

Tax-Free Films
in association with
goingdigital films

present

wrestling

written & directed by:
Jeremy O'Keefe

starring:
Mark Welling
Lauren Schneider
Melissa Claire Egan
and
Jeff Conaway

Contact:
info@wrestlingthemovie.com

www.wrestlingthemovie.com

"There's something so touching about WRESTLING. This film is subtle and uncompromising. O'Keefe did exactly what he's supposed to do – created a landscape that I won't soon forget. It is a beautiful picture and a stellar freshman effort."

- Todd Milliner, writer/producer, Hazy Mills Productions

about the film

wrestling is not just another teen movie. By exposing the inconsistencies and complexities embracing middle-class teen life, **wrestling** strips the gloss off of the American teen movie and challenges the suburban stereotypes purported by its celluloid counterparts (*She's All That*, *Can't Hardly Wait* and the *American Pie* series).

The film follows Jake Conner (Mark Welling) as he attempts to wrap up his life before heading off to college. Jake is forced to face an onslaught of new emotions surrounding the death of his mother, his grieving father (Jeff Conaway), the loyalty of his best friend (Melissa Claire Egan) and a new, exciting romance with a girl (Lauren Schneider) struggling to cope with her own loss.

wrestling confronts how we negotiate our memories by blurring the images and emotions of the transitional time between high school and college. In doing so, the line between documentary and narrative film is also blurred, offering audiences the chance to celebrate teenage love and loss like never before.

about the production

Tired of seeing his generation simplified on film, then 21-year old actor, writer, director Jeremy O'Keefe set out to create a story and characters that challenged the stereotypes of suburbia and even more specifically, those of his home state of Delaware – the place made infamous by credit card companies and Wayne and Garth.

Three years later, armed with a college degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and several experiences working both in front of and behind the camera, Jeremy felt he was ready to bring **wrestling** to the screen. He asked his friends: from home in Delaware, from college, from Los Angeles, from New York, if they would work on it for free – act, produce, edit, shoot, boom operate – they agreed. His mom's friends all volunteered to cater meals for the 14 day August shoot in his hometown of Wilmington, Delaware. His parents turned over the Christmas card list, so Jeremy could seek investors.

People came out of the word-work to help on the project: family friends, strangers, local businesses, Jeremy's and Rachel's former high schools. The City of Wilmington even offered to house veteran actor Jeff Conaway (*Grease*, "Taxi") in their executive suites free of charge. On a shoe-string budget of \$14,000, the cast and crew of **wrestling** set out to challenge themselves and have a good time working on this

project, and succeeded in both. They also happened to create a stunning little film in the process.

"A surefire fest film. Capturing suburban teens growing up, WRESTLING shows real promise. Jeremy O'Keefe is a writer/director to watch."

- Houston King, producer's rep, *Funny Ha-Ha, Mutual Appreciation*

the filmmakers

produced by:	Rachel Morse, Tim O'Hara & Jeremy O'Keefe
co-producer:	Elizabeth Lockman
associate producer:	Sue Devito
directed by:	Jeremy O'Keefe
written by:	Jeremy O'Keefe
cinematography by:	Tim O'Hara
editing by:	Rachel Morse & Jeremy O'Keefe
original music by:	Day Action Band

cast

Jake Conner:	Mark Welling
Franklin Conner:	Jeff Conaway
Carrie Masters:	Lauren Schneider
Ali Court:	Melissa Claire Egan
Mrs. Masters:	Susan Moses
Lauren Nichols:	Leslie Gilliam
Chris Doran:	Richie German
Reese Wade:	Tamara Davis
Ryan Conner:	Alex Goodman
Seth Conner:	Adam Montgomery
Sara Houston:	Annie Fair
Kristin Gilotti:	Marcy Minton
Todd Colgate:	Jeremy O'Keefe
Brent:	Ken Latsko
Rob:	Tom Hamilton
Teddy:	Shawn Ryan

production details

location:	Wilmington, Delaware
contract:	SAG Experimental
camera:	Canon XL-1 (PAL)
format:	Mini-DV
production companies:	Tax-Free Films, goingdigitalfilms,

"Jeremy O'Keefe's WRESTLING is a quietly honest, unassuming film that captures more truth about being a young adult than any I have seen. Jeff Conaway's performance is heartbreaking."

-Rob Mello, Hazy Mills Productions

“Jeremy O’Keefe is a natural born filmmaker...The real star of this movie is his direction. He is very resourceful on the most limited of budgets.”

-Joel Michaely, actor/producer *The Quiet*.

about the filmmakers

Jeremy O’Keefe

writer/director/producer

Born and raised in Wilmington, Delaware and a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Dramatic Art program, Jeremy is an actor, writer, producer and director.

Jeremy conceived, produced, acted in and directed *patriot* - a multimedia theatrical event comprised of six original plays and a series of over 85 filmed interviews with elementary, middle and high school students that served as a collective representation as to how young people were responding to patriotism in the wake of September 11th. Because of *patriot*, in April of 2002, he was invited to Washington D.C. to speak on a panel on Freedom in America, hosted by Cokie Roberts and Doro Bush. As a director, Jeremy has studied with the late Mike Ockrent, Susan Stroman and Ted Shaffner.

Furthermore Jeremy has taught acting in St. Croix, U.S.V.I. and worked in Los Angeles for Miramax Films and with film producers Laura Bickford, P. Jennifer Dana and Sonja Grunden. In New York, Jeremy has worked in production for Stratus Films (*Winter Passing & Dave Chappelle's Block Party*) VH1 (*Wendy Williams is on Fire*) and on music videos, commercials and with the non-profit off-Broadway theater company, Edge Theater Company, where he produced their second annual celebrity bingo night fundraiser.

Currently, Jeremy is attached to direct *Beast of Burden*, by Zach Baylin. *Beast* is a 1945 Western revenge thriller produced by Michael J. Katz & Cassidy Lunnen. They are seeking financing, talent and we aim to go into production in November in Utah.

He has also just completed his second screenplay, *Richard*, a smart, sharp teen adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Richard III*. *Richard* is a cross between *Heathers* and *Cruel Intentions* with a splash of *Scream* and a dash of *Bring It On*. Rather than being set in an Elizabethan England at wartime, *Richard* has been updated to a posh Northern California suburb where war is waged not on the battlefield, but in the hallways and on the dance floor as our title character, now a young girl, takes down everyone in her path to become Dance Team Captain and win the State Dance Team Championship.

For his company, Tax-Free Films, Jeremy is also in early stages of developing the 2001 St. Martin's Press novel, *You Think You Hear*, written by his novelist older brother, Matt O'Keefe, into a half-hour, single camera television program.

Tim O’Hara

Producer/Director of Photography

Tim O'Hara has a B.A. in film studies from Cornell University. In college, Tim produced two short films (one of which followed two Cornell custodians and is still used by the school's office of human resources as well as a class in the school of Industrial Labor Relations), wrote two original feature length scripts, and spent a summer working in Jim Henson Pictures' creative development department in Hollywood. Upon graduation, Tim joined Boston's National Public Radio station WBUR, as a photojournalist intern in their new media division. Most recently, Tim co-founded goingdigitalfilms, LLC in order to produce and direct the documentary feature "1". "1" tells the story of De La Salle High School and football's longest winning streak and was screened at the 2004 Cinequest Film Festival in San Jose and the 28th Annual Cleveland International Film Festival.

Rachel Morse

Producer/Editor

Rachel Morse is a native of Wilmington, Delaware. After earning a B.A. in film studies from Cornell University, Rachel spent two years in Los Angeles, working as an assistant at the Creative Artists Agency. In January 2003, Rachel joined goingdigitalfilms films to produce and edit the feature documentary, "1". The film screened at the 2004 Cinequest Film Festival in San Jose and the 28th Annual Cleveland International Film Festival. Rachel lives in Boston where she has worked as an editor for a small company that broadcasts on college campuses and as a production assistant on a number of cable television documentaries including *Engineering Supermax Prisons* and *Extreme Engineering* for the Discovery Channel

about the cast

Jeff Conaway

Franklin Conner

A professional actor since the age of 9, Jeff has appeared in over fifty motion pictures and television programs, including *Grease*, *Taxi* (Golden Globe nominee, 1979, 1980), *Man on the Moon*, *Babylon 5*, *Jawbreaker*, and *Living the Dream*. Jeff continues to live in Los Angeles, where he teaches acting classes.

Mark Welling

Jake Conner

The youngest of four, Mark was born in Wisconsin before moving to Delaware at age two, and then onto Michigan, graduating from Okemos High School. After attending Kettering University for a BSME and working as an engineer for almost two years in Pontiac, MI, Mark moved to Los Angeles, where he lives today. **wrestling** marks his acting debut.

Lauren Schneider

Carrie Masters

Lauren recently appeared in leading roles in the independent films, *The Rest of your Life* and *Among Brothers* (John Schwert, Palm Beach 2005). A graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, she currently lives in New York City.

Melissa Claire Egan

Ali Court

Born in Bedford, New York, Melissa stars as "Annie McDermott" on ABC's

All My Children. She has also appeared on *Dawson's Creek* & *One Tree Hill*.

“Very naturalistic, the performances are all real. [O’Keefe does] a great job at capturing a sense of that time and place in life.”

-David Koplan, producer *Chrystal*, *Blackbird*, *The Last Lullaby*

a note from the writer/director

Unlike the glossy, "clever" teen movies of the mid-90's - like *Can't Hardly Wait* and *She's All That* - **wrestling** creates the same group of suburban kids depicted in these films: the jock, the brunette tom-boy, the blond girl-next-door, the black best friends and the slut, in a three-dimensional way. Real suburban kids are way more complex than their celluloid counterparts. Suburban kids are cheesy - but not glossy. Stylistically, our goal with **wrestling** was to shoot a "teen movie" as though it's a film like Larry Clark's *Kids*.

Typically in cinema , the lower-class kids get the gritty, "real" look (*Raising Victor Vargas*, *Thirteen*) and the upper-middle class kids get the glossy, commercial look (*American Pie*, *10 Things I Hate About You*). I wanted to change that. I was tired of not being able to really connect to any of the characters in those movies. Beyond a few similarities, the production values on these films end up detracting from the humanity of these experiences most teens have gone through.

We shot **wrestling** to look like a home-made documentary of these kids' lives - made up of the images and emotions of growing up. In today's world, most people remember their lives through a series of carefully documented photo albums and home video collections. People settle for these memories - rather than *really* remembering how things really were.

The characters and themes in **wrestling** both challenge and celebrate *what is really going on* at that age - the inconsistencies and the complexities that occur when teens are experiencing an onslaught of new emotions and responsibilities. The film is about kids trying to make sense of the world in the only way they know how. *Trial and error*. Children and teenagers experience each new emotion at incredibly heightened levels. They *love* like they've never loved before. They *hurt* like they have never been hurt before. They are unbelievably passionate about each new feeling. And as people get older we tend to look back with embarrassment at these "dramatic" moments - but these are the moments that shape us. They are *universal*.

wrestling is a *celebration* of that universality. I am more interested in providing a glimpse into that teenage period of everyone's life - when we didn't know what we're doing; we weren't even close to being consistent - but we were trying to make sense of it. That's what the story is to me. That's what the film embraces - the uncertainty; the boldness. We're not trying to solve anything. We just want to call attention to that universality in hopes that people will not look back in shame at adolescence , but realize that it is these challenges and even seemingly inconsequential moments that make up who we are this very day. ~ JmO

wrestling

press notes

1. Filmmaker Magazine
In Focus column
"Love is a Battlefield"
Mary Glucksman
2. The News Journal
"Professional 'wrestling'"
Gary Mullinax

FILMMAKER: IN FOCUS

Love is a Battlefield

Mary Glucksman

wrestling

“I’m a huge fan of ’80s and ’90s teen movies and programs like *Dawson’s Creek*, but there was always something missing for me — the characters were archetypes, and I never really related to them,” says Jeremy O’Keefe about his first feature, *wrestling*, a coming-of-age tale about teens in the summer between high school and college. “I wanted to take the storytelling techniques established in grittier films like Larry Clark’s and make a really simple story about the people I grew up with.” O’Keefe ultimately describes his film as “somewhere between *Kids* and *Can’t Hardly Wait*.”

Protagonist Jake is struggling to get past his mother’s death when his best friend’s hookup with a mutual lifelong girl pal prompts him to romance a new girl whose boyfriend was recently killed. “Real suburban kids are way more complex than their celluloid counterparts,” says O’Keefe. “Children and teenagers experience emotions at incredibly heightened levels — they love like they’ve never loved before and they hurt like they’ve never hurt before.”

O’Keefe graduated from the dramatic arts program at UNC-Chapel Hill in 2002 and has since soaked up experience working development and production gigs, interning for Miramax and teaching acting in St. Croix, where his mother grew up. The Mini DV *wrestling* shot for 14 days in August in Wilmington, Del., O’Keefe’s hometown, with doc director Tim O’Hara (*I*) as d.p. “We shot it to look like a homemade documentary of these kids’ lives,” says O’Keefe, who used his parents’ Christmas card list to solicit investments for the bare-bones production. Most of the cast are new to the screen; Mark Welling, younger brother of *Smallville* star Tom Welling, debuts as Jake, and veteran Jeff Conaway (*Taxi*) plays his dad. Also in the cast are Melissa Claire Egan and Lauren Schneider. Next for O’Keefe are an original script for a Caribbean-set drama and a TV adaptation of his brother Matt O’Keefe’s novel *You Think You Hear*.

Contact: Jeremy O’Keefe:

jeremy@wrestlingthemovie.com, www.wrestlingthemovie.com

Professional 'wrestling'

Jeremy O'Keefe adds his gritty, Wilmington-staged tale to the short list of 'films set in Delaware'

By GARY MULLINAX/Staff reporter/

Jeremy O'Keefe, back home in Wilmington to direct his first feature film, stands on one side of a stone wall next to the Mount Salem Cemetery in Wilmington.

Veteran actor Jeff Conaway ("Taxi," "Grease") stands on the other side next to a gravestone being used as a movie prop. He plays the father of three much-younger actors who join him for the scene.

O'Keefe wants a close-up, from about chest-high.

"Oh, you want the 'cowboy,' " Conaway says with a laugh.

"Cowboy?" asks the 24-year-old O'Keefe and some members of his youthful film crew.

"Yeah, that's what they called it when I first went to Hollywood," says Conaway, the only "name" actor on this project.

OK, another lesson learned.

But make no mistake, O'Keefe already knows plenty about filmmaking, having learned on a handful of internships and projects in New York and elsewhere. He moves on this film from one setup to another with the aplomb of a seasoned professional - he can even call for a "cowboy shot" now when he wants to sound like a veteran.

"Jeremy's such a good director. He has thought this out down to the way he wants people's eyes to point," said Sue DeVito, the talent coordinator, as she stood on the sidewalk in front of the cemetery near Tower Hill School. At 50, DeVito - who produces events at Cab Calloway School of the Arts - describes herself and friend M.K. Geneva, who does makeup, as "the two old people" on the project.

O'Keefe has been shooting "wrestling" in and around Wilmington for almost two weeks. Filming ends Sunday and will take place today in Rockford Park.

Scenes have been filmed in front of the Iron Hill Brewery & Restaurant on the Christina Riverfront (where some onlookers were put to work as extras), Valley Garden Park, Tatnall School, A.I. du Pont High School and elsewhere.

O'Keefe also shot at St. Anthony's Catholic Church for an Italian Festival scene.

The festival itself was not going on, but O'Keefe combined the new footage with shots of rides and activities when the event was held earlier this summer.

O'Keefe hopes "wrestling," which he is shooting digitally, will be invited to play on the film-festival circuit and then be picked up by a distributor.

The movie is set specifically in Delaware. Most of the cast and crew have Delaware ties and at least a little experience in filmmaking or acting.

"I want all of us to look back on our career paths someday and say this is how it started," said 24-year-old actor Mark Welling.

Welling lives in California, where he recently began pursuing an acting career. He is the younger brother of "Smallville" star Tom Welling. The family moved from Delaware to Texas when Mark was in A.I. du

Pont Middle School, but recollections of Delaware are rushing back to him.

"Jeremy has an impeccable memory," he said. "He tells me about stuff that happened here."

Coming of age in Delaware

It makes sense to use Delawareans on this project. O'Keefe's script focuses on the kind of experiences a group of twentysomethings - many of them working on this project - went through here "in the summer between high school and college."

Most attended A.I. du Pont High School, Tatnall School or Cab Calloway. O'Keefe graduated from Cab Calloway in 1994 and A.I. du Pont in 1998. He now lives in New York City.

O'Keefe found himself thinking about Delaware a lot after his parents moved away when he was 20 and living in Los Angeles. This film is one result.

"I felt like I had lost my footing," said the University of North Carolina graduate. "There were things relating to my coming of age there that I hadn't really dealt with. Coming home to a place that's no longer your home makes you appreciate where you grew up a lot more."

The central characters in "wrestling" are Jake and Carrie. Jake's mother has recently died and there is tension between him and his father. Carrie's boyfriend has also died. She and Jake bond.

O'Keefe's parents are very much alive, but he did suffer losses when he was younger. His friend and fellow community theater actor Jeff Walker was killed in an auto crash in 1995. Another friend, David Goddess, died of cancer when he was 10.

"I used those experiences to craft this story," he said.

Goddess' brother, Tony, is in the established indie-pop band Papas Fritas and will contribute to the film's music. So will Jeremy's brother, Matt, a novelist and member of the indie Day Action Band.

The "wrestling" budget is about \$15,000. O'Keefe raised most of the money from family and friends.

The visuals will have a documentary, "hand-held" quality. Director of photography Tim O'Hara is a friend of and has worked with Rachel Morse (Tatnall, '97), the film's editor and producer. Morse put him in touch with O'Keefe.

The gritty quality of "wrestling" is fine with Tami Davis, who plays Jake's ex-girlfriend. She worked with O'Keefe in the Wilmington Drama League's youth program before attending the University of Connecticut and then moving to New York to pursue acting.

"I wouldn't want it to be a glossy teenage movie with stereotypical football players and cheerleaders," said the petite, 25-year-old blonde. "This is like your actual friends going through some dark times and trying to figure out what the next step's going to be."

She is excited to be making her first full-length feature - and to be leaving her day job for a while.

"I'm a struggling actress, so I wait tables," she said. "This is more fun. No heavy trays to carry or angry customers to deal with."

Everyone helps out

On a muggy morning earlier this week, however, when Davis had no scenes to film, she was making sure cast and crew got their fill of the fruit, bagels and cereal laid out on a table in the flower-filled back yard of a house on 16th Street in the Highlands neighborhood.

Well, she does have food-service experience. Everybody helps out in any way necessary.

Upstairs, three actors are being filmed for a scene in Jake's house. Joining Welling as Jake are 11-year-old Adam Montgomery of Wilmington and 12-year Alex Goodman of Allentown, Pa. Adam is a student at Cab Calloway.

In one scene, Adam walks through his late mother's bedroom, missing her. He opens her closet and looks sadly at her clothes.

"Just do exactly what you did but take your time looking around the room," O'Keefe says before another take.

A few minutes later, in the next bedroom, Jake lies on the bed, shirtless. A mid-'90s-era Janet Jackson poster hangs on the wall. A Delaware license plate is propped up on the dresser. It is a night scene, so the crew covers the windows with dark cloth.

First assistant director Zach Baylin, 24, looks on. One of the three bedrooms on this second floor used to be his. The Baylin house was one of several where the group of teens O'Keefe has in mind used to hang out.

Parents Jonathan and Sarah Baylin were vacationing in North Carolina, so Zach - who now lives in New York - was in charge of keeping things in order there. He and O'Keefe worked together in the art department on a Will Ferrell film called "Winter Passing."

So is everything under control at his parents' place? "It's kind of a madhouse," Zach says just before O'Keefe asks him to run out to the van for the "yellow shirt."

Meanwhile, 20-year-old Sarah Bengel is looking at the clothes people have on. She studies fashion at the Pratt Institute in New York City and serves as costume director.

Though younger than most of the people the movie is about and to some extent being made by, she knew them through her older sister.

"Back then they just looked like a lot of goofy kids to me," she said. "But they were showing promise. I think they'll all be hugely successful."

Starring Jeff Conaway

On the day after filming at the Baylin house, O'Keefe is guiding Conaway, Welling, Adam and Alex through the cemetery scene. They are filmed as they walk through the entrance, almost in the shadow of the tower in Rockford Park. Then O'Hara walks the camera to a far corner of the cemetery for the scene at the gravestone.

The gravestone faces the actors, not the camera. O'Keefe isn't allowed to show the name on it. "No product placement for dead people," he says with a grin.

Onlookers get a sense of what the actors are seeing when Adam announces between takes that the person died "a long time ago."

Conaway, 53, laughs. "Well, not that long," he says. "It was the 'Summer of Love,' " - 1967.

Conaway, in town for three days, is cheerful throughout the scene, though he acknowledged he was a little frazzled the night before, when O'Keefe took him to dinner at Deep Blue Bar and Grill.

"Anything longer than four hours in an airplane is inhuman," he said after the scene was finished. "I don't sleep well the night before a flight or the night before a shoot. I'm rebounding today."

Indeed, he horsed around with Adam and Alex between takes. At one point he launches into a snippet of the song "Soon It's Gonna Rain" from "The Fantasticks."

O'Keefe was thrilled with Conaway's work. "I had written the father's story arc, but he really didn't have a personality. It was amazing to have Jeff come in and give me a human being."

When the three actors are ready to leave the grave, for instance, Conaway kisses his fingertips and places them on the stone. That was his own, spontaneous idea.

"I love to just keep the camera rolling on him" O'Keefe said. "You never what he's going to do."

Conaway keeps busy even if his profile is much lower these days than when he played out-of-work actor Bobby on "Taxi" or bad-boy Kenickie in the movie "Grease." He acts in low-budget films, makes appearances at conventions, tries his hand at writing TV pilots and teaches acting in Los Angeles, where he lives.

He said he took this role because the script "has something to say" and "sometimes parts where you don't speak a lot, where you do a lot of acting without words, can be challenging. That's really refining your craft."

Conaway, though affable, was feeling a little melancholy that day. He thought a cemetery scene was appropriate for his mood.

"I just split with my wife last year, and this is helping me purge those emotions," he said. "It's the death of a relationship. It just so happened that yesterday was our anniversary and today is her birthday."

Meanwhile, the young folks on the project remain cheerful through long shoots that have ended as late as 4 a.m.

"I wake up in the morning with a smile on my face," Welling said. "Twelve-hour days? Bring it on."

Reach Gary Mullinax at 324-2888 or gmullinax@delawareonline.com.

Copyright . The News Journal