

Documentary filming in Columbia

By [Alecia Warren](#), Senior Staff Writer. Posted [September 27, 2005](#).

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Columbia residents looking for their 15 minutes of fame and an excuse to shop are being put on the road to stardom.

Los Angeles directors Tamas Bojtor and Sybil Dessau, who are shooting a feature-length documentary in Columbia, are paving the way for them.

Both documentary and fiction, "American Shopper" will follow actor Jonathan Sawyer's quest to introduce a new sport to willing Columbians. If the Columbia citizens welcome Sawyer's creation, a competition between residents will be held at the end of November.

The theme of the sport? Shopping.

"It's about American culture and American consumerism," producer Katie Mustard said. "We'll be finding real people and turning something we do in our everyday lives into a sport and trying to make it fun."

Bojtor said he plans to base the film off of his personal experiences. After moving to America from Hungary nine years ago, the filmmaker said he was astounded by the cultural differences he saw in simple daily life activities, even shopping.

"It's a lot of small differences," Bojtor said, adding that he hopes his movie will portray the unique qualities of small-town life he has observed in the United States.

"Somehow the film will reflect my own experiences and how I felt the first few years that I came here," he said. "It's a personal image of how I see America today."

Bojtor planned to star in the full documentary, spotlighting his shopping experiences in various small towns. More comfortable behind the camera as a cinematographer, however, Bojtor decided an actor could play his role in the hybrid film. Hybrid films mix documentary and fiction characteristics.

Although hybrid films aren't made often, Mustard said, they allow moviemakers more control of a documentary's plot direction.

"We have an actor we can manipulate in the way you couldn't in a real documentary," Mustard said, making a comparison to the process of filming reality television shows. "If things aren't working out we'll have the actor come in and change the story line a little bit. But in the end it will be up to the people we find."

Exactly who these people will be and where they'll be found, Dessau said, will depend on Sawyer and where in Columbia he decides to solicit his sport.

"There will be no casting per se," Dessau said. "Anyone who wants to participate can, but who we'll follow will depend on how they present themselves as compelling characters."

The directors said they weren't sure where to unearth these compelling characters until Mustard joined the project. She invited the directors to visit her hometown of Columbia, where Bojtor found the American small-town sentiment that he wanted for his film.

"The people were fantastic," he said. "Columbia has a unique balance.

There's a lot of pride, it has a university, which has a totally different element. It's picturesque."

And Bojtor should know what makes for an intriguing setting. Both he and Dessau have built their careers shooting documentaries for television networks, including ABC, Showtime and National Geographic. They also worked together on the reality show "Film School," which followed the stories of students experiencing the same struggle for artistic expression as Bojtor and Dessau.

Filming for "American Shopper" started Monday, and will continue through Nov. 30. Sawyer already has begun looking for places to reach large groups of people and will visit the Twilight Festival Thursday evening with film crew in tow.

Dessau said she and Bojtor are excited to see how the project will develop.

"I'm sure these people will naturally shine," she said. "Its just about people at the end of the day."