

MEET

BEN CHIU

SCANNING THE MIND; SCANNING THE FUTURE

By Susan Stewart

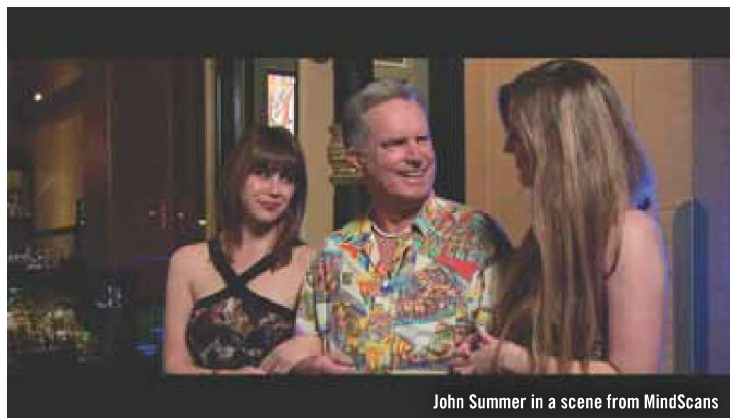
“THE FUNNY THING ABOUT MOVIES,” SAID producer/director Ben Chiu, “is that if no one notices what you did, you did your job well.” His job, he explained, is to make it look like he wasn’t needed.

Chiu is the Studio Head of Alliance Digital Studios, and has just released a feature-length film, produced right here in San Luis Obispo County, and featuring an entirely local cast and crew. *MindScans*, a thought-provoking futuristic drama based on a story from best-selling sci-fi author Steven L. Kent, premiered last month at Atascadero’s Galaxy Theater to a sold-out crowd.

“The plan is to run it at every city in the Galaxy chain,” said Chiu. With 120 screens located in California, Nevada, Texas, and Washington, the privately owned theater chain will give *MindScans* the kind of exposure indie filmmakers covet. And Ben Chiu is delighted.

Born in New York City and raised on Long Island, Chiu’s love affair with film began as a latch-key kid. His father was in the import/export business and his mother worked for the New York school district and later, the county police department, while they raised their two children. Chiu has a younger sister.

“My babysitter was TV, so I watched a lot of it—*Gilligan’s Island*, *Dragnet*, *I Love Lucy*, all the classics,” he said. “Back then, going

John Summer in a scene from *MindScans*Michael Passerelli and Katy Ouse in a scene from *MindScans*

to the movies was not an option, so I suppose TV is where it all started for me.”

Chiu attended New York University on an academic scholarship and graduated with a degree in Motion Pictures. “Most filmmakers at NYU worshipped guys like Andy Warhol and made artsy/experimental movies ... so they used to make fun of me and my narrative movies and called me ‘Mr. Hollywood.’ In their eyes I was a sellout.”

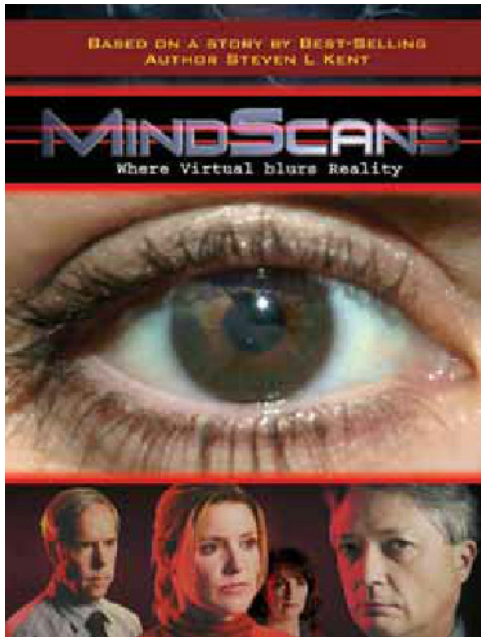
But Chiu is philosophical about their digs. “It’s funny how something meant to be a put-down inspires you sometimes,” he said. He landed a job at Paramount Pictures right out of college and moved to California. He later attended the American Film Institute, taking classes at night and on weekends.

But his real education came from working alongside the masters. “The most important things you learn in film school is design—why things work or don’t work,” said Chiu. “This is art and while you can enjoy something on many levels, most people don’t even know how much they don’t know. ... Craftsmanship is all in the details.”

At Paramount, seeing movie stars like Sean Connery, Robert Mitchum, and Eddy Murphy; or talking to Henry Winkler and Michael J. Fox were everyday things for Chiu. But one day, his early TV years caught up with him when he found himself awestruck by running into the actors who’d starred in *The Brady Bunch*.

“Well, seeing William Shatner had the same effect,” he said, explaining that *Star Trek V* was in production at the time. “But not to the same degree as seeing ‘Marsha and Greg.’ Silly, right?”

Chiu married his wife, Mary (“the smartest thing I’ve ever done!”) and they moved to San Luis Obispo when they decided to start a family. One day, while still living in the L.A. area, a woman was killed in a parking lot during a car-jacking gone wrong. The lot was for a sewing supply store that Mary frequented, and they knew they’d have to move. Ben and Mary searched for the best place to



"Essentially a guy that owns a camera and a few other guys that move lights. ... [It's] smart move-making to produce high-quality, low-budget features while residing in one of the best places to live in the world—San Luis Obispo, California."

That "best place" is featured prominently in *MindScans*, the story about an investigative journalist, Sara, who is invited to write about the Prometheus Bionetic Interface, a controversial technology that connects the human brain to a virtual reality super-computer. While researching her story, Sara meets its creator/founder Tom Sobel, learns about the numerous lawsuits from its former customers, and struggles with the social and moral implications of this mysterious technology, as the lines between her ethics, the virtual world, and reality blur. (Synopsis adapted from press materials released by Alliance-DigitalStudios.com.)

Locals will recognize their favorite spots, including Avila Beach, Cuesta College, a San Luis Obispo Cemetery, and the streets of Downtown SLO; as well as familiar local faces such as John Summer, Michael Passerelli, and Megan Maloney. Visit www.alliancedigitalstudios.com for screenshots and teasers. Full cast and crew can be found here: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2235633/fullcredits#>

Why this project? "There are so many factors that go into green-lighting a movie," said Chiu. "But story is one of the top criteria. ... This is a great, timely story that explores society's fascination with technology."

New Times' longtime film and music reporter, Glen Starkey, said, "The story is totally engaging. I couldn't stop watching it. ... [It's] a cerebral thriller that, like *Inception* and *The Matrix* will have you questioning reality."

raise kids, and SLO was it! Besides, by this time, Chiu had become disenchanted with the "... whole who-you-know, not-what-you-know" mentality that seemed to govern his industry, and had begun working as a photo journalist and writer for hobby and computer gaming magazines. He soon landed a job as an author at Microsoft for the *Flight Simulator* series, then the best-selling entertainment software title of all time. To date, Chiu has authored nine books that have been printed in 11 languages.

Chiu is also a flight instructor, a ground instructor, holds a commercial pilot certificate, and has been an FAA-appointed Aviation Safety Councilor for the San Jose Flight Standards District Office for many years. He and Mary have three children, ... "wonderful, talented, smart kids," he says, currently attending middle school, high school, and college locally.

Soon after moving here, Chiu opened Alliance Digital Studios, which he describes as,

And *The Tribune's* Sarah Linn said, "... Ben Chiu's ambitious, imaginative film examines the dark side of our modern-day obsession with technology, literally taking moviegoers inside the minds of its characters."

Chiu said if the movie generates a following, he wants to spin it off into a TV series. And what about his own future? "The plan is to continue building a mini-movie industry here in SLO," he said. "We have a business model that makes sense and we've proved we can make quality movies here. The only unknown is whether we can generate enough interest in our products, which in the end means dollars, to support making more of these."

Support independent film in San Luis Obispo by supporting local companies such as Alliance Digital Studios, by seeing their movies like MindScans, buying the DVD at <http://mindscaans.com>, and spreading the word in person, via Twitter, Facebook, and other social media portals.

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