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The Candy-Store Cowboys

PAUL BRACCO'S FIRST FILM CENTERS AROUND A POPULAR HENRY STREET HANGOUT

LOOK AROUND," SAYS PAUL Bracco, sitting at the old-style fountain counter at Lou's Candy Store on Henry Street in Red Hook. "This is it."

Bracco, 26, is so fond of the little candy store that he made it the centerpiece of his first film, *The Court*, which was a featured selection at the Brooklyn Film Festival in October. The movie, shot primarily in the store and the surrounding neighborhood, has brought its young director a fair share of acclaim. He was named best new director at the New York Independent Film Festival in May and best director at Las Vegas' Blue Sky International Film Festival in September, where the film also earned best-feature honors. One reviewer said the film was "Shakespearean in its tragic dimensions."

"Shakespearean?" says Bracco, nursing a Manhattan Special. "I'll take that."

The script, rewritten 28 times, evolved from slapstick comedy to serious drama; a nine-minute one-act play (without a budget) became a 90-minute feature film (with a \$50,000 budget). Through it all, the candy store remained the spiritual center of this work.

"This is the place I wrote the script for,"

says the affable, energetic Bracco. "There is something about this place. It's a hangout. The stories that you hear, the people."

Bracco grew up on Staten Island and



later, New Jersey, but on the weekends he would come to visit his grandparents who lived across the street from Lou's. (Bracco simply calls it "the candy store.") He

regularly walked across Henry Street to buy coloring books, sodas, cap guns, comics and other stuff. Sometimes he'd come with his grandparents, other times with friends from the neighborhood. Anthony Guardascione, whose father, Lou, owns the store, remembers Bracco as "a little mischievous."

Before deciding to make the film, Bracco, who was trained as an actor at Boston University, produced a

number of theatrical productions in the city. He made ends meet by working as a bartender at the Tribeca Grill, the downtown eatery owned by Robert DeNiro

(who, alas, did not offer the young filmmaker sage advice about the joys and sorrows of moviemaking). When Bracco started searching for money and actors to make his film, he didn't need to look far for the cast: Four of his coworkers at the restaurant—Scott Conte, Jim Sandner, Alicia Wells and Jeff Mackin—were awarded parts in *The Court*.

The director says the movie is a cautionary tale about the dangers of illicit substances and mixing with the wrong group of people. Its spiritual antecedents, he says, include films like *Diner*, *Mean Streets* and *The Pope of Greenwich Village*. In addition to searching for a distributor for the film, Bracco, who has founded a production company called Red Hook Films, is busy writing scripts for more feature films.

But what do they think about *The Court* at the candy store? Owner Lou Guardascione saw the movie in May and has hung a poster on the wall to celebrate its completion. When asked his opinion of the flick, he pauses for a few seconds before answering in a single word: "Good." —PD



The 26-year-old Bracco plays a tough guy named Paulie who has a fondness for controlled substances, street prostitutes and old-fashioned egg creams.