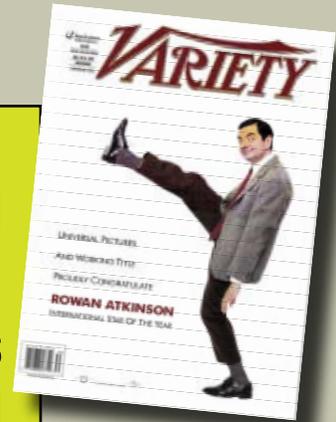


SPECIAL NEEDS

recent press

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-Bill Gibron, **DVDtalk.COM**



““ With two pieces of string and several inspired actors, Isaak James has constructed a film of rare impertinence”

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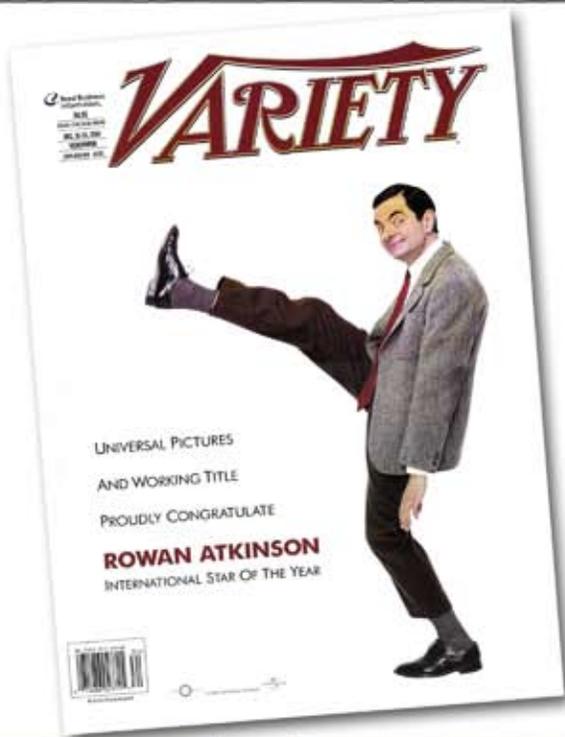


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Smoke & Mirrors

BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE BIZ'S DEALS, DECISIONS AND DIVERSIONS



Fresh Troma trauma

By **DIANE GARRETT**

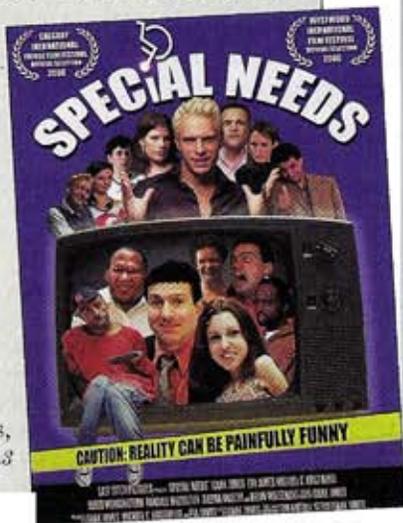
Could **Isaac James** be the next **Trey Parker**?

Troma Entertainment impresario **Lloyd Kaufman**, who discovered Parker before he struck gold with "South Park," believes the two have a lot in common. Kaufman picked up James' mockumentary "Special Needs" for a limited theatrical release later this year before a homevideo release. The low-budget satire, about "handicapped" competing on a reality show, was rejected by the likes of Magnolia and First Run Features before Kaufman stepped up.

Shot in straight-forward docu style for \$20,000, "Special Needs" features a gangsta rapper with cerebral palsy and judges who admonish contestants to "enunciate better."

"We got a lot of flack, to be honest," says James,

Turn to page 43



Helmer's 'Special Needs' finds the right fit at Troma

Continued from page 5

who used his experiences on a reality show for SoapNet as inspiration. "We got a lot of reprimands."

Kaufman admits "Special Needs," which has since been shown at the Calgary and Westwood film fests, is worlds apart from signature Troma fare like "The Toxic Adventure."

"It doesn't have the usual Troma elements," he chuckles.

Kaufman, an outré mainstay on the Croisette every year at Cannes, has sparked to other offbeat fare over the years. Besides "Cannibal: The Musical," a pic Parker wrote while still a student at U. of Colorado, Troma has distributed "Lollilove," a mockumentary about a do-gooder couple directed by "The Office" star **Jenna Fischer** and starring her husband. Troma also gave early acting gigs to **Vincent D'Onofrio** (as Lobotomy in "The First Turn-On") and **Eli Roth** ("Terror Firmer" and "Citizen Toxic: The Toxic Avenger IV").

"He covers a lot of very taboo subject matter that people are very afraid of," says James.



KAUFMAN



DVDtalk: Special Needs

Written by Bill Gibron
Published May 27, 2007

Reality TV really doesn't need help making fun of itself, what with the preening man whores and street beat skanks of shows like *I Love New York* and *Bad Girls*, respectively. Like a satiric version of a self-fulfilling prophecy, pushing the limits of plausibility has caused the medium to manipulate the product into more and more perplexing – and preposterous – positions. At one time, all we cared about was survival and self reliance. Now, it's a combination of egomaniacal exaggerations of excellence meshed with worthless wish fulfillment. So if someone told you that the latest exercises in televised authenticity will revolve around finding the best pirate, the newest superhero, or the most talented handicapped person, you probably wouldn't flinch. Oddly enough, two of those three *are* actually on their way to a boob tube near you. The third forms the foundation for one of the funniest, most critical comedies about the business of show ever conceived.



Like *Lollilove* before, *Special Needs* is an amazing new mock documentary by the multitalented Isaak James. Centering on a TV wunderkind named Warren Piece (James) and his *American Idol* like cast of critical cohorts – former A-lister Laura Wilcox (Eva James) and confused corrections officer David Smith (Michael C. Kricfalusi) – we are thrown into a world that, at first, looks shockingly familiar. Piece and his posse are self-centered schmoes, each one working through their own set of aggressively inconsiderate issues. Smith wants to be taken seriously as part of the entertainment industry. Wilcox is working off a 'fat actress' reputation. And Piece needs to make up for a previous reality show disaster. When desperate network CNT puts a newbie in charge of production, the trio thinks they've found a friendly ear. All that's left is to pitch their latest project.

And it's a doozy. Piece wants to find a group of photogenic, engaging 'retards, psychos, and freaks' to star in his latest reality brainstorm – *Handicaps*. That's right, He plans on picking individuals with differing physical and/or mental issues and force them to live together in a swanky Addams Family-like Victorian house of humors. Then he can monitor their behavior and manipulate the playback in order to discover what it's really like when mongoloids and misfits stop being polite, and start being...well, he hasn't quite gotten that far yet. Noted for his outrageous ideas and Simon Cowell on steroids critiques, Piece has to find a hook to keep audiences intrigued, and with the help of some stoned production assistants, the final facet is put in place – TALENT!

Now all he needs are the weirdoes. At first, it looks like *Special Needs* is going to be the same old sloppy spoofery. James – who wrote, directed, stars and probably prepared the craft services – appears overly eager to roll out a combination of actual and 'artificial' human oddities and get us to laugh at what makes us uncomfortable and antsy. We expect the thwarting of convention, the tweaking of PC paradigms, and some good old fashioned vulgar funny business at the expense of someone else's predicament. Yes, it will all be in bad taste, but the current envelope pushing conceit of motion picture comedy readily supports such obvious offensiveness. Just ask the Farrelly Brothers.

But this is not where James and his clever cast actually go. Not at all. Instead, we are wrapped up in an engaging and intricate world of high maintenance histrionics, battling bravado, cockeyed creativity, and just enough sideshow shock value to transcend the potentially tacky. *Special Needs* does employ the services of several handi-capable individuals, and all of them single-handedly steal the show. During an open audition for potential participants, we are introduced to a paranoid schizophrenic lounge singer, a determined deaf actor, a genial blind man, a wheelchair bond vixen, and a no bullshit dwarf. Initially, they remain on the fringes. But once the callbacks come, James gives each individual their three dimensional setpiece moment to shine.

The clear breakout star here is someone called Killer P. A bad ass gansta rapper with cerebral palsy, if he's not the future of urban culture, no one is. Using an aggressive thug life stance to shelter criticism over his obvious physical limitations, he's a foul mouthed masterwork, a tripwire Tupac locked in an equally potent personal fortress. He's a classic character (or a great find) and almost instantly demands the making of a solo feature all his own. Every moment he's on screen is worth savoring and repeating. He's gutbustingly great. He also illustrates part of *Special Needs'* motion picture mystery. If he was discovered by James and brought to the project, then this filmmaker has a clear eye for flawless idiosyncratic talent. On the other hand, if he's merely a handicapped actor putting on a front, then James is a genius for creating such a character, and P (real name, Keith Jones) is equally brilliant at bringing him to life. For this one element alone, *Special Needs* deserves unlimited praise.

But there is more to what's going on here than outlandish personalities and a sly spoof of reality TV. In fact, it's safe to say that this film really isn't 'about' a potential series centering on the handicapped. Instead, it's about the individuals involved, from Piece's high-strung hubris to Laura Wilcox's self loathing meanness. While the entire team behind *Handicaps* comes across as vain, angry, bitter and unlikable, James takes his time and opens up each and every character. We learn enough about each one to care (if only a little), and by the end we're almost happy that the show appears to be a winner. And it's not just the players that get fleshed out. The story is solid with an amazing amount of social commentary and depth. Scenes are densely packed with multilayered material and James manages to find meaning in even the most scatological scene (as when the P.A.s lace the stars' lattes with laxative).

Yet none of this touches on what really makes *Special Needs* shine – its brave sense of humor. Allowing the handicapped actors onscreen to hold their own, to be both the brunt and providers of many of the jokes, keeps the comedy fresh and honorable. Even when Killer P is hit with the N-word, his hilarious reactions take the sting out of the sentiment. In fact, that's this film's major motion picture contribution. In recent years, off balance disasters like *The Ringer* have tried to temper the mentally and physically challenged with something akin to soiled saintliness. Sure, they're crude and rude, but they also have a built-in buttress against such standard human behavior that gives them a moralistic pass. Here, James simply let's them be people. They are not defined by their malady anymore than Piece is hindered by his closet gayness, or as Laura is trapped in a shame cycle of body image issues.

This makes *Special Needs* a certified cinematic home run, an instant candidate for independent comedy of the year, and another terrific title in Troma's growing collection of outsider gems (the company will release their DVD version sometime this year). Those expecting a mean-spirited marginalizing of the disabled will be greatly disappointed, while others wanting the mindless purveyors of reality rot to really get theirs will be doubled over in sidesplitting delight. That he managed to salvage something that could have been a disaster is not Isaak James' greatest accomplishment here. No, the real revelation is his ability to thwart convention while carefully walking across all the formulaic necessities mandated to make a clever motion picture. Along with proving yet again that mainstream moviemakers have completely forgotten how to handle humor, *Special Needs* argues that the future of film lies somewhere beyond the fringe. Any cinephile who visits there will be wonderfully rewarded.