**Filmmaker Ali Selim settles in at St. Olaf**

By Anna Stevens '10 November 10, 2008

The Minneapolis *Star Tribune* named him the 2006 Minnesota Artist of the Year. This year, Ali Selim is teaching at St. Olaf.

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Selim is the writer, director and producer of the critically acclaimed independent film *Sweet Land*. As an artist in residence in the Department of English, Selim is teaching screenwriting at St. Olaf. He has also worked to get several noted independent filmmakers to come to campus to screen their work and meet with students. Those [visits](http://fusion.stolaf.edu/news/index.cfm?fuseaction=NewsDetails&id=4480), along with having the [Coen brothers](http://fusion.stolaf.edu/news/index.cfm?fuseaction=NewsDetails&id=4482) on campus to film scenes for their upcoming movie *A Serious Man*, have provided St. Olaf students with a number of opportunities this semester to see and hear firsthand how the film industry works.

Selim spent many years as a successful advertising commercial director before he began his film career. His work received the Gold Lion, advertising's most coveted award, from the Cannes Advertising Film Festival; a Gold Award from British Design and Art Direction (D&AD), an educational charity; and can be found in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. During his years of work in the field, Selim has directed more than 850 television commercials.

Now his passion lies in filmmaking, a career that he recently shared more about.

**What brought you to St. Olaf as an artist in residence?** Assistant Professor of English Mary Trull had me visit her class a couple of times about a year ago. When word came that Professor of English Eric Nelson was retiring, Mary called and asked if I knew anyone who could teach his screenwriting course. I like teaching (for the most part!) and had promised the Minneapolis College of Art and Design some of my time this fall (meaning I knew I would be in town and available), so I thought, 'Why not try teaching students who aren't film students and see if I can learn anything in the process?'

**What has been the highlight of your time at St. Olaf thus far?** Hmmm ... hard to say. I usually don't assemble the highlights reel until after the game -- sometimes long after the game. I am more of a 'lesson' person than an 'experience' person. Sometimes the lessons are late in revealing themselves. But the experience is positive.

**How did you become interested in films?** Who isn't? This is actually sort of a painful question for me these days. From a very early age, films held more power for me than anything. Thanks to my father, I have had the opportunity to travel a great deal in my life. I have been to the center of the Great Pyramids, the bottom of the Grand Canyon, the top of Machu Picchu. Nothing compares to my first viewing of *Last Tango in Paris*. But out on the road with my film, *Sweet Land*, I quickly learned that very few people feel this way. Bummer.

**What is your favorite part about making films?** It all fills me with a sense of dread. And anguish. And fear. And self-loathing. But I can't seem to get away from it.

**How does teaching compare to filmmaking?** Sorry, I know you are looking for a thoughtful comparison, but nothing compares to filmmaking. I couldn't even begin to answer the question.

**You have been influential in bringing other notable filmmakers to campus this year to screen their films and interact with students. Why do you feel this is important?**
You're the second person in 24 hours to ask me this question, and I am a bit taken aback. For the filmmaking population of St. Olaf: If you want to be a surgeon, isn't it important to expose yourself to surgeons and surgery? Or an attorney. Or a ... Get out of yourself and your environment and see what they do, how they think, why they get out of bed in the morning. For the non-filmmaking population: Regional filmmaking is so very important to our ability to understand other people. If all we watch is *Dark Knight* or *Iron Man* (both of which I loved), we are not learning anything about humanity.

**Have you stumbled upon any interesting stories concerning St. Olaf that might be worth filming?** Stories of humanity are all worth filming. Unfortunately, it is very, very, very hard to get a movie made. And so I have become very discerning. I want to make *Iron Man 2*.

**If you could leave young filmmakers on campus with one piece of advice, what would it be?**
I'll give you two pieces of advice for the price of one:
1. Write.
2. Shoot.

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