



"Wake Up" (Photo by Chloe Crespi)

Commentary: Filmmaker sees dead people -- for real

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By Martin A. Grove

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"Wake" words: As memorable movie lines go, "I see dead people" is among the very best.

The line's been around since "The Sixth Sense" opened in 1999, but it has new relevance now that the documentary "Wake Up" is starting to be shown. Directed by Jonas Elrod and Chloe Crespi and produced by Steve Hutensky, "Wake" is the story of how Elrod woke up one morning four years ago and realized he was somehow seeing angels, demons, auras and ghosts and could even access other dimensions. Elrod, who was 36 at the time, got a clean bill of health from his doctors, but they couldn't explain why he suddenly had this disturbing new ability. His determination to find out what had happened to him sparked the movie.

"Wake" is premiering Sunday at the South by Southwest Film Festival in Austin as its first step in attracting the right domestic distributor. Having already enjoyed an early look at it, I'm confident it's going to be a big topic of conversation among festivalgoers and distributors who get to see it. I was happy to have an opportunity to talk recently about the making of "Wake" with Hutensky, who was a top Miramax Films business and creative executive for nine years before going out on his own in 2005.

"I never dreamed my first project out of the gate would be a low-budget doc," Hutensky told me. "I started developing big-budget studio feature type of films. But what happened was my friend Chloe

Crespi, who's one of the two directors on the movie, met this guy Jonas. They had an idea for another documentary basically on veterans from Iraq, and we started exploring that one and it didn't work out. I heard about Jonas' story and what had happened to him and the three of us were like, 'Wow, that would make an amazing movie.' My gut instinct said that people would be really interested in Jonas' story and that we could find a sizeable audience for it. While neither Jonas, Chloe or I were clear on what the film would be, we decided to take the plunge and see what would happen."

Reflecting on Elrod's unique experience, he explained, "When I'm talking to people (I ask them), 'What would you do if one day you woke up and something was floating in the corner of your room?' Because that's literally what happened to Jonas. He was just going about his business and leading an average life in New York City and one day for no apparent reason he just started seeing and hearing things."

What sort of things are we talking about? "He might see something floating behind you," he replied. "Or apparently everyone emits different colors. It's this idea that we all give off different colors of the rainbow so he can see auras, too. They came to me (and asked), 'What do you think?' and I said, 'I think that can make a great movie,' (because) it encompasses two amazing elements. One was this phenomena world, which I find fascinating. I felt that had a lot of commercial appeal. And, then, the spiritual aspect of it. I didn't quite know what that would be. That kind of came across as we started making the movie."

To proceed, Hutensky added, the three of them "bought a high definition camera and some sound equipment and just started filming. We didn't have any idea where it would take us, but it's a story where one thing connects to the next to the next. We kept on meeting people along the way (like) spiritual teachers or scientists, who kind of put us (in touch with) the next person. It was a real adventure. Jonas ended up in a bunch of pretty amazing situations and we just let the camera roll. The best stuff we got was definitely when everyone forgot filming was going on. Four hundred hours (of footage) later, we finally put our film together."

Along the way, he said, "we ended up hooking up with Chris Seward, who's one of Michael Moore's main editors, who did 'Sicko' and 'Fahrenheit 9/11,' and Kurt Engfehr, who worked with Chris, who's a big documentary guy as well, who did 'Fahrenheit 9/11' and 'Bowling for Columbine.' So we got connected with these guys and they thought it was a great story. Chris came on board to edit and Kurt came on as a consulting producer. It was really helpful to have two guys with such amazing experience in the doc world."

What's more, he continued, "I thought they really knew how to tell a story. For me, the interesting thing about this documentary was that it wasn't just a bunch of talking heads. It was a real guy who had this incredible thing happen to him and there was a story behind it. He has a girl friend who loves him and who's a bit skeptical about the whole thing and they have to figure out what it's all about."

While Elrod doesn't really learn why he suddenly started seeing dead people and other spirits, Hutensky pointed out, "I think what he did figure out was how to integrate it into his life. When it first happened

to him, it shook up his life a lot -- like I think it would (do to) anyone. You think to yourself, what if this happened to you? First of all, you'd want to know what's going on, but also, like, who do you tell? Do you run out and tell your friends and your family? And, ultimately, what does it all mean? Why you? And what are you supposed to do with it? He learned to integrate it into his life and he figured out how to maybe not shut it off but control it in the sense of like how to keep grounded. We have a scene where he's lighting sage in his apartment. So he learned to do that and to meditate and things that I think all gave him more control over it."

Of course, the movie may play a big part in determining how Elrod's life moves forward. "It's amazing how fascinated people are with his story," Hutensky said. "The thing that really blew me away was how many people we met along the way who've had experiences like he's had. Maybe not like the full blown scene (with seeing and) hearing things all the time, but maybe they walked into an empty room one day and they felt the hair on the back of their neck come up or they thought of a song and it suddenly came on the radio or they thought of somebody and the person called or they dreamt something and it came true or deja vu, they're in a place that they know they've never been and it feels familiar."

All these different types of psychic phenomena are things that many people have experienced and relate to, he emphasized: "I think that's why all those shows on TV like 'Media Men' and 'The Mentalist' and 'Lost' do so well. People believe there's more out there than meets the eye. To me, it kind of goes back to that age old question, 'What happens to you when you die? Are you food for the worms or is there some sort of after-life?' If you believe there's a heaven, why is it so impossible that someone could connect with beings that are in heaven?"

If "Wake" turns out to be a film that sparks great conversations about the after-life, Hutensky said, "I think we've been successful. If four people go to dinner and they debate about what happens to you when you die -- Do you think there really are ghosts and angels and, if so, can we communicate with them? -- I think that's all stuff that people are just fascinated about and really can't get enough of."

Coming back to making the movie, he observed, "When I was at Miramax we released a couple big documentaries, including 'Fahrenheit 9/11,' but we never produced them. It was always acquisitions. So I never realized how much footage was shot on documentaries. In the feature world you have a script, so you go into an edit room and certainly that first cut is pretty much what the script is. You're debating over what takes (to use) but there's not a question about what's the story and how does it all fit together.

"I think that the hardest part but also the adventure and thrill of the documentary is that you can make like 10 different movies when you have all that footage. You sit there and you basically write the script in the edit room. You have all these scenes and (have to decide) how do they fit together, how it makes sense, how does it form a good narrative that's consistent with the reality of what happened on the trip. We were just blessed to have these two great guys, Chris and Kurt, to sort of guide us along the way."

Their first cut of "Wake" was over five hours long, but it ultimately became a fast-playing 95 minutes.

"We did test screenings," he told me, "and you figure out what resonates with people, what do people want to know about the story. (Sometimes with) things that you think are the most important things for people to know, people say, 'Oh, I don't really care about that. But I'd like to know about this.' We were in the edit room for over a year. We actually went back (after test screenings) and added some scenes that we had taken out and took out scenes that were in and really sort of restructured the movie to a place where I think it's the best movie right now that we're ever going to have.

"It was painful to pair it all down. We had a big bulletin board with every scene and we were constantly rearranging the order -- taking a scene out and putting another one back in. It was a big puzzle with no real road map. In the end, we had to take out some of our favorite people (who were filmed over the years) in order to make the film work as a whole. The bright side is that we've got plenty of great material for our DVD extras."

Asked about theatrical distribution plans for the movie, Hutensky replied, "42West is our PR company (and) we just made a deal with Andrew Herwitz from the Film Sales Company (in New York). When you ask people who are the best people to sell this type of movie Andrew's one of the top two guys on everyone's list. We're going to South-By-Southwest to premiere there. March 15 is our screening. It's the (film's) world festival premiere and they gave us a great time slot opening weekend at 2:00 p.m."

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