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## What if Darth Vader had a brother?

He just might get his own Internet video series

March 4, 2007

BY RYAN J. FOLEY

MADISON, Wis. -- Chad Vader gets no respect, but he sure gets plenty of laughs.

Poor Chad, the younger brother of the evil Jedi knight slayer Darth Vader, is stuck managing a grocery store in a series of short films that have become an international hit thanks to video-sharing sites YouTube and MySpace. The six wacky episodes created by Aaron Yonda and Matt Sloan have been viewed more than 9.5 million times on those sites alone.

The popularity of Chad's misadventures has allowed Yonda and Sloan, both aspiring filmmakers, to quit their jobs and negotiate a contract with a major media company they won't yet name. It has also led to talk that Chad Vader may be the best comedy started in Madison since The Onion, the satirical newspaper founded here in the late 1980s.

"This is one of the biggest things to come out of Madison in a while," said Jesse Russell, who runs a Web site that follows Madison arts and culture. "It's a very Madisonian form of parody and comedy. The Onion was a perfect example. Chad Vader is kind of intelligent in some ways, but you also have to have a sense of pop culture to get it."

Chad Vader is not strictly a "Star Wars" parody. The filmmakers say they wanted to build a universe of their own and avoid such cliches as, "Luke, I am your father."

Instead, the episodes, which run about five minutes each, feature Darth's little brother being demoted, facing derision from colleagues and struggling to win over a crush -- even though he wields a light saber and can move objects with his mind.

"He doesn't command the respect that Darth Vader does. He has the powers, he could be great but he's missing something," says Yonda, who transforms from a 34-year-old metal shop worker into Chad when he slips into his Supreme Edition Darth Vader costume. "Some key personality flaw is preventing him from getting past that level that he needs to get to become Supreme Commander of the Imperial Army."

Sloan, who does the character's voice with an uncanny resemblance to James Earl Jones' Darth, said the goal was to humanize Vader by "making him that guy who doesn't know how to handle his authority and goes way over the top ... but at the same time making him really likable."

Chad Vader has conquered the Internet quickly. Yonda and Sloan previewed their first episode to a small group at a Madison coffee shop last year and were nervous when they got few laughs. They made changes and submitted it to a monthly film contest in Los Angeles and won.

YouTube started featuring the episodes and fans quickly began e-mailing them to friends. ABC's "Good Morning America" debuted their fourth episode and VH1 will feature Vader among its top 40 Internet superstars in April. Fan mail has poured in from around the world, including Tokyo, where Chad Vader was featured in a film festival.

The films have become a source of civic pride in Madison. Most of them have been filmed at the Willy Street Co-Op, a popular local grocery store. Mayor Dave Cieslewicz appears in the sixth episode, released last week.

"You've failed me for the last time!" Cieslewicz says as he fires Chad, who briefly works as his assistant after leaving the grocery store in that episode.

Yonda and Sloan, who have done improv and short films together since 2000, chalk up their success to a mixture of talent, hard work and timing. They came on the scene just as YouTube was getting big, and they arrived with a base of "Star Wars" followers.

The quality of the films has won over fans. Yonda takes 10 minutes to don the replica Vader suit, bought for \$600 and transported in a 3-foot-long case. Sloan, 33, does the Vader impersonation so well that LucasArts recently hired him to record Darth's voice for a new video game. The two came up with a catchy acoustic version of the "The Imperial March."

They say they plan to do two more episodes -- which take as long as 11 hours to film and cost up to \$1,000 apiece -- to finish the "first season" of Vader, and then film a second eight-episode season.

Sloan said the contract being negotiated by their talent agent -- Dan Shear of William Morris Agency -- will be with a major Internet site to create a new series. The two have also been in meetings with NBC and Cartoon Network executives to pitch ideas.

Sloan said some executives have been lukewarm to picking up the Vader series for fear of infringing on "Star Wars" copyrights. But he said they believe they'll stay out of legal trouble as long as they keep the series on free Web sites.

"We'd like to hang onto our grass roots audience, keep their attention and then when we make our move to this other network we can say, 'Hey, come here and you can see content you can't see anywhere else,'" Sloan said.

In recent weeks, Sloan has quit his job at a University of Wisconsin bookstore. Yonda has gone on leave -- still skeptical about his newfound stardom -- from his job at a metal shop. Both said they'd like to stay in Madison, where they credit cheap access to locations and a network of well-trained volunteers for helping achieve success.

"I hope it's something," Sloan said, "that causes Madison to be looked at as a breeding ground for great comedy."

AP

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