Arts & Humanities

Documenting the Edges

Fall 2003

With *American Splendor*, winner of the Dramatic Grand Jury Prize at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival, co-directors Shari Springer Berman ’95SOA and Robert Pulcini ’94SOA, whose fruitful collaboration began at Columbia, have created a movie that defies categorization. The story of Harvey Pekar, the Cleveland file clerk, music critic, and autobiographical comic-book author (he published his first *American Splendor* comic in 1976), their film includes animated cartoon segments, dramatizations of Pekar’s life starring character actor Paul Giamatti, and documentary footage of Pekar’s wildly unpredictable TV appearances on the David Letterman show.

The filmmakers are well known for their sensitive and humorous documentaries about people who live at the edges of society. *Off the Menu: The Last Days of Chasen’s*, about the late, famous Hollywood restaurant, was named one of the ten best movies of 1998 by both *USA Today* and *CNN*. The Young and the Dead (2000), which aired on HBO, took a look at the newly spruced-up Hollywood Memorial Park Cemetery, final resting place of Rudolph Valentino.

With *American Splendor*, they were drawn to what Berman calls “the love story between a man and his art form—in Harvey’s case, comic books. He found a purpose and a legacy.” In getting to know Pekar, Berman and Pulcini came to see this utterly honest everyman as the central character in a much wider story of a cranky, unlikely, but ultimately loving family—Harvey, Joyce Brabner, his wife and collaborator, and their foster daughter, Danielle Batone.

American Splendor, released in August, received a standing ovation at Sundance; one enthusiastic viewer could “think of no other film that has ever looked or felt like it.” Their unique methodology was simply a response to unusual subject matter. “Harvey hates rules,” says Pulcini. “We tried to find a vehicle that was as rebellious as the way Harvey puts his comics together.”



Guide to school abbreviations