

Performance Art

Working with *Sopranos* fans and veterans of the Halo wars, ex-art director Simon McQuoid finds his true calling.

By Jim Hanas



GO FILM'S SIMON MCQUOID

"I THINK I'M A MUCH BETTER DIRECTOR THAN I EVER WAS A CREATIVE."

—SIMON MCQUOID

In the recent Xbox spot "Enemy Weapon," we return to The Museum of Humanity—where the wars that occupy the *Halo* videogame trilogy have been memorialized. Two graying, rank and file veterans recall their wartime service, and one appears palpably shaken after he handles a weapon once wielded by the enemy. The effect is poignant and, above all, realistic. As with other campaigns for *Halo 3*—including Rupert Sanders' spots about the museum and its centerpiece diorama and Neill Blomkamp's chilling battlefield video cycle "Landfall"—the commercial invites us to believe that the *Halo* world is real. More real than a videogame, at least, and perhaps as real as current events.

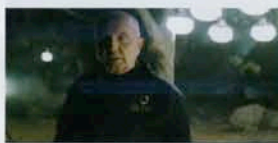
Simon McQuoid, the creative-turned-director who shot "Enemy Weapon" for McCann TAG—and its companion piece, "Hunted," in which a veteran returns to the site of a skirmish—says it's the most "satisfying job" he's done, "as a result of how it turned out and the process of it," he says. "It ticks all the boxes for me. My desire is for the stuff I do in the future to be better than the Xbox stuff. That's my goal."

McQuoid, 39, stepped behind the camera for the first time four years ago after a career as an art director and creative director. Originally from Perth, Australia, he and his creative partner—copywriter/CD Richard Overall—arrived in the U.S. in 1995 as creatives at Minneapolis agency Clarity Coverdale Fury. Stints at Hill, Holliday in Boston and TBWA/Chiat/Day, N.Y. followed, and it was at the latter that McQuoid and Overall first tried their hands at directing with a spot for client Samsonite. The pair also shot a comic campaign for Segway that admitted (at last) that the fancy scooter would not save humanity, but was still nifty nevertheless. After the team signed with Go Film, Overall returned to Australia—where he currently works out of the Sydney production company The Pound—leaving McQuoid to go it alone in New York.

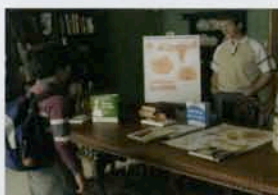
As a former creative, McQuoid says he was brought up, pro-



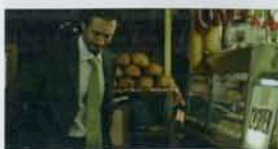
HALO 3 "ENEMY WEAPON"



HALO 3 "HUNTED"



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SOPRANOS DVD SPOT

fessionally, "protecting the idea," and that when he gets an assignment, he understands what it took for the script to get there. "When I get involved in a job, it's often at the end of an absolute marathon that these guys have had to run to get this script and idea through," he says. "I understand what they've been through." In fact, he eschews the idea of having a recognizable visual thumbprint that unifies his work. "My work is a little bit varied only because I start with the idea and I do what's right for the idea," he says.

That said, his reel features many character-driven scenarios. In a spot promoting *The Sopranos* on DVD from Venables, Bell & Partners, various people get misty when they see things—workmen throwing away a body-shaped package, for example—that remind them of the dearly departed series. In a Goodby anti-drug campaign, parents tackle awkward chats with their kids—one Dad initiates the "sex talk"—as a way of making talking about drugs go down easier.

"I think I'm a much better director than I ever was a creative," McQuoid says. "I just feel like my brain is better equipped to work with actors and bring out performances." To that end, he relies on improvisation as a way of allowing believable performances to emerge. He worked a lot with the actors in "Enemy Weapon," for example, briefing them on the world and gear of *Halo*, and the spot's first line—the grisly "I was a sniper. Used a standard, high-powered sniper rifle. At 600 yards, it would go through about 13 feet of flesh and bone."—was an ad-lib. "I just love performances like that," McQuoid says. "That's what I really get excited about."

Currently, McQuoid is in the process of moving to L.A. with his family so he can travel less. But it's not Hollywood that's on his mind—at least not yet. "I definitely have feature aspirations, no doubt about it, but I'm at the early stages and my primary focus is still commercials," he says. "I've got a long way to go, and there's a lot I want to achieve in that world."