



- [About Slackerwood](#)
- [Contributors](#)
- [Venue guide](#)
- [Reviews](#)
- [Archive by category](#)
- [Archive by month](#)
- [Contact](#)

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[Home](#) » [Blogs](#) » [Jordan Gass-Poore's blog](#)

Interview: What Kind of Person is Tom Copeland?

By [Jordan Gass-Poore](#) on January 5, 2012 - 12:30pm in [Local Cast and Crew](#)

It takes a certain kind of person to be in the movie industry. **Tom Copeland**, former **Texas Film Commission** director, teaches Texas State University-San Marcos students what it takes to persevere in the industry. A lesson he teaches in his courses is what he refers to as "Scared Straight: What Kind of Person Are You?"



I had the opportunity to speak with Copeland to find out what kind of person he is. The Meadow High School graduate's interest in theater flourished while studying under legendary high-school drama coach Noyce Burleson, who set the state record for most consecutive UIL One-Act Play Contest appearances and wins.

As a high-school student, Copeland became active in Texas Tech University's theater program, where he met Fred March, former **Texas State Department of Theatre and Dance** chair. He enrolled at Texas State, back when it was Southwest Texas State University, in 1969.

During his time as a Texas State student, Copeland was involved in 25 theater productions, such as *Waiting for Godot* and Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Measure for Measure*.

"I lived and breathed in that department," Copeland said. "I didn't do a lot of social things in school because I didn't have a lot of time. It was all about the play or whatever we were working on."

As an undergraduate, Copeland was involved in summer repertory theater programs in Texas and Colorado. He did not graduate from Texas State. However, he continued to call the theater department home and stayed in touch with faculty and staff.

Copeland said he left Texas State to pursue his dream of acting professionally. He struggled to find an acting job and instead became involved in behind-the-scenes work on movies and television. For five seasons, Copeland was a crew member for the PBS television series *Austin City Limits*. He said the job "came out of the blue."

After working as a freelance production assistant, grip, location and production manager, Copeland was hired as a Texas Film Commission location scout in 1983. In 2005, he retired as the organization's director.

Copeland became a Texas State Department of Theatre and Dance lecturer in 2005. He has helped integrate film-related courses, such as the business of film and short film development. He considers the courses he teaches to be "reality based."

"It's unadulterated hard work," Copeland said. "Many, many, many hours. It's a very tough business to get in, and a very tough business to stay in."

Guest speakers in Copeland's courses have included Austin-based independent filmmakers **Kat Candler** and **Bryan Poyser**. Poyser now teaches a screenwriting course at Texas State.

"I'm giving back to the university that I care a lot for with my expertise in the business," Copeland said.

Slackerwood: How did you first become involved with the Texas Film Commission?

Tom Copeland: In 1972, the film *The Getaway* filmed in San Marcos with (actor) Steve McQueen. Hollywood came to town. I mean, it was really interesting to watch this happen because they literally took over San Marcos. We all thought in the theater department that they would want us to be in the film.

What are your experiences like outside of the entertainment industry?

Copeland: I've only worked outside of the entertainment industry for 18 months. It wasn't a lot of fun. I got stranded. I had some friends I went to Texas State with who hired me at a rental company in Virginia. I worked as a shipping-receiving clerk. I didn't spend a lot of time in the real world.

Why did you want to teach at Texas State?

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Copeland: I think I kind of noticed that over the years I was pretty much teaching anyway, between hiring people in the (Texas Film Commission) intern program. It sounded interesting to me. And since Texas State doesn't have a formal film program, I thought there were some things that I could do to help out. After 37 years of working in this business, I have a pretty incredible network of people.

I've heard rumors that a film minor is in the works at Texas State. Is this true?

Copeland: There are more people who are starting to show an interest. I think in time there will be a minor. We're not trying to be like UT, Columbia or USC.

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