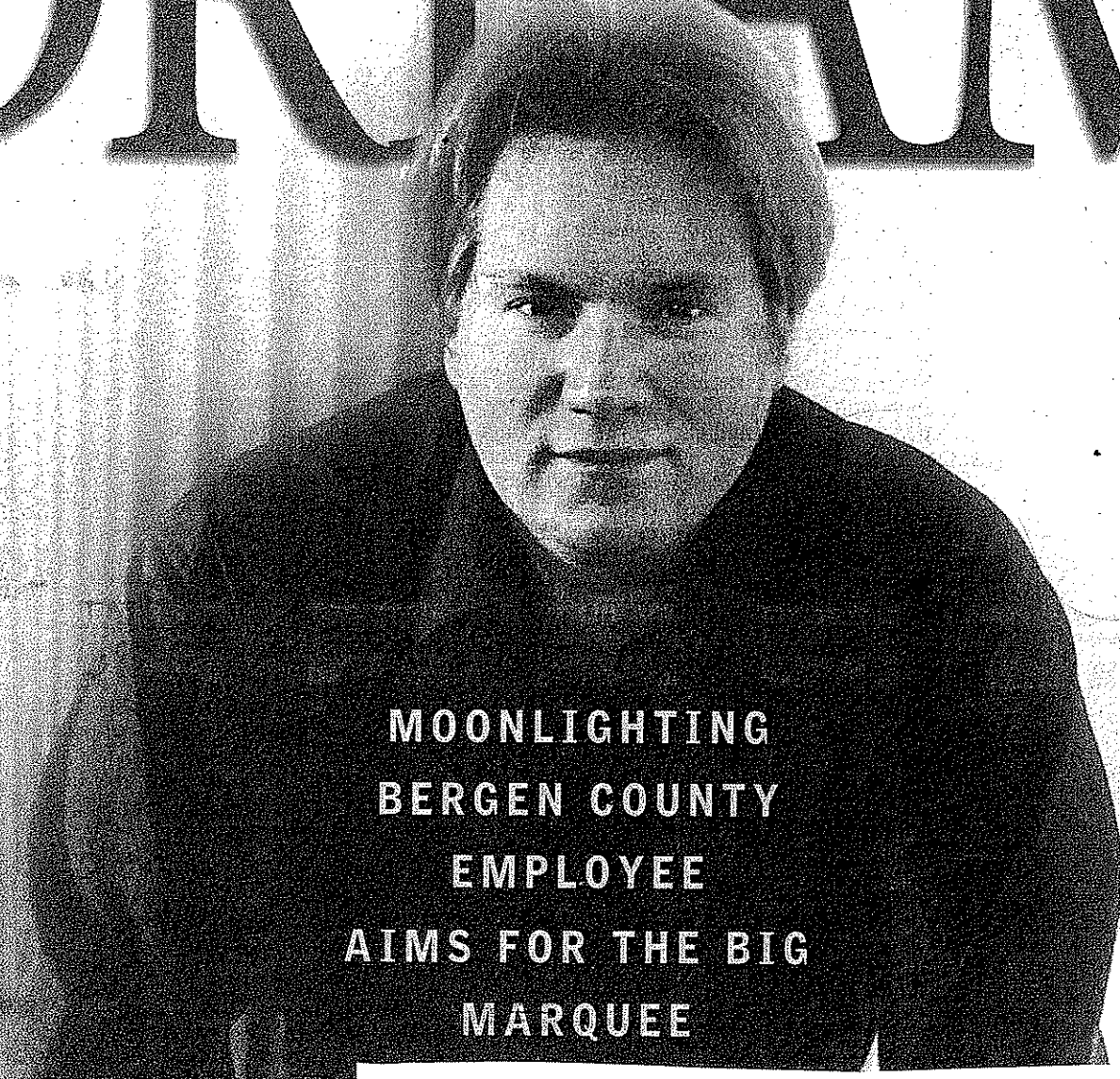


INDIE FILMMAKER'S

DREAM



MOONLIGHTING
BERGEN COUNTY
EMPLOYEE
AIMS FOR THE BIG
MARQUEE

Record



STAFF PHOTOS BY THOMAS E. FRANKLIN

Stars in his eyes: Jason Dale on the set in Mahwah.

By MIKE KERWICK
STAFF WRITER

Room 2001, a 20th-floor suite at the Sheraton Crossroads in Mahwah, is booked this Sunday afternoon. A young woman in a blue blouse is leafing through a script, checking her lines. A 60-year-old man in a white shirt and red tie is settling into his role as governor of New Jersey.

"You feel gubernatorial?" Jason Dale asks him.

"I feel like ordering people around," Russ Pickhardt jokes.

Minutes before they are scheduled to commence shooting, the lights in the Presidential Suite go dead. The 28-year-old director reaches into his pocket, pulls out his cellphone and dials his contact at the hotel.

"Hi, Reggie," Dale says. "I think we blew a fuse."

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PROD.

FIGHT THE POWER SUDDENLY

SCENE

TAKE

SHOT

Indie: North Jersey sets for a thriller

From Page E-1

It is not the first time Dale has blown a fuse while filming. It will not be the last time, he says.

For the next 12 months, Dale will continue to lead a bizarre double life. On most days, the Franklin Lakes resident is an executive assistant to Bergen County Executive Dennis McNerney, dealing with the mundane and Machiavellian minutiae of local politics and constituent issues.

Hero's quest

On nights and weekends, Dale has been funneling his creative juices into a feature-length motion picture, a dark comic adventure called "Fight the Panda Syndicate," the political aide's foray into the world of independent film. The movie follows a hero's quest to prevent an evil syndicate from reuniting four pieces of an ancient talisman, an act that would usher in the end of the world.

"I don't want to be one of those people who gets old and says, 'I always wanted to make a movie, I always wanted to write a book,'" he said.

A student of Orson Welles and Ed Wood (director of classic campy flops turned cult favorites, such as "Plan 9

From Outer Space"), Dale worked on theater projects when he was an undergrad at Lafayette College. His film roots stretch back to the mid 1980s, when "Ghostbusters" and "Big Trouble in Little China" landed on the big screen.

They were fun movies, films that made an impact on Dale and his Indian Hills High School classmates Chris Pickhardt and Steve Bley. Today, all three guys are working on Dale's passion project.

"We don't know what the outcome's going to be," said Pickhardt, the film's coproducer, "but we have a feeling it's going to be something special."

Dale has close to 100 people helping with the picture. He has enlisted interested parties from six states and is filming on location throughout Bergen and Passaic counties, including shoots in New Milford, Hackensack, Ramapo, Clifton, Ringwood, Prospect Park and Franklin Lakes. He hopes to have the majority of filming done by July, so he can get the movie on screens sometime next winter.

Until it is complete, he will be donating part of his government salary toward a necessary coffee addiction. "I don't sleep," Dale explained.

How can he? His hours often bend beyond the 9-to-5 standard. Dale handles

constituent relations for McNerney, who oversees New Jersey's largest county government and the \$432 million budget that comes with it.

Dale is responsible for sending e-mails, firing off memos and responding to complaints. Some people write to McNerney with a housing issue. Others have questions about roads or county programs.

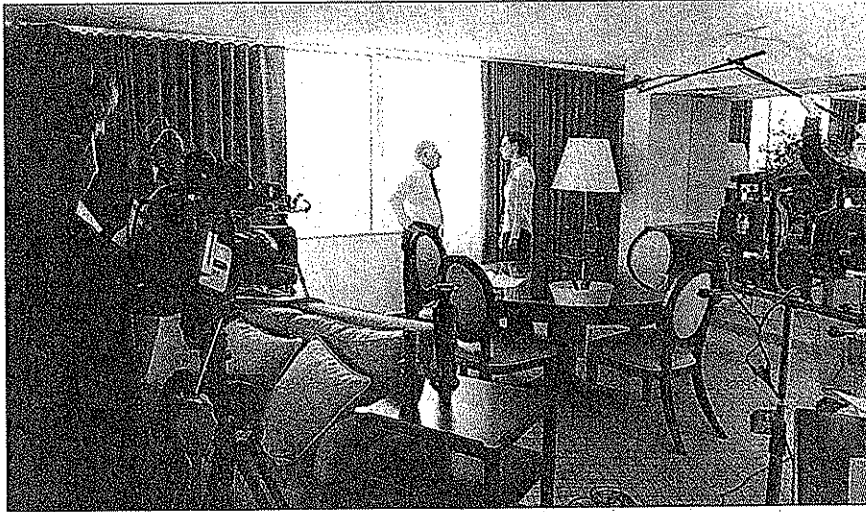
"I don't like to leave anything unanswered," Dale said.

Friends and family help

With the film's final budget expected to come in a shade under \$20,000, Dale has relied on friends and family to fill some of the roles. Pickhardt's father, Russ, an Oakland native who once starred opposite John Travolta's sister, Margaret, in his high school production of "The Crucible," is playing Gov. Charles Bedford. Andrea Prendamano, a Dumont resident who is an acquaintance of Pickhardt's, came onboard when another cast member bailed.

"I got the script on Friday and read it at a Nets game," Prendamano said.

Before the set fades to black, Prendamano and the elder Pickhardt are busy rehearsing a scene in the corner of the suite. Prendamano plays Charlotte Mc-



THOMAS E. FRANKLIN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

In action in Mahwah: Dale filming a scene for "Fight the Panda Syndicate."

Fadden, the governor's assistant.

"Cancel my schedule for the rest of the night," Pickhardt tells Prendamano.

"Governor, it's your anniversary," she replies.

"There's a great father-daughter dynamic," Prendamano says after the scene is over.

If it doesn't work, at least Dale has his boss's blessing.

"I'm glad that Jason's able to pursue his passion for filmmaking and that he's

shooting here in Bergen County," McNerney said through his spokesman. "If he puts as much effort into this film as he does in his work for the county, I'm sure he'll have a blockbuster on his hands."

Blockbuster-to-be or bomb-in-the-making, Dale's film faces a more immediate issue. Right now the lights are out. Dale has to get them up and running again.

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