



BEHIND A DYNAMITE COVER

How BYU served up an award-winning magazine cover with one oddball hero and 25 pounds of tater tots

BY MEREDITH BARNETT

IN 2004, A MOON BOOT-WEARING, liger-doodling, tater-tot-loving super-nerd danced his way into stardom in the underdog hit indie film, *Napoleon Dynamite*. The comedy was born in a screenwriting class at Brigham Young University, and nearly everyone involved with the film is a graduate. To commemorate the 15th anniversary of the short film that prefigured the movie, the *BYU Magazine* team dished up a tasty cover story on how the blockbuster took shape.

Here's a look at the making of this dynamite, Circle of Excellence Award-winning cover.

When you brainstormed cover ideas, where did you start?

Peter Gardner, *BYU Magazine* editor: Looking back, *Napoleon Dynamite* would seem to be a slam dunk as the cover story, but it wasn't at all obvious in the moment. This issue happened to have two major articles

with a spiritual focus—would one of those be more engaging for readers? Or would a cover featuring the quirky hero of an off-beat comedy feel off-tone?

Brittany Rogers, *BYU Magazine* assistant editor: We knew we could fall back on movie poster art if needed, but we kept brainstorming in our weekly meeting with editors and designers. In one meeting, Peter threw out making Napoleon's visage out of food—like how Italian artist Giuseppe Arcimboldo painted people made of vegetables.

A.J. Rich, *BYU Magazine* assistant art director: Over the years, I've commissioned many different illustrators but have never had the opportunity to hire someone who used food. We Googled "food illustration" and saw an image of [actor] Kevin Bacon made of bacon and that led us to artist Jason Mecier. I contacted Jason and the rest is crispy history.

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How did you land on tater tots?

Rich: I listed out some of the items that would or could be used to illustrate Napoleon. On the top of my list was tater tots—so we decided to send the list to Jason. Whenever I give art direction to an illustrator, I rarely tell the illustrator exactly what to do. After sending the list to Jason, I got a quick reply (exact words): “Definitely TATER TOTS!”

Tots it had to be and now tots it was. I was thrilled; I could see the explosive potential of the art beginning to take shape. Jason produced the tater tot art in a square format—which presented challenges for our magazine’s dimensions, but using it on the cover allowed me to fulfill one of my lifelong dreams: creating type out of ketchup.

Rogers: The credits for the movie are written in condiments on lunch trays. A.J. was adamant about paying homage in the layout with mayo and ketchup.

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Peter Gardner, BYU



Rich: When the final cover was complete, I had no doubt it was a keeper and one to be proud of.

It’s a pretty wacky idea—how does this tie to your magazine’s typical cover approach?

Rogers: It is wacky—but so is the film. Our magazine tone is normally more staid, but the fodder of the film begged for it and, I think, gave us license to experiment.

Gardner: We felt pretty confident that the tone wouldn’t be too foreign to our readership. It was also a chance to expand our creative toolbox a bit. It’s easy to get into

a rut of portraying the university in all of its solemn seriousness and forgetting that it’s also an experience of self-discovery and fun. To authentically reflect that experience of readers, an alumni magazine sometimes needs to work in stories and covers that convey the off-kilter, youthful exuberance of this phase of life. This seemed like a good opportunity for that.

That said, we did still need to make the case for the cover to our bosses. I distinctly remember my dread as I presented the tots cover along with a couple of safer cover options to our publisher. But we felt the art was special enough that it would be a real miss if it weren’t on the cover. Fortunately, our publisher agreed.

What was the response to it?

Gardner: Considering how well the tots turned out, I wasn’t surprised when we began to see praise for the cover on Twitter and Facebook as soon as the magazine began hitting homes.

Rogers: We also received a lot of fan mail celebrating the article, one of which came from a reader who stated he/she didn’t love the movie but, seeing the cover, was intrigued, read the piece, and enjoyed the story.

Gardner: What did surprise me was that we didn’t see *any* negative feedback about the cover or article—from people thinking it was too silly or who thought a portrait out of tots was gross or who just happened to hate the movie.

Rich: Even my teenagers were in love with it.

What could other teams learn from your experience making this cover?

Rogers: Developing cover art plans earlier in our process—and fully planning at least two cover options—is pushing us to get better, more interesting covers. It’s also

TOT-TASTIC: Artist Jason Mecier used 25 pounds of tater tots to create this portrait of Napoleon Dynamite.



allowing us to plan the safe-bet cover *and* the wacky, provocative, or all-out cover.

This was a story we had to wait a long time to do. It helps to remember to be patient. The answer may be no—but instead of “no,” think of it as “not now.” Don’t write off a good idea. Just find ways to do it in the right way at the right time.

Gardner: I think we can sometimes self-censor by assuming that administrators won’t go for an idea that is outside the norm. But the magic waits just outside the norm, so you’ve got to be willing to take that risk.

Part of our success in making the case to the publisher was tied to the fact that we already had Mecier’s awesome artwork to place before him. Had we just approached him and said, “Hey, what if we made a picture of Napoleon Dynamite out of tater tots?” it might have seemed too weird or unlikely. Having the pudding before him made it much easier to make our case. We had to be willing to assume some risk in pursuing artwork that might not fly in the end.

What’s the value for educational institutions in trying something different in their magazines?

Rogers: Goofy always feels risky—in large part, I think, because it is hard to do well. It has to be really, truly fun. The audience has to smile with you, not laugh at you. And that can be a hard chord to strike, even harder at certain institutions. But when you can do it well, it pays dividends.

Gardner: For any magazine to be successful, you’ve got to engage the reader where it counts—in the mind, the heart, the gut, and occasionally the funny bone. You’re dealing with real people, and real people like to laugh sometimes. If you can harness laughter—or heartbreak or inspiration or love—to help tell the university’s story, then you have a chance of really getting through. ■

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LEFT: NATHAN KAN; JOMMANEE/EYEM/GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM RIGHT: JASON MECIER