



Interview with Jesse Moss, director of CON MAN

Docurama: How did you decide to make CON MAN?

Director Jesse Moss: The film is the result of my personal obsession with Hogue, an obsession that dates to 1985, the year Hogue assumed the identity of a deceased infant named Jay Mitchell Huntsman and enrolled in my high school in Palo Alto, California. At the time, I was fifteen years old.

Although Hogue's ruse was short-lived, it had a powerful impact on me. In the ensuing years, I thought often of Hogue and his motivations. There was something romantic but also deeply disturbing about Hogue's pathological desire to re-invent himself.

Six years later, in 1991, I was stunned to learn that Hogue had succeeded in fabricating an entirely new identity, and had conned his way into Princeton University. This time, Hogue had transformed himself into Alexi Indris Santana, a prominent member of Princeton's sophomore class. Had it not been for a chance encounter with his former Palo Alto High School classmate -- Renee Pacheco -- Hogue might have succeeded in living out his dream of creating a new life for himself.

Hogue's arrest at Princeton renewed my interest and I began to seek out similar stories -- of con men, imposters and heroic self-invention -- in film, literature and real-life. I found echoes of Hogue's character in works like F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Tobias Wolf's *This Boy's Life*.

In 1998, unable to shake my obsession, I began to investigate Hogue's life. After contacting Robert Egles of the New Jersey State Parole Board, I learned that Hogue had been released from prison in 1997, and had disappeared. Rather than pursue Hogue immediately, I set out to explore his childhood and adolescence in Kansas City. Some of the earliest conversation I had were with Hogue's old friend, Keith Mark, and his track coach, Wayne Hobelman. Their recollections were vivid and deeply sympathetic, and revealed a new dimension to Hogue's character. Other interviews yielded darker theories about Hogue. I quickly realized that even if Hogue couldn't be found, an investigation into his real life story might yield answers to some of my questions about Hogue's true motivations.

Docurama: How were you able to find funding for the film?

Moss: After developing the project for a year and a half, I formally presented the film as a seven minute work-in-progress to funders at the 1999 Independent Feature Film

Market. Sheila Nevins and Nancy Abraham of HBO were intrigued by the documentary and offered to provide development funding to determine if Hogue would participate in the film. With this commitment of support, I formally began searching for Hogue. After Hogue agreed to participate in the film, HBO stepped in to fund the full production. Production was completed in October 2001.

Docurama: It seems like a difficult endeavor to locate a known con artist and impostor. How were you able to track him for the film?

Moss: My search for Hogue unfolded in the fragmented and unpredictable manner that often characterizes documentary filmmaking. A year and a half after beginning production on the film, I flew to Aspen with what I believed was Hogue's current address. I was disappointed to discover that he had moved, but, through a circuitous chain of coincidences and connections, I was finally able to get word to Hogue about the film. He called me in Aspen on the last night of my trip, and I arranged for him to view the short promotional trailer I had produced for the film.

I knew that Hogue had spurned previous offers and was wary and distrustful of the media. I wanted to convey both my serious intentions and my sympathies, and I did not want to jeopardize my relationship with Hogue by surprising him with a camera.

After viewing the trailer, Hogue called to say that the film seemed "interesting," and that he would meet with me in person.

Although Hogue decided to cooperate with me on the film, he was reluctant to discuss his experiences and feelings in detail. Hogue has spent the last twenty years of his life denying his past, and, thus, represents the most challenging of documentary subjects. His responses to my questions were often evasive, and it quickly became apparent that Hogue had little interest in offering an emotionally introspective and narratively revealing account of his childhood, his deceptions, or his life after Princeton. He responded most enthusiastically when our discussions took a philosophical turn. These digressions, frequently on the subject of morality, were enlightening but frustrating.

Docurama: What was it like working with a con artist?

Moss: On a practical level, working with Hogue was extremely difficult. Hogue still lives on the margins of society and continues to move from town to town. He maintains no fixed address and can be difficult to reach. On one occasion, I had been unable to reach Hogue for several weeks. On a hunch, I called the local police department in the town where Hogue was then living and learned that he had been arrested for theft.

Hogue and I did eventually visit Princeton University together on a cold winter day. I had learned, at this point, to expect few revelations from my film subject. Instead, I found myself chasing Hogue through Princeton's gothic campus. After developing my film, I was struck by the emptiness of the campus and the way in which Hogue seemed to blend in and out of the shadows. These were the images I chose to include late in the film when Hogue discusses his experience at Princeton.

Despite the many difficulties I encountered, I believe that the film still succeeds in capturing an essential truth about Hogue's life today: his loneliness. In late summer of 2000, Hogue and I traveled to the remote ranch he owns in Southern Colorado. The landscape was vast and beautiful. Hogue was most at home on this barren, windswept mesa, and I immediately realized that the ranch could serve as a metaphor for his interior psychic landscape, which previously had been inaccessible to me. It seemed appropriate to close the film with these lonely images and a lingering close-up of Hogue's face.

Docurama: Can you tell us a little bit about how you structured the film? Did you have a specific editorial intent?

Structurally, the film was a challenge to piece together. I felt that it was important to withhold information about the real Hogue -- including his childhood in Kansas City and experiences at the University of Wyoming -- until we had learned about his deceptions in Palo Alto and Princeton. Only then is Keith Mark's statement -- "To be a distance runner, you have to be a con man and a liar to yourself" -- really meaningful.

As I discovered in my earliest interviews, people had very strong impressions of Hogue. He came alive in their descriptions; thus it seemed both possible and appropriate to tell his story largely through their recollections. Jon Luff, Hogue's Princeton teammate, says succinctly of Hogue: "He would allow you to create him." The more Hogue withheld of himself, the more people invested in him. This was his true genius for deception.

The film stays true to this aspect of Hogue character by allowing us -- the audience -- to create our own impressions of Hogue before finally meeting him in the final act of the film.

Docurama: What formats did you shoot the film in, and where did you locate the archival footage?

Most of the interviews in *Con Man* were shot on Digital Betacam. The film's non-interview elements, including many of the running images, were captured using high speed Super 8 film stock. The grainy imperfections of the Super 8 image evoke an immediate nostalgia, and perfectly captured the texture and feeling of high school track meets from the 1970s. The *verité* elements of the film with Hogue (at Princeton and on the ranch) were captured in both Super 8 and Digital Betacam. In the editing room, I preferred the slightly softer, impressionistic quality of the Super 8 to the video footage because it seemed stylistically consistent with the elusive nature of Hogue's character.

One of the real surprises came during post-production with the discovery of an old documentary about Princeton University produced in 1950 by the International Communication Agency. The footage, which was obtained from the National Archives, seemed to accurately convey the clubby, aristocratic qualities of the University and offers us a portrait of the mythic Ivy League aura that drew Hogue to Princeton.

Docurama: How difficult was it to track down the legal documents and interview tapes?

Moss: It took considerably more effort to locate Hogue's fraudulent application and correspondence with Princeton. With the assistance of a local criminal attorney, I obtained a court order compelling the Mercer County Prosecutor's Office to release its discovery file on Hogue. The file contained Hogue's complete application as well as an audio-cassette recording of Hogue's interrogation by the Princeton Police Department. These elements were essential in piecing together the details of Hogue's remarkable deception.