



## Candid cameras on campus

ALEXANDRA GILL talks to filmmaker John Zaritsky about his fascinating look at college life

By ALEXANDRA GILL  
Monday, February 28, 2005 - Page R1

 [E-mail this Article](#)  
 [Print this Article](#)

VANCOUVER -- There are no laugh-out-loud sex scenes in *College Days*, *College Nights*. The Canadian indie bands featured on the soundtrack might make you want to jump up and dance instead of scoff, as many did, when reading the embarrassingly cartoonish hip-hop lyrics Tom Wolfe wrote for *I Am Charlotte Simmons*. And the stories of 16 hard working, astutely introspective undergraduates in this six-hour series are almost all more inspiring than depressing. But if George W. Bush has any interest in getting a real perspective on the North American leaders of tomorrow, he really should put down the above-mentioned bleak portrait of campus life by a septuagenarian wannabe and immediately start watching this fascinating documentary, which begins airing in three parts on the Documentary Channel tomorrow night.

*College Days*, *College Nights* is directed by John Zaritsky, the acclaimed Canadian filmmaker who won an Academy Award for *Just Another Missing Kid* (1982). The crew included professionals along with eight of Zaritsky's University of British Columbia film students, who were each assigned two undergraduates to follow over a 10-month period.

The relatively chaste atmosphere of this modern college campus is one of the documentary's most surprising revelations.

"I was quite disappointed in the sexual life of my characters -- seriously," says Zaritsky, who himself graduated from Trinity College at the University of Toronto in 1965.

Other than one party hound named Lenny, who is featured in the third episode, most of these students have more important things than sex on the brain. The delightful cast of characters includes a Christian student from Singapore who wants nothing more than to foster a closer relationship with his distant father, a Persian woman who struggles with the weight of her parents' divorce, a Korean frat boy yearning for true love, and a driven commerce student who seems a very likely candidate for Canada's next female prime minister.

"I found the students far more serious, dedicated and harder working than we were," says Zaritsky, who moved to Vancouver from Toronto six years ago. "I think part of it is that they live in a far more competitive world. It's harder to get into university now, the financial problems are greater and the degrees aren't worth as much as they were in the mid-sixties. It's not an automatic ticket into the marketplace any more.

"Also, as you really see in the second episode, a lot of these kids are being raised by a generation of parents who are divorced or separated. It's had a real effect on them. They're far more serious about finding good relationships and being monogamous and faithful than we ever were.

"Yes, they're having a lot less sex than we did. Is that good or bad? I really don't know," he adds, laughing heartily. The documentary's dearth of steamy sex scenes is fully compensated by the confessional intimacy and candour achieved with video diaries that the characters recorded themselves. Zaritsky gave them cameras, which they kept at home and pulled out whenever they had something to say.

"I think it paid off hugely," says Zaritsky, who was so pleased with the technique he plans to use it again for *Couples*, his next original project for the Documentary Channel.

The idea of having film students document their own subculture was a method Zaritsky first used when making *Ski Bums*, a hilariously candid documentary about Whistler's working class, produced for the National Film Board.

"While I pride myself on being a good interviewer and getting good material, it's all done during the day in front of a professional crew, in a very artificial environment," Zaritsky explains. "When I sent ski bums out to cover other ski bums at a party with a small camera, the footage was much more real than anything I could have achieved by going in with a professional crew and huge lights and sound system."

His experimental methods didn't make this project any easier. "It was like running a three-ring circus," Zaritsky says. "We had so much footage we had to start editing very early, even before we finished shooting."

Fortunately, the soundtrack -- which includes such great Canadian indie bands as Winnipeg's Weakerthans and Vancouver's Spygirl -- proved much easier than any he had previously worked on. "For years and years, I've been cutting to guide tracks that would include the Smashing Pumpkins and Tom Petty or whatever. And then at the end of the game, you can never afford to include Tom Petty so you've got to go out and replace it all -- but it never looks as good without Tom Petty."

This time, Zaritsky asked his students right at the beginning of the project to bring in CDs of their favourite bands, ones he could afford.

"Some of the music, especially the opening song, sounds almost as if they had been written for the series. I'm really pleased with it."

He's pretty chuffed about life these days, too.

"I've become a real ski bum," boasts Zaritsky, who lives part-time in Whistler and manages to get in about 50 days on the slopes each season.

Zaritsky laughs very hard when asked if he's gone native since moving to Lotus Land. Although his subjects of late are undoubtedly compelling, college students, ski bums and couples seem rather soft when compared to the rapists, murderers and criminals he once chased and racked up numerous awards for when he was a hard-hitting investigative reporter for CBC, PBS, BBC and The Globe and Mail, among others.

"My interests have changed, truly. I'm more interested in exploring different subcultures and human relationships than I was back then. I had 20 years of that. There are lots of younger guys who can do it now, and I have huge respect for many of them. I'd much rather hang out with ski bums than chase some crook halfway across the world in this part of my life. It's a lot more fun."