

# Miracle of the North

# Life

TUESDAY  
APRIL 30, 2013 **D**

This seemed like no way to make a movie.

Take a first-time director, working with a former NFL star making his acting debut in the lead role, and give him 24 days and a limited budget to create a historically accurate, pre-Civil War-era period piece that showcases both the cruelty and kindness of mankind.

If Thomas K. Phillips had bothered to dwell on the challenge ahead of him, he might never have been able to pull it off.

"I don't know, man, everything just came together," says Phillips, writer and director of "The North Star," which will be screened this week as part of red-carpet events at both the County Theater in Doylestown and the Newtown Theatre in Newtown.

The film, shot last summer entirely in Bucks County, is based on the true story of "Big Ben" Jones and Moses Hopkins, two slaves who escaped from a Virginia plantation in 1849 and found refuge in Buckingham. Former Philadelphia Eagles linebacker Jeremiah Trotter makes his acting debut as Big Ben, with relative newcomer Thomas C. Bartley as Hopkins.

The cast also includes veteran actors Clifton Powell, John Diehl, Lynn Whitfield and Keith David.



Andy Vineberg

The awe-inspiring, true story of escaped slaves and the Bucks County residents who helped them is told in "The North Star." Former Eagle Jeremiah Trotter makes his acting debut.



Trotter plays real-life escaped slave "Big Ben" Jones.

"It absolutely was intimidating," Phillips, a 1989 Central Bucks West High School graduate now living in Buckingham, says of directing so many experienced actors. "But I felt with only 24 days to film it, I had to be so focused. I couldn't worry about any drama or let anything get in the way. I just had to focus on the script and getting the scenes done."

"To do an 1850s period piece with horses and wagons in 24 days is pretty much unheard of. One time, we got the wagon we needed an hour before we had to film. It's crazy what we all accomplished. It was kind of surreal when it was all done."

Born and raised in Doylestown, Phillips left the area to work as a professional musician in places such as Florida and Los Angeles. The inspiration to write the story that would become "The North Star" came when he returned to Bucks County in 2002 to care for his ailing father and attended a Christmas Eve service at Mount Gilead A.M.E. Church in Buckingham.

He was blown away by what he heard — stories of Quakers and Methodists and other religious groups in the area coming together to help escaped slaves along the Underground Railroad, stories he had never learned about in school. Further research into the area's mid-19th-century history inspired him to write his first screenplay in 2005.

"When I first started writing it, I didn't have the concept I would direct a movie. I just wanted to tell a story," Phillips says. "The biggest thing that kept me going was that every person I told about the story — their eyes lit up. That's when I knew I had something."

See **VINEBERG**, Page D3



Local "North Star" actor has taken long road to on-screen success. Page D3

## Screenings

Red carpet celebrations with cast and crew members of "The North Star" (including Jeremiah Trotter) and preview screenings will take place Thursday night at the County Theater at 20 E. State St. in Doylestown and Saturday afternoon at the Newtown Theatre at 120 N. State St. in Newtown.

Screenings in Doylestown (7:30 and 8 p.m.) are sold out, but the public is invited to the red carpet event which begins at 6. There will also be outdoor historical events, costumed performers and a horse and carriage, presented by the Doylestown Historical Society, beginning at 4:30. Information: 215-345-6789; www.countytheater.org.

The red carpet event in Newtown begins at 3:30 p.m., followed by the screening at 4:30. Tickets: \$20. There will also be regular preview screenings in Newtown at 7 and 9 p.m. Friday, 8:30 p.m. Saturday and 7 p.m. Monday through May 8. Tickets: \$10. Information: 215-968-3859; www.newtowntheatre.com. More information: www.thenorthstarmovie.com.



Scenes from "The North Star," all shot in Bucks County

## EXE



### Quotable

"Like music and art, love of nature is a common language that can transcend political or social boundaries."  
— Jimmy Carter, 39th U.S. president



### Still on the Books

In Fargo, N.D., one may be jailed for wearing a hat while dancing.



### Getting a Grip

Pandas have front paws equipped with extra wrist bones that act like thumbs.



### Art of Perfection

It took Leonardo da Vinci 12 years to paint the lips of Mona Lisa.



### Celebrate This

Today is National Honesty Today.



### A True Scaredy-cat

Napoleon suffered from a fear of cats.

### State Stats

Hawaii is moving toward Japan at the rate of almost 4 inches per year.

## Vineberg

Continued from Page D1

Cut ahead a few years to the casting of the movie. According to the history books, Big Ben was 6-foot-10 and wore size-22 shoes ("imagine that guy running through the woods trying to hide," Phillips says), which certainly narrowed the field of potential actors for the role.

A few former Eagles auditioned, including massive 6-foot-7 offensive lineman Tra Thomas.

Trotter, a four-time Pro Bowl selection who last played football in 2009 after his second stint with the Eagles, initially wasn't interested. But despite his height (6-1), he had a physical presence and charisma that intrigued the filmmakers.

"I turned it down a couple of times. In the beginning, I felt like, 'I ain't no actor. I'm the Axeman.' The Axeman don't act," Trotter says, referencing his nickname from his playing days. "But (my agent) was, like, 'Trot, man, this is the perfect role. You've got the personality for it. At least come down and meet the guy.'"

"(Phillips) started telling me about the script, and I was immediately intrigued. I read a few lines and thought, 'Yeah, what the heck.' I ended up reading the script at least eight or nine times, and I'm not a big reader. But the type of work Thomas put into the script, I couldn't put it down. It really is a remarkable story — everything he went through to become free and then putting himself back into harm's way to save other slaves."

Phillips, who credits Powell for mentoring Trotter on set, thought the casting was almost meant to be.



Thomas C. Bartley, Clifton Powell and Jeremiah Trotter play characters chasing their freedom in "The North Star."

"His nickname is the Axeman, and if you know anything about Big Ben, you know he was chopping wood on the side of Buckingham Mountain. It was almost too good to be true," he says. "He had this natural instinct for the role, and he took it very seriously. It set the tone for the rest of the cast — if this guy who's never acted before is working this hard, everyone has to step up their game."

Trotter acknowledges he was a little nervous but felt like he didn't have to do anything special to get into character.

"Big Ben was a humble guy, a Christian guy, who respected everyone," he says. "I just kind of played myself."

The character has to show plenty of emotion during the film,

including reacting to the death of a friend. For those scenes, Trotter channeled long-dormant memories of his father, who died right after he was drafted in 1998.

The role was also more physically grueling than he expected. "What really surprised me was the 15-hour days," he says. "Big Ben was like a superhero, always carrying someone up a hill. We'd have to shoot some of those scenes at least 15, 20 times from different angles. I'd get pretty worn-out. If two-a-day (football practices) were a 10 (in intensity), this was like an eight-and-half, nine."

Part of that was no doubt due to the frenetic shooting schedule. The film, which was produced by Doylestown-based LuckPig Studios, used 14 locations in Bucks

County, including state parks, private homes and historic sites such as The Moland House, Plumstead Meeting and the Hammerstein House.

A speech by famed abolitionist Frederick Douglass (Keith David) was shot in the 182-year-old Newtown Theatre — a fitting set choice, given that the real Douglass actually spoke there, back when the building was the site of anti-slavery meetings. Newtown mayor Dennis O'Brien appears in the scene as a 19th-century politician, introducing Douglass.

Phillips doesn't sugarcoat the violence in "The North Star" (the title refers to the guide in the sky the escaped slaves were told to follow). The film vividly shows the brutality the main characters

encounter, their suffering and starvation in the woods.

"But I don't want that to be the focal point of the film," he says. "It's really about how people came together across racial, religious and ethnic lines for one cause they believed in — abolishing slavery."

He's proud of how the 19th-century Bucks County community united to help Big Ben's cause, just as he's moved by the way that community opened its arms to this project 160 years later.

Phillips is already working on his next Bucks County-based film, about Pearl Buck.

"There's so much stuff right here, so much history," he says. "I'd love to put this place on the map."

## After long road, former area football star finding acting success

By ANDY VINEBERG  
STAFF WRITER

Honestly, Adam Ratcliffe is more than just an on-screen tough guy.

You might not know it from a pair of projects debuting this week, though. The former Central Bucks East High School football standout plays a sadistic slave hunter in the locally produced independent film "The North Star" and an overly aggressive corrections officer in an episode of NBC's "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit" scheduled to air at 9 p.m. Wednesday. "As I was walking off the set, (SVU) executive producer Dick Wolf says, 'We'll hire you again if we need somebody to come in and rough somebody up,'" Ratcliffe says. "I told him, 'I'm a little more versatile than that.'"

Indeed, Ratcliffe, a 1997 CB East graduate, has been acting for about nine years, guest-starring on six national TV shows. He's also a singer/musician, performing regularly around the Philadelphia area, and a writer whose mixed martial arts screenplay "The Philly

Kid" led to a feature-length release on Netflix.

Oh, and he once made \$50,000 for a Pizza Hut commercial in which he swallowed about half a slice of pizza in one bite.

Ratcliffe, who grew up in Warwick Township and now lives in Warminster with his wife, Andrea, has been fascinated by film since he skipped baseball practice as a kid and rode his bike to the movies to sneak into "The Color of Money" with Paul Newman and Tom Cruise. He's been hooked on acting since middle school, when he received a standing ovation for playing Conrad Birdie in "Bye Bye Birdie."

"It was the only thing that could compare to scoring a touchdown or making a big tackle," says Ratcliffe, a four-year starter at East who received a football scholarship to West Chester University before transferring to Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where he earned degrees in communications and theater.

He moved to New York City in 2003 to pursue acting professionally and landed a couple of key jobs two



CB East graduate Adam Ratcliffe (left) relaxes on the set of "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit" with star Ice-T. The episode is scheduled to air Wednesday.

years later — starring in New Hope-based director Stephen Stahl's critically acclaimed independent film "Consequences" and nabbing his first major TV guest spot on "Law & Order: Criminal Intent."

Along the way, there have been plenty of diverse jobs to pay the bills: logging sports highlights for Vai Sikahema at NBC10, working with troubled group-home kids, even riding a pedicab-rickshaw in New York.

Not that it's been an easy road. His father, George, owner of the Warwick Tavern in Jamison, and mother, Liddy, a school bus driver in Central Bucks (and a singer), split up when he was 4. He grew up around the pub and "knew about life's problems at a very young age. I was constantly meeting new characters from all walks of life, and my curiosity made me want to emulate certain people I met."

He struggled with alcoholism into his early-20s (he

says he's been sober for 13 years).

Ratcliffe's most devastating crisis occurred last fall, when his and Andrea's first daughter, Alaina Reese, died at birth.

"She looked like this porcelain doll," he says. "There was nothing wrong with her. It was a life-altering tragedy. She's been an angel on our shoulders ever since."

Ratcliffe credits his large family — mom, dad, four brothers and a sister and many aunts, uncles and cousins — for helping him and Andrea get through their grief.

He also credits his acting work, which has given him the chance to focus on a profession he truly loves.

In "The North Star," he plays a particularly ruthless slave owner. He nailed his audition after acting as vicious, violent and vile as possible while pretending to hang a slave, bloodying his own forearm in the process.

"When Jeremiah Trotter (who stars as runaway slave Ben Jones) saw my audition tape, he said, 'We're gonna have some problems,'" Ratcliffe says. "But I told

him I was a huge fan, and we ended up becoming great friends. I had three scenes with him, including a nice fight scene."

Ratcliffe says he was more starstruck meeting former Philadelphia Eagles linebacker Trotter than he was when he met Jack Nicholson while attending his first play on Broadway in 2003.

He's optimistic his career is on the rise.

"There are two types of actors — those on the way up and those on the way down. I haven't really been up yet, but the fact I landed a role on 'SVU' at 35 is a good sign," Ratcliffe says. "I really revere what it is that I do. Just like in football, I try to use all of the things that have happened to me in the past to inspire me, especially my daughter."

"I want to use where I come from to tell a story. Whether through the songs I write or by conveying emotion on-screen, I'm a storyteller."

### BROADWAY REVIEW: 'HANDS ON A HARDBODY'

## Texas-set musical treads on the American Dream

By ISA GOLDBERG  
CORRESPONDENT

"Hands on a Hardbody," playwright Doug Wright's ("Grey Gardens") new musical, based on S.R. Bindler's documentary film, follows an annual Texas competition in which the contestant who keeps his/her hand on a pickup truck — the "hardbody" — for the longest stretch of time wins.

As an event, it sounds merciless and as pointless as inhaling the greatest number of Nathan's hot dogs or spinning around in circles until you fall down.

But, with lyrics by Amanda Green and music by Green and Trey Anastasio, it has a heartwarming effect as it telescopes the lives of 10 competitors enduring the sheer banality of keeping a hand on a truck under the remorseless Texas sun.

Here, the competition continues for a full five days before all but one person falls off or surrenders to delirium. All the better to get to know them. They're "all around the truck here — the best souls and the worst."

Indeed, there is destiny to this tale, and it's all promulgated by a capitalist enterprise, the Nissan dealership in Longview, Texas, that sponsors the event.

Described as a typical Middle American town, Longview boasts



three Walmarts and 100 foreclosures a month.

Its most celebrated residents are Karen Silkwood, immortalized in the eponymous film, and Matthew McConaughey, the actor.

As the source for the musical is a documentary, the information is based on fact.

Still, one wonders what the real motive is for these contestants, and whether the play warrants a full two and a half hours of musical theater.

If you consider unemployment an issue, then "Hands on a Hardbody" speaks to motive and to destiny in a big American way.

"Try to find a job that pays/ waitin' around for better days," sings the aging, overweight Janice, played by Dale Soules.

Among the most colorful characters, Benny Perkins is the prior year's winner, but he's returned this year because his wife ran off with his truck, and along with it, his sense of purpose.

Played as a tough surly character by the typically endearing and comedic Hunter Foster, this role demonstrates the actor's surprising range.

More obviously poignant is David Larsen as the Iraq war vet who, we're told at the musical's finale, still can't keep a job, but at least is learning to hold onto his family.

And Allison Case as the optimistic UPS worker (the top-paying job in town) meets her love holding onto that big red truck.

That man, played by Jay

Armstrong Johnson, wins the girl and along with it a job at UPS. Together, their dream of a two-week vacation in Las Vegas expresses working-class youthful longing.

Their goal is no more the stuff of satire or derision than the religiosity of the heavy-set lady played by Keala Settle, who praises the lord for every moment she holds on.

Together, Settle and Jacob Ming-Trent as Ronald McCowan, the first one to drop out of the contest, bring their religious zeal to the gospel-style music of the piece.

Meanwhile, Kathleen Elizabeth Monteleone, the sexy blonde who gets conned by the dealership, delivers spicier numbers with a velvet voice.

Trey Anastasio, former Phish front man, helped write the score to "Hands on a Hardbody."

Still, the core story follows an unemployed laborer (Keith Carradine) with a broken leg who insists on competing for an award that threatens his health and alienates his wife (Mary Gordon Murray) of 30 years.

Ultimately, it's their ability to hold on to one another that speaks to the musical's endearing message.

Unfortunately, the music — a mix of country, rock and bluegrass — falls short of inspiring. It could easily be the upbeat elevator music at Walmart. The straightforward lyrics are necessarily simplistic.

Susan Hilferty's costumes are equally to the point of these simple blue-collar folk. And the scenic design (Christine Jones) for this event at a car dealership is appropriately functional.

Directed by Neil Pepe, the musical loses its punch for sustaining itself far too long.

Not only is the staging necessarily stagnant, but the individual stories, like threads in a tapestry, fray over time.

"Hands on a Hardbody" is being staged at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre, 256 W. 47th St., New York City. Performances are at 7:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 2 p.m. Wednesday. For tickets, call Ticketmaster at 877-250-2929, go to Ticketmaster.com or stop by the box office.