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NEWS

May the force be with you...always

by Allie Tempus

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Since the success of their smash 2006 web series, "Chad Vader," about Darth Vader's younger, less magnetic brother, Madison's creative duo Matt Sloan and Aaron Yonda have been steadily gaining momentum in the entertainment industry.

Sloan and Yonda first met doing improv together at Comedy Sportz in Madison. It wasn't long before the pair was collaborating on Yonda's WYOU cable show, "The Splu Urtaf Show" and other writing projects.

They also helped found Wis-Kino, a monthly screening for short films. From 2003 onward, Yonda said, they were making at least one short video every month.

"We made videos as much as we possibly could, as well as having full-time jobs," Yonda said. "That sort of honed our skills and got us to the point where we just threw as many ideas as we could against the wall, and finally Chad Vader was the one that stuck."

But before they even filmed one episode of Chad, Sloan and Yonda pitched the idea to networks like NBC and Comedy Central with help from their agent. The networks seemed intrigued with the idea — at first.

"These networks really responded well to it; they were like 'Oh, that's a great idea,'" Sloan said. "We figured, 'Well, OK, we'll be getting a phone call any day now,' and it never happened."

So they forged ahead on their own, producing and filming "Chad Vader" independently through their own production company, Blame Society Productions.

Featuring the video on Channel101.com, Sloan and Yonda noticed that someone else had posted the first episode of "Chad Vader" on YouTube. The pair then posted the official version of their video on the popular video website, and as Yonda put it, "That's when everything went crazy, basically."

To date, the entire "Chad Vader" series boasts 22 million hits online, with the first episode holding over 6 million on its own.

"It was a case of really good timing because YouTube was starting to get a lot of press, and we were on the front page for a really long time while they were getting all this press, so that really helped us," Yonda said.

With the help of YouTube, it wasn't long before Sloan, Yonda and Chad Vader himself were getting widespread national media attention. Their story was told nationwide in publications as well as the broadcast of selections from episode four on "Good Morning America."

"When we were featured on "Good Morning America" for episode four, I think that was sort of the point that kind of drove it home," Sloan said. "It was like, 'OK, I guess it's a big deal.'"

Yonda remembers a specific instance in which his mother and stepfather were at a restaurant in New York discussing Chad Vader when a waiter approached them.

"(He said,) 'Oh my God, you know Chad Vader?' and (my mom) was like, 'Yeah, I'm his mom.' He was so excited, and he just was gushing about it," said Yonda. "That's when she really understood how well-known it had become."

Sloan and Yonda have worked hard to garner that reaction, making sure that Chad is unique and distinct from his very famous brother.

"He's kind of a dope. He's clumsy, doesn't have any charisma," Sloan said about the younger Vader, a day-shift manager at a grocery store. "But also," he added, "Chad has compassion. Chad has a conscience."

Their work has even impressed people at the Star Wars franchise, including George Lucas himself. Last year, Sloan and Yonda were given the "George Lucas Selects" award for the 2007 Star Wars Fan Movie Challenge.

Even with the notoriety the Chad Vader phenomenon has built around them, Sloan and Yonda said they are keen on staying in Madison.

"In a lot of ways it's sort of good to be outside the entertainment world a little bit. I feel like it gives us a different perspective," said Yonda. "A lot of our creativity comes from being in Madison."

Yonda also commented that shooting at a grocery store in Los Angeles would have cost perhaps tens of thousands of dollars. In Madison, most of the series is shot at the Willy Street Co-op.

"The costume was expensive enough. I don't think we could have afforded any more big expenses on the first shoot," Sloan said about Chad's \$600 outfit.

Sloan and Yonda said they are planning to shoot the second season of "Chad Vader" in the near future. This week, the pair is traveling to Los Angeles to pitch a broadcast version of the show to several studios.

Sloan, who is the voice of Chad on the show, was hired to be the voice of Darth Vader on several Star Wars video games, including "The Force Unleashed," due out this summer.

While working on Chad Vader, the pair still does improv together, usually on Friday nights at the Coliseum Bar in Madison with a group called "The Monkey Business Institute."

From doing live sketch comedy, Sloan and Yonda said they have already gotten new ideas for future projects, including "Space Bear," a series about a bear working at a space station who tries to fit in among his human colleagues.

In addition to the television series, the men are also hoping to develop a few screenplays and eventually publish some book ideas they currently have in the works.

"We'd like to diversify as much as we can, and at the same time maintain creative control of whatever it is that we do," Sloan said.

As for the future, Sloan and Yonda seem destined to work as a team. Their ease around one another and rapid-fire dialogue is both the result and the cause of their immense creativity as writers and entertainers.

"I plan on dumping him first chance I get," Sloan joked about leaving Yonda behind.

All too quickly, Yonda responds, "Yep, that's my plan too. So that means we'll probably be together forever."