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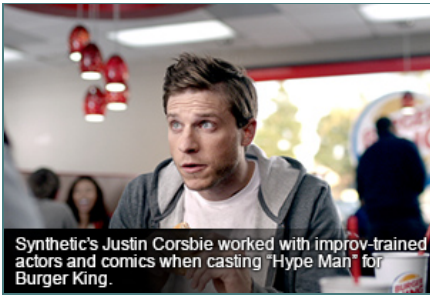
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**Synthetic Pictures' Justin Corsbie is One Serious Student of Comedy**

By Anthony Vagnoni

***The Founder, Director and Creative Director of this live-action boutique brings a personalized process to his work with comedy scripts.***



Justin Corsbie cautions you that when it comes to comedy, he's quite serious. That's not to say he lacks a sense of humor. He's actually a hoot to hang with, according to agency clients, many whom have become friends. It's just that to him, comedy is something you need to approach with some discipline. You need to do your homework, too, which is why he's always going to clubs and checking out rising stand-up stars. And his sphere of reference is impressive – it's hard to find someone so close to millennials in age who aspires to banter like Mike Nichols and Elaine May.

What's just as impressive is that, when it comes to this Austin-bred, NYU-trained director and founder of Synthetic Pictures, he's got the passion and drive to turn his avocation for funny into a commercial calling. It's made him a director whose comedy chops are on par with his work in just about every other advertising storytelling genre.

Indeed, comedy is something he's thrown himself into full throttle, and it shows. Clients describe Corsbie and his team at Synthetic – led by Partner and EP Allison Smith, to whom he's also married – as bringing a level of enthusiasm, ingenuity and creative chutzpah to projects that's often infectious.

Jesse Yowell is an Art Director at McCann in New York who worked with Corsbie on a Burger King spot titled "Hype Man" when he was at Pitch. Just from reading the script – a trio of young people sitting in a BK

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Funny Business 2015

**Synthetic Pictures' Justin Corsbie is One Serious Student of Comedy**

GO Taps a Cavalcade of Comic Writer/Directors for Brand Stories

8th Street's 'Any Where, Any Time' Mantra Makes Friends

Comedy is Easy, Advertising is Hard, as Our Showcase Reveals



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restaurant chatting about how their sandwiches only cost a buck – Yowell and his partner felt the execution could go either way. But with Corsbie on board, they were able to dial it up.

“What impressed us about Justin was more than just our belief that he could add a lot of nuance,” Yowell explains. “He was really excited about the script and had a ton of ideas. And that helped make us more excited, too; he gave us a fresh take and got us amped up.”

Pitch’s Jake Matthews, Yowell’s copywriter partner, says Corsbie also shined at fleshing out the concept and plussing it, particularly when it came to the young cast members. “Justin is immersed in the improv world,” he notes, “and when he gets on set he knows how to give these actors the kind of direction they can really respond to.”



In Justin Corsbie's spot for Dell's gaming laptops, video game characters show up in everyday situations.

“Hype Man” is one of a number of comedy spots with the Corsbie touch. Often sweetly funny, they have an ‘everyman’ vibe that clicks with audiences. It’s apparent with the befuddled guy fumbling for his health insurance card in a spot for [Wellmark BC/BS](#), only to be shown up by a savvy senior toting an app on her smartphone, or in the rash of video game characters who show up in everyday situations in a spot for Dell’s gaming tower.

While busy directing spots like these, Corsbie also does double duty as Synthetic’s Creative Director. The shop has a diverse roster that covers a range of genres, from docu-style to visual storytelling, performance, automotive and more. They also have an in-house visual effects arm, SP/FX, and partner regularly with editorial houses in Austin, L.A. and New York to package jobs from production through post, when required. Smith notes that they’re in the process of expanding in New York, where they’ve just named veteran production executive Stephanie Balint as their new New York EP and are in the process of signing several New York-based directors.

Corsbie graduated from NYU’s film school and then dabbled in features before being drawn to advertising. After a stint in L.A. he launched his career back home in Austin, working for local legend [Richard Kooris](#) at his production company, Xopix. There he rose quickly, being named EP by the time he was 24. A year later, in 2002, he left to open Synthetic.

At Xopic Corsbie also began to direct, which was his ambition all along. While he and Smith were building Synthetic – a former on-air reporter for TV and radio stations and networks, the two met in ‘04, married in ‘07 and relocated to L.A. in ‘08 – he again put his directing plans on hold to focus on the company. Setting up offices in L.A. with a satellite in New York, he started adding to the directorial roster on both coasts and back home in Austin.



The comic frustrations of finding your health insurance card are on display in this Wellmark spot from Justin Corsbie.

After several years it was time to satisfy his urge to get behind the camera, he recalls. “So I shot some specs, did some lower budget projects and started getting requests from clients who asked me to personally direct their ads. They trusted me, and knew I’d take care of their projects. And all those years working with other directors creatively gave me a well-balanced set of skills as a filmmaker, and I leveraged that as a storyteller.”

Agency sources who’ve shot with the Synths seem unanimous in their view that they’re not only talented, but

great to work with, too. “We felt that all of Justin’s performances felt really genuine and natural, and we thought he could deliver that on this project,” says Xanthe Wells, Chief Creative Officer at Pitch, talking about the “Hype Man” spot. “And he’s such a down-to-earth person; that really influences his approach.”

“They’re absolute sweethearts,” adds Yowell. “Justin is very collaborative, and it felt like he was part of our team. He and Allison just go way above and beyond.”

Smith points out that they want to keep a boutique feel to the company, with a directorial roster that’s sized right to ensure the directors don’t overlap and that she and Corsbie can match the right talent for each job. While his comedy work has soared, the company’s also been handling numerous docu-style projects and automotive spots for clients like [Dodge](#), [Chrysler](#), [Ford](#), [Nissan](#), [BMW](#) and [Fiat](#). Their car guys include Director/DP [Dean Mitchell](#) and the Italian-born, L.A.-based [Jako](#). They also have a strong visual storyteller in San Francisco-based [Peter Sorcher](#), a documentary specialist in [Erik Anderson](#) and directors who excel at



integrating visual effects, such as Corsbie and [Lance Larson](#).

"One of our strongest attributes is being able to tailor each creative team and approach to the particular project," says Corsbie. "For example, as things have gravitated into more 'outside the box,' non-scripted experiential projects, we've tapped our credentials and relationships with directors and producers from that world and become experts in the genre."

They've done this several times, transforming a street corner in downtown Chicago into a fashion runway for Kellogg's Special K, or commandeering a weekly 10-mile bike ride between Iowa and Nebraska and throwing a party at the finish line where riders could sample tacos made with Jennie-O Turkey.



Their most ambitious 'takeover' was for R&R Partners and Vegas Tourism. Working with the agency, Synthetic helped identify a middle-American town that was hurting from the effects of the recession. They found this in Cranfills Gap, Texas – a place where hard-working folks had foregone vacations and relaxation just to keep working.

The project turned out to be a content bonanza, Corsbie says. "The result was six national TV spots, a couple of which aired during the Super Bowl pre-game show, five 15-minute webisodes, a trailer that played in cinemas, a feature length documentary and tons of additional extras," he says. "We were on CNN, CBS and The Wall Street Journal, and some of the townspeople went on 'Jimmy Kimmel Live.' It was a huge P.R. push that garnered hundreds of millions worth of free media before the campaign ever aired. That's what we call content."

Dustin Oliver, former Head of Production at R&R in L.A., says this was one of the most rewarding projects he's ever worked on, and he attributes much of its success to Corsbie and Synthetic. "Justin is a tireless worker, and he helped us engineer how we were going to pull this off," he notes. There were seven crews shooting in Texas and Vegas for three weeks, creating a logistical jigsaw puzzle that couldn't be allowed to overshadow the human quotient of what these people were experiencing. "And Justin made sure we captured all of it," says Oliver.

Projects like this notwithstanding, Corsbie believes comedy lends itself to the shorter lengths often associated with advertising, whether in the form of 30 or 15-second ads or longer web videos. "It's harder with dramatic content to establish characters and flesh out back stories when you're working with limited amounts of time," he explains. "And you need those elements to hook audiences in emotionally. But it's the exact opposite with comedy."



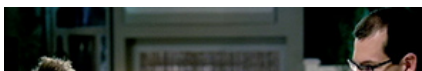
He approaches many comedy jobs using a process he prefers not to divulge in detail, other than to say it involves a lot of planning and prep, followed by a general leap of faith. That's what it takes for him to deliver the most out of the experience of working with comics and actors who are trained in improvisation and quick on their feet.

"It's about allowing unexpected things to happen," he explains, "and being able to respond if we get those magical reactions or takes." To do this, Corsbie almost puts himself in the scene with the cast, tossing them lines and ideas in a rapid-fire patter that fuels their creativity. "There's a technical aspect to it as well, making sure you've got the right coverage to capture these moments."

It requires not just experimentation but also an agency and a client that understands how it works. "You have to prepare them for this," he says. "They can have a bit of trouble grasping it at first. They're nervous creatures, and this approach can come across as untethered. But it's the best way to find the comedy gold in the script, and that can make some people uncomfortable on set. And it often results in so many great options in the edit that they'll have trouble deciding which to finish and air."

On the horizon is the annual SXSW party Synthetic throws, partnering with [Yessian Music](#), which Corsbie says is not only "badass" but also gives them tons of exposure and buzz. "We get these starry-eyed looks when we say we have an office in Austin and are from there originally," he says with a grin. "Everyone wants to shoot in Austin these days, and we're very dialed in there, so people get that real Austin experience."

The company is also ramping up in other ways, looking to add another visual stylist to the director roster and, as



noted, expanding in New York. Corsbie and Smith have consistently kept close tabs on everything the company does, but they admit it's been more of a challenge the busier the shop gets. "We left L.A. last Labor Day and were on the road in various places until mid-January," says Smith, whose background as a broadcast journalist prepped her well for the topsy-turvy life of a production company EP. "It's been wonderful, but being home only ten days out of six months is a little bit crazy."



As for Corsbie, he's determined to 'hit the books,' as it were, and "keep working at my craft. I really enjoy getting to do short form humorous storytelling. It's such a fun process, and we like to have fun here at Synthetic. I'm not only serious about comedy, I'm really serious about having fun." Clients would agree; the ones I spoke to all said that hanging with the Synthetic crew is as much fun as working with them.

All of this, of course, is backed up by the work and their commitment to giving clients their best. "Justin's a complete filmmaker with a well-earned reputation built slow and steady over the past 15 years," says Smith, with a hint of familial pride. "He's got a lifetime's worth of knowledge, yet he's only in his 30s. Synthetic embodies that. It's all youthful passion, coupled with well-tested experience."

Corsbie takes the compliment well, with a touch of self-deprecating style. "I've been able to scratch out a pretty cool career so far," he says. "Lots of interesting projects, working with lots of cool people. I'll take more of that any day."

▶ Chapter 1: Synthetic... ▶ Chapter 2: GO ▶ Chapter 3: 8th Street... ▶ Chapter 4: Showcase... ▶ Cover

Brand: BMW  
 Product: 335i  
 Director: Justin Corsbie  
 Prod. Co. Synthetic Pictures

#### "Teleporter"



**Why use a teleporter when you can drive a BMW?**

[Show Video](#)

Brand: Burger King  
 Product: King Deals Value Menu  
 Director: Justin Corsbie  
 Prod. Co. Synthetic Pictures

#### "Hype Man"



**Believe it or not the Rodeo Crispy Chicken and Rodeo Burger are only a buck on the new King Deals Value Menu.**

[Show Video](#)

Brand: Burger King  
 Product: Extra Long BBQ Cheeseburger  
 Director: Justin Corsbie  
 Prod. Co. Synthetic Pictures

#### "Real Buddies"



**Buddies discuss how to eat the Extra Long BBQ Cheeseburger from Burger King.**

[Show Video](#)

Brand: Chrysler  
 Product: Cars  
 Prod. Co. Synthetic Pictures

#### "Premiere Event"



**The three vehicles in Chrysler's new lineup drive through Detroit.**

[Show Video](#)

Brand: Dell Gaming  
 Product: XPS

#### "Ready To Live It"

Director: Justin Corsbie  
Prod. Co. Synthetic Pictures  
VFX: Synthetic Pictures



Videogame characters infiltrate the real world.

[Show Video](#)

Brand: Hot Dogs & Hand Grenades  
Product: MOVIE TRAILER  
Director: Justin Corsbie  
Prod. Co. Synthetic Pictures

**"Hot Dogs & Hand Grenades"**



Shoot a cow. Take home dinner for a year.

[Show Video](#)

Brand: Jennie O Foods  
Product: Turkey  
Director: Justin Corsbie  
Prod. Co. Synthetic Pictures  
Animation Director: Debra Lustig @ BBDO/MN

**"Taco Ride"**



Jennie-O is on a mission to bring the world a better taco by simply substituting ground turkey for ground beef.

[Show Video](#)

Brand: Microsoft  
Product: Surface 2  
Director: Erik Anderson  
Prod. Co. Synthetic Pictures

**"Workshop"**



A workshop of designers and artists come up with new applications for the accessories to the Surface.

[Show Video](#)

Brand: SpeakingPhoto  
Product: SpeakingPhoto  
Director: Peter Sorcher  
Prod. Co. Synthetic Pictures

**"Shoot Speak Share"**



With image and sound, SpeakingPhoto allows you to fully capture every important moment.

[Show Video](#)

Brand: T Mobile  
Product: webConnect  
Director: Justin Corsbie  
Prod. Co. Synthetic Pictures

**"Road Trip"**



Stay connected with the Dell Inspiron Mini 10.

[Show Video](#)

Brand: Vegas Bound  
Product: Trailer  
Director: Justin Corsbie  
Prod. Co. Synthetic Pictures

**"Vegas Bound"**



A small town's residents head to Vegas for the trip of a lifetime.

[Show Video](#)

Brand: Wellmark BCBS  
Product: Health Insurance

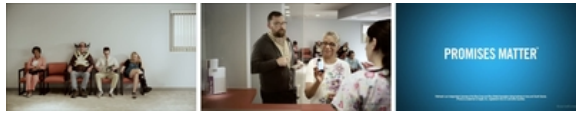
**"Carded (Sad)"**

Director:

Justin Corsbie

Prod. Co.

Synthetic Pictures



**Young man can't find his insurance card. That makes him sad.**

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