



contemporary art world. Mr. Malkovich plays an art school professor who begins Jerome's first class braying: "Don't have unrealistic expectations. Only one out of a hundred of you will ever make a living as an artist."

The film's first public showings, at this year's Sundance Film Festival, drew mixed responses, including one that the producers are quick to challenge. "Some people have seen 'Art School,' as they saw 'Ghost World,' as cynical, and I think they're really about innocence," said Ms. Halfon, who produced Mr. Zwigoff's acclaimed documentary "[Crumb](#)" (1995) before she helped form Mr. Mudd.

"It's true of Terry — just as it's true of John," she said, speaking of Mr. Zwigoff and Mr. Malkovich. "They are much more innocent than cynical. Are they deeply wounded? Absolutely. But this work is much more about innocence than cynicism."

Speaking by phone from his home in France, Mr. Malkovich said he found the resentful, frustrated characters in "Art School Confidential" to be "really funny" — and began one of his trademark conversational arias, which touched, among other things, on the difficulties of working as a producer.

"The world just doesn't owe you anything — I'm probably just too Midwestern for that — even if you're really good," he said.

"Perhaps, you know, it's absolutely awful that 'The Sound and the Fury's' first printing was 5,000 copies, and any Barbara Cartland novel is trillions, but so what?" he continued. "That's absolutely the way the world is, and you know what? People had better get used to it. And sometimes really talented people are discovered, and sometimes they're not. There is no justice in that. And if that's what some of our films have had to do with, we've probably lived those lives.

"Obviously we'd all like it to be easier. Obviously we'd all like it to be not such a struggle to do what are essentially quite small independent films that are funny, compelling, of interest. But it hasn't been easy, and it probably won't be any easier. But that's the way it is."

Mr. Mudd's roots stretch back much further than Thailand, to a setting that by Hollywood standards is at least as exotic: a high school basketball court in southern Illinois.

That's where Mr. Malkovich, who grew up in Benton, Ill., a coal mining town, first noticed Mr. Smith, who was a star guard and forward for the Springfield Lanphier Lions. They became roommates as freshmen at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston. "Smart alecks, plaid shirts, that kind of back-of-the-class thing," recalled Mr. Malkovich, now 52, who moved to Chicago after college to help start the Steppenwolf Theater Company.

A few years later, the sandy-haired, white-as-a-biscuit Mr. Smith — who relishes disclosing his unlikely first job, running an African-American political organization in Springfield — remembers getting a call from Mr. Malkovich, "who said: 'You know how to write a grant. Come take over our theater.' "

Mr. Smith, 51, who still wears Converse basketball shoes (though now the John Varvatos version, sans laces), produced some of Steppenwolf's best-known plays, including "[True West](#)," before moving to film, where his early credits included "[Of Mice and Men](#)" and "[The Man in the Iron Mask](#)," both starring Mr. Malkovich. The two men formed a company, Smith-Malkovich, in 1994.

They met Ms. Halfon, who was an executive at A&M Films, when she and the actor butted heads over film rights to "[Libra](#)," Don DeLillo's novel about Lee Harvey Oswald. Mr. Malkovich expressed interest in the material, which A&M swiftly purchased; when a reporter asked for comment on the acquisition, he remembers saying that maybe the company's executives "were geniuses or maybe they had thick metal plates in their

