that they're going to call and ask me to come back to speak. And then I got that phone call. I didn't actually expect that to happen at all."