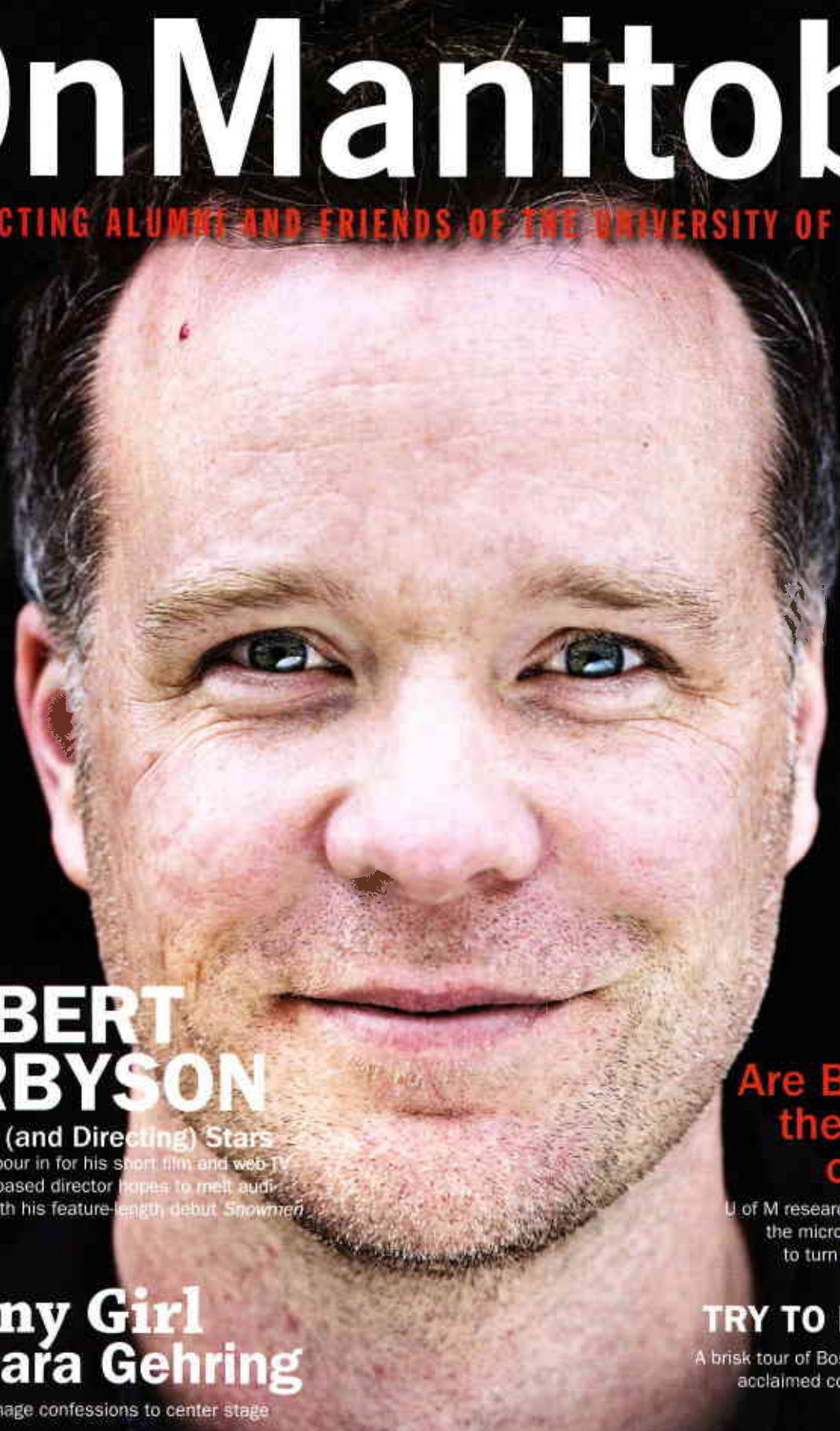


# OnManitoba

CONNECTING ALUMNI AND FRIENDS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA



## ROBERT KIRBYSON

Is Seeing (and Directing) Stars

As accolades pour in for his short film and web-TV work, the L.A.-based director hopes to melt audience hearts with his feature-length debut, *Snowmen*

## Are Bacteria the Future of Fuel?

U of M researchers are studying the microorganisms' ability to turn waste into energy

## Funny Girl Barbara Gehring

Brings her teenage confessions to center stage

## TRY TO KEEP UP

A brisk tour of Boston (on foot) with acclaimed contemporary artist Fred H.C. Liang

**ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:** An Arctic research announcement so huge we gave it its own cover: see reverse | four generations, five doctors, one medical school | hidden gems in Archives and Special Collections

# IN THE DIRECTOR'S CHAIR



Winnipeg-raised **Robert Kirbyson** [BFA(Hons)/92] plumbs his well of childhood experience to create his cinematic vision

David Silverberg

The irony is almost too rich to be true: aspiring cinematographer loses his sight in one eye, decides to become a director, fixes his eyesight but continues to focus on directing. Robert Kirbyson has a story ideal for its own biopic, if only the tale was over. At 40, Kirbyson is just beginning to realize his vision as a prominent filmmaker in Hollywood.

In May, his debut feature film *Snowmen* screened at the venerable Tribeca Film Festival where it placed second in the Audience Award category—losing out to a documentary about fellow Canadians, rock band Rush. Co-starring Christopher Lloyd and Ray Liotta, the film is semi-autobiographical but Kirbyson is mum on the details. He did reveal in an interview the storyline is inspired by events during his childhood years in Winnipeg. “It’s my most personal film,” says Kirbyson, now living in Los Angeles with his wife Catherine.

*Snowmen*, which is slated for an October release pending a finalized distribution deal, is eons away from the early days Kirbyson enjoyed on the Prairies. How many young filmmakers can say they worked on *Sesame Street* at 19? In high school, a teacher connected him with the National Film Board in Winnipeg, where several filmmakers were creating animated segments for the children’s show. He produced a few of those segments, all while he was at the University of Manitoba pursuing his bachelor of fine arts.

Before he enrolled in the School of Art, he was inches away from going into one of the sciences. “Then my mom told me I’m too creative to be a doctor,” Kirbyson says, “and that encouraged me to take fine arts and eventually filmmaking.”

Kirbyson credits a very special experimental video class, led by Alex Poruchnyk, for shaping his vision of filmmaking. “That class, and my whole time at the university, really gave me my foundation so I was ready to take a gamble when I graduated.”

It wasn’t a major gamble, but Kirbyson left *Sesame* to try his hand at directing for the CBC’s hit reality show about interesting jobs, *It’s a Living*. Filming all day and editing all night, Kirbyson suddenly became busier than he expected. As fun as it was to capture host Peter Jordan tackling fascinating careers, Kirbyson admits the stress took a toll on his body.

Then came the bad news: in 2000, central serous retinopathy damaged his right eye so severely he would soon be legally blind. Specialists guessed his work with cameras may have contributed to the condition. No one really knows why, Kirbyson says, but doctors told him he burst a blood vessel, and that explosion compounded to affect other key vessels. “When it first happened, I was terrified,” he admits. “Would a guy who loves making movies suddenly go blind?”

But a funny thing happened on the way to the doctor’s office. Kirbyson turned his pain into gain: after hauling cameras and testing the directorial waters with CBC Winnipeg, the then 33-year-old was ready to pursue feature filmmaking. “In a weird way, I felt that problem was divine intervention,” he remembers.

DS: Rob, where’d you get the idea for *Ctrl Z*?

RK: I needed to make the original short as part of my advanced application to the Steven Spielberg reality show *On The Lot*. The film had to be five minutes and we only had a week to finish it. I needed an idea that I could shoot in one day, cheap, in a single get-able location.

I pitched to a co-worker an old feature film idea of mine about a time machine that travelled back only a few seconds—essentially an undo button. My friend responded, “Oh, like Ctrl Z on a keyboard”. Epiphany! I wrote it that evening in a couple hours.

I should point out that I’ve always pronounced the title “Ctrl Zed”, much to the amusement of my American cast and crew.

What if life had an undo button?

## Ctrl Z



Zachary Levi Tony Hale Emy Coligado

WATCH KIRBYSON'S WEB SERIES by searching 'Ctrl' at nbc.com.

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On the set of *Ctrl Z* from left: Steve Howey, Rob Kirbyson and Tony Hale. Courtesy: NBC Photo/Chris Haston; Robert Kirbyson on the set of *Snowmen* with Christopher Lloyd (r) and young cast members: Christian Martyn, Bobb'e J. Thompson, and Bobby Coleman (photos courtesy Gorilla Pictures); *Snowmen* movie poster.

In another twist of fate, Kirbyson recently had surgery to correct his eyesight. But despite his restored vision, Kirbyson doesn't see himself returning to cinematography; he's caught the directing bug.

When he began, he worked on freebies, tried his hand as a director of photography, moved to L.A. with Catherine (who works as a film editor), took screenwriting courses. Like any passionate artist, he struggled until he found what he wanted.

What he got was a surprise. Kirbyson wrote and directed a short film called *Ctrl Z*, about a magical computer keyboard with the ability to stop time. Starring Tony Hale (who played Buster in the TV comedy *Arrested Development*), the film won acclaim at short film fests and even attracted major network attention. Kirbyson and his team were hired by NBC in 2009 to write a 10-part web series based on the short film.

"I appreciate Rob because he knew what he wanted with *Ctrl*," says Hale during a phone interview. "Some directors aren't secure in their vision, but not Rob. He made everyone feel comfortable."

Hale says he enjoyed his experience on *Ctrl* so much he would gladly work with Kirbyson again.

*Ctrl* the web series is unique, for both the director and the TV industry: it's been hailed as the first original web series from network TV (compared to offshoot vids from shows like *The Office*). Like the short film that inspired it, *Ctrl* has earned recognition in the award circuit: it won Web Comedy of the Year at the 2010 Los Angeles Web Series Festival, and Hale took home a Streamy (think Oscars for the web vid industry) for Best Actor in a Comedy Series.

Comedy works for the web because viewers want quick bites of humour, Kirbyson says. When he taught filmmaking at the University of British Columbia, he stressed to students the importance of story, and he sees the web as a prime vehicle for telling a tight, well-edited narrative. "People can leave in seconds if they aren't hooked in right away," says Kirbyson. "On the web, you have to win over the audience quickly."

He's hoping to win over audiences with *Snowmen*, which he likens to a Canadian *Stand By Me*. And he's encouraged by the test screenings. "People were crying and cheering, and I dream of that, to move people with my story," Kirbyson says.

*Snowmen* would be ideal for the Canadian market, he adds. "Since I find it nostalgic, I think most Canadians will too."

Kirbyson is also going Canuck for his next project: a film about hockey. He's tight-lipped about details—the deal is preliminary—but let's just say Kirbyson is rooting for the film to be shot in Winnipeg. "I'll take any excuse to return to Winnipeg," he says with a short laugh.

Some artists carry around a lucky charm when they work. Others claim to follow the moral taught by a teacher or parent. Robert Kirbyson's philosophy can be summed up in a poem he read as a boy, four lines he's learned to live by, four lines to inspire anyone enduring the challenges of their art:

"Time and stress will make or break/Keep smiling, tho' through tears/For it's not the years you live that count/But how you live the years." 🍷

## Fred Liang continued from page 23

Liang describes the relationship he has with his parents today with humour, "Luckily for me, my parents have more to worry about now than me: six grand kids, they're off my back." And acceptance, "We'll always be kids in our parents' eyes."

Though he paints himself as the black sheep, Liang nonetheless excelled at the things he took an interest in. And art was there, right from an early age. "I remember my oldest brother John teaching me to draw; very quickly, I could draw better than him," says Liang. He brought his 'knack' for drawing with him to the U of M's School of Art. There, a trio of instructors: Diane Whitehouse, Steve Higgins and Sheila Butler, especially Butler, immersed Liang in the true language of art. "(Butler) totally dismissed the fact that I could do photorealistic art and said it was 'the worst crap she'd ever seen,'" says Liang. "She woke me up from my slumber. Sheila was the most influential as a teacher because she taught me, 'tell them the truth and they'll figure it out.'"

Years later, in 2001, Liang returned to the School for a solo exhibition in Gallery One One One. Cliff Eyland, an associate professor in the School and the Gallery's director, shared his thoughts on Liang's work. "He set up a circle of wild Manitoban rice on the gallery floor and a circle of white rice in the rotunda floor just outside the gallery," Eyland recalls. "I thought of that as a direct reference to his ethnicity as a Chinese Canadian, but also as an invitation—like all of his work—to a certain kind of contemplation. Fred made specific reference to Zen Buddhism in our conversations and I regarded his work as a set of images and objects meant to perhaps provoke some kind of awakening after contemplation."

Back to Boston, and March. Dinner is over but the conversation continues as Liang leads a brisk hike through the city's touristy spots. Our interview has been an endurance race of sorts from Liang's studio, to Chinatown, to dinner, to now, its end. And on the sidewalk below our feet is the finish line to the Boston Marathon. 🏃