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# Telling a True-Life Story, Following a 'True-Film' Style

By MICHAEL CIEPLY  
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GARNERVILLE, N.Y. — Some come [here](#) for the pork chops.



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Sabrina Nicosia/Rockland County Times  
Jonah Hill on the set of "True Story" at Sparky's Diner in Garnerville, N.Y.

But on a recent morning this month, they were featuring the actor [Jonah Hill](#) at Sparky's, a roadside diner in this [hamlet](#), some 37 miles up the Hudson River from Midtown Manhattan.

Outside, a crowd of extras done up in flannel and camouflage chomped breakfast sandwiches next to a wooden bear. The restaurant was doubling for the rural Northwest.

Inside, Mr. Hill, the comic actor who has occasionally turned serious in films like "Moneyball" and the coming "Wolf of Wall Street," was wrestling not with the chops, but with what might be the most complicated role of his young career.



Michael Finkel.

In a movie called "True Story" — its tale is true, to a degree — he is playing a disgraced reporter, the real-life [Michael Finkel](#). The film, from Brad Pitt's Plan B Entertainment, is the latest to explore the foibles of journalism as part of a small but sometimes distinguished cinematic subgenre. And as Mr. Hill, tucked into a green sweater, shirttails dangling, worked his way through a scene, there was a hint of something new and slightly chilling: journalistic horror.

Mr. Finkel was banished as a contributing writer for The New York Times in early 2002 for [faking much of a magazine cover story](#) about the travails of a young African plantation worker, who turned out to be a composite. Seeking redemption, he quickly struck up what proved to be a mutually exploitive relationship — mixing friendship, journalism and some bizarre exploration of shared reality — with one Christian Longo.

Mr. Longo had just murdered his wife and three children in Oregon. And then, improbably, Mr. Longo assumed Mr. Finkel's identity as he went on the lam outside the United

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Pat Sullivan/Associated Press  
Christian Longo under arrest in 2002.

States.

In the film, Mr. Longo, now on death row, is played by James Franco, who was not at Sparky's Diner that Monday. But the scene is supposed to end, according to a recent draft of the screenplay by David Kajganich, with the reporter, in a handwritten note, begging for help from his creepy doppelgänger.

"I just want to ask what it felt like being 'me,'" he writes.

Plan B Entertainment, which is producing "True Story" with backing from New Regency Pictures for distribution next year by 20th Century Fox, has twice before made films — neither a great success — about journalists who jumped the rails.

The first was "A Mighty Heart" in 2007, about the search for Daniel Pearl after he was kidnapped and murdered while on assignment in Pakistan for The Wall Street Journal. Later, the company's "Eat Pray Love" cast Julia Roberts as Elizabeth Gilbert, a magazine writer who abandoned a more conventional career to chronicle her globe-spanning quest for self-fulfillment.

But other films about the craft of journalism have drawn critical praise. In 1981, Sydney Pollack collaborated with the journalist-screenwriter Kurt Luedtke to land three Oscar nominations for "Absence of Malice," about a fictional reporter who wrecked a life with a carelessly reported story.

In 2003, "Shattered Glass," about the inventions of the real journalist Stephen Glass, won critical accolades, though few ticket sales, for the writer-director Billy Ray, who based his movie on a magazine article by Buzz Bissinger.

Three years later, Bennett Miller's "Capote," about Truman Capote's journalistic seduction by two itinerant killers who were the subjects of his book "In Cold Blood," was nominated for five Oscars, including best picture. (It won one, for its star, Philip Seymour Hoffman.)

"True Story" promises to be stranger than its precedents.

The movie is being directed by Rupert Goold, the artistic director of the Almeida Theater in London, who has a reputation for taking risks. He is known for conceptually sophisticated productions that have included a musical telling of the Enron story and a "Macbeth" that featured Patrick Stewart in a Stalinist setting.

Mr. Goold was deep inside Sparky's during shooting last week, too busy to explain how the mind meld between Mr. Finkel and Mr. Longo had become the stuff of his first feature film.

Mr. Kajganich sees Mr. Goold as a guide to invisible currents in a relationship that was first described by Mr. Finkel in his 2005 book, "True Story." "This story has crucial elements that are unspoken or otherwise concealed," Mr. Kajganich wrote in an e-mail this week.

Though his own résumé is heavy with horror — he has worked on possible remakes of "Pet Sematary" and "Creature From the Black Lagoon" — Mr. Kajganich stressed that "True Story" is not a fright film about the Longo family murders.

"Writing this story in any way that would intentionally minimize or sensationalize their deaths is not something I could have agreed to, and avoiding those two scenarios was a factor in every narrative choice I made," he wrote.

Still, Mr. Longo is a chilling subject.

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He ultimately confessed to having strangled his wife, Mary Jane, and his 2-year-old daughter, Madison, before dropping his slightly older daughter, Sadie, and his son, Zachery, into icy waters, with weights attached. Yet he came clean only after spinning a more subtle horror, by persuading Mr. Finkel to teach him the storyteller's craft, which he used to construct an intricate lie that was supposed to save him from the jury.

"My experience with him was quite a shock," said Mr. Finkel, who communicated by e-mail this month. "There was a long silence after I wrote the book. But we remain in occasional contact."

Weirdly, Mr. Longo eventually realized his own dream of writing for The Times. As noted in Mr. Kajganich's screenplay, he did so by writing an [Op-Ed piece](#) published in the paper on March 6, 2011, in which he advocated that condemned prisoners should be allowed to become organ donors.

Eileen Murphy, a spokeswoman for The Times, said the paper has no involvement with "True Story," though part of it was filmed in a Manhattan office tower that houses The Times.

Despite the movie's title, moreover, its portrayal of The Times, its editors and Mr. Finkel's experiences at the paper — where he was a contributor under contract to the magazine, but not a staff reporter — are not quite real.

Rather, in the way of Hollywood and, sometimes, of wayward journalists, they are composites.

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