

Written by Sean Abley
Thursday, 15 July 2010 11:37



In [Part One](#) of this interview, I talked to Chris Diani about his work in the Seattle live theater scene. In this installment, we talk about his first forays into film, including his first mix of gays and zombies.

SEAN ABLEY: I get the sense from my interview with Seattle (now Los Angeles) filmmaker Armando Munoz that the Seattle film scene is small and somewhat cliquey—i.e., exactly like any other regional film scene. Where do you find yourself in the Seattle film landscape?

CHRIS DIANI: Seattle's film scene is very small and cliquey, and it suffers from an inferiority complex similar to the one in the theater community: We don't value local artists until they're validated elsewhere. Lynn Shelton is currently the toast of the town, but you'd be hard-pressed to find someone who knew who she was before HUMPDAY was accepted at Sundance. And that's a shame, because her two previous films are excellent—and happen to feature my CREATURES co-writer, Basil Harris. We're also a city of committees and meet-ups and mixers, and while a little socializing can be good for the soul, I find that most of the people who attend these functions would rather talk about filmmaking than actually go out and make a film. So I skip the parties, for the most part.

As for where I fit in, God only knows. There's no real gay filmmaking community here; in fact, I can only think of two other Seattle-based gay male full-length filmmakers, and they're both documentarians. Meanwhile, despite my film screening multiple times around town in 2005 and 2006 and being featured in over 30 festivals worldwide, the programmers of the Seattle International Film Festival—one of whom I'd sat on a festival jury with—still decided to call Bruce LaBruce's OTTO; OR, UP WITH DEAD PEOPLE "the world's first gay zombie movie" in their 2008 program guide. I threw a slightly-more-public-than-intended hissy fit after that incident. But I think, for the most part, I fly under the radar. That can be a handy thing—it relieves some of the stress that comes from expectations being placed upon you—but it's weird to think that I'm probably better known in Tel Aviv and Baton Rouge and Cardiff than in my own hometown. Then again, I did have an usher at last year's Seattle Lesbian & Gay Film Festival stop me and ask, somewhat accusingly, "When are we going to see another film from you?" So I guess someone's paying attention.

ABLEY: There's the Seattle True Independent Film Festival (STIFF) that takes place at the same time as SIFF. Is this Seattle's version of Slamdance vs. Sundance?

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DIANI: It most certainly is! Back in 2005, local filmmaker Clint Berquist submitted his first feature film, SWAMPER, to the Seattle International Film Festival. When it was rejected, it seemed to confirm the long-standing complaint that SIFF ignores local filmmakers. But instead of whining about it, Clint sprang into action, starting the Seattle True Independent Film Festival as a showcase for local and independent movies. Since then, STIFF has grown to include comedy and music as well as film, and Moby signed on as a sponsor last year, but their independent "f**k the establishment" ethos remains intact. I love STIFF.

ABLEY: Some of your first work was for the Seattle Pride—

[ZOMBIE PRIDE](#) , [BRAZILIAN WAX PRIDE](#) and, of course, [GLORY HOLE PRIDE](#) .
Where were these shown?

DIANI: When the Seattle Pride committee approached me about making a series of promotional shorts for them, they promised to show them in bars around the state, at festivals, on local TV...but in reality, I believe they screened at one Seattle bar the week before Pride. They just didn't have a solid delivery plan in place, and I think they kind of hoped the shorts would proliferate by magic. They didn't even think to screen them at their information booth the day of the festival.

Unfortunately, this lack of wherewithal is typical of gay non-profits, at least in Seattle. This turned out to be my first in a series of similar disappointments with local gay organizations, culminating in a disastrous screening in which no one thought to hire a projectionist for the premiere of a film I'd been commissioned to make for a gay men's health org. Have you ever had to climb up a 20-foot ladder to repatch a projector while an impatient audience muttered at your feet? Because I have.



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ABLEY: Was this the first time you got behind the camera as a writer/director? What were those first days of shooting like?

DIANI: I did a lot of directing in film school, but the Seattle Pride job was my first professional gig. And it was a trial by fire. I had to let one insubordinate crew member go, my DP had rage issues, we had major problems lighting one of our locations, another location fell through at the last minute and I couldn't pull a good performance out of one of my lead actors. But I was having a blast at the same time. Being on the set is my favorite part of the filmmaking process, hands down.



ABLEY: I know I'm still learning how to make movies, even after working on six of them. And I learned some harsh lessons on the first film I produced. What did you learn on these shorts that you still carry with you?

DIANI: Oh, I'm definitely still learning. The big lesson I took away from the "I Scream Pride" films was that sometimes you inadvertently hire people who are determined to be contrary or miserable or angry, no matter how hard you try to make them happy. The best thing you can do in those situations is cut them loose before they do too much damage. This turned out to be particularly helpful when I started having issues with my first AD on CREATURES. I released him from his commitment, he sulked off and the rest of the shoot was amazingly harmonious.

ABLEY: Let's talk about your other shorts. Winner for the Best Short Film Title goes to [BOB HOPE'S MIRACLE CURE FOR INCARCERATION](#), which you made for the STIFF Weekend Film Challenge. I'm assuming this is one of those "write, cast, direct, post in 48 hours" contests, yes?

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DIANI: It was indeed made for a weekend film challenge, hosted by STIFF. The deal is this: on Friday evening, filmmaking teams are given a character, a prop, a line of dialogue and a genre; they're then tasked with writing, shooting, editing, and delivering a short film incorporating all those elements by Sunday evening.

This was the first time I'd participated in a challenge like that, and it was a lot of fun. We actually built that jailhouse in someone's garage and got permission to shoot the exteriors at the Museum of History and Industry—during regular hours, no less! The finished film needs some musical underscoring, which didn't occur to me until late on Sunday. And I was so focused on finding a clever way to incorporate all the required elements into the film—lotion, in a Western?—that I didn't think about the fact that the contest was an audience-judged one. The films that catered to a cruder sensibility ended up beating us.

Incidentally, this was the first and last time I cast someone I was dating; my relationship with the film's dopey deputy ended soon after we made this short, an event that was probably telegraphed by the deputy's grisly demise.



ABLEY: Vincent Kovar, who appears in your first feature, CREATURES FROM THE PINK LAGOON, is also in this short as, from what I can tell, a sexually ambiguous bad guy. I mean, when the sheriff puts the gun barrel to Vincent's lips and he opens his mouth with that smarty-pants look—that's a penis, right? A gun penis? A gun penis that Vincent is A-OK with putting in his mouth?

DIANI: Gosh, Sean. Sometimes a gun is just a gun.

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ABLEY: Uh, false. You describe RABBIT'S FOOT as a "dark comedy about a national election being manipulated by amputation and animal sacrifice." If only art imitated life! I'm assuming this was shot during the Bush administration. Are you wearing your politics on your sleeve here?

DIANI: RABBIT'S FOOT was made for STIFF's 2006 Weekend Film Challenge, so yes, it was during the Bush era. The required elements were: P. Flowers, a politician (character), pocket change (prop), "More like 28, right, guys?" (line of dialogue) and horror (genre). I was inspired by CREEPSHOW, in which nasty people get their comeuppance in grisly ways. And after losing the challenge the previous year, I was determined to make the audience sit up and take notice. It worked; my mean little movie took second place.

I like this film, but it does have its problems: there are two really terrible shots in it—can you identify them?—there's no establishing shot, one character delivers a line off-camera that should really be said on-camera and the female lead swears too much. Other than that...



ABLEY: SUPER SPACE FORCE...I've found exactly one piece of evidence of this film: a photo on your Facebook page of you with Phillip D. Clarke—the gun-penis-wielding sheriff in BOB HOPE—who looks like he's been painted to be a green drag queen. More information, please.

DIANI: This was the last time I participated in a Weekend Film Challenge; SUPER SPACE FORCE was made in 2007. The elements I had to incorporate into the film were Violet Galaconalison, a fruit and vegetable specialist (character), an extension cord (prop), "Just impeach the f**ker!" (line of dialogue) and sci-fi (genre).

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God, this movie went off the rails. When I learned we'd be doing sci-fi, I went home and watched a bunch of LOST IN SPACE and SPACE: 1999 clips on YouTube for inspiration, which explains the weird TV-episode structure I used here. I also lacked a solid ending, something I always try to have before I start writing. And our set fell through, so we had to shoot in my one-bedroom apartment against a bolt of green fabric. What a mess. At least it has a couple of cute, shirtless guys in it.



ABLEY: When I first asked if I could see these early epics, you told me they were locked in the vault of shame. Why so shy? Certainly nothing can be as horrifying as the end of BRAZILIAN WAX PRIDE!

DIANI: You've now seen these films, so you probably understand my reluctance to share them with the public. But I have two more good reasons to keep them locked away. First, because they were made for film challenges and had to include specific, random elements, they don't play well outside of that milieu. And second, they were each made over a weekend, so they're not as polished as my other work. I look at these films as good learning experiences. And I happen to love the end of BRAZILIAN WAX PRIDE!

ABLEY: For the record, I think they're all really cool. I love the avant-garde aspects of each one, undoubtedly born from the crazy requirements of the challenge. Now, what about this documentary that's all done with puppets?

DIANI: That was the aforementioned commission for the gay men's health org. They were given a grant by Public Health to do on-line outreach and a quarterly series of films highlighting

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different aspects of Seattle's gay community. I was asked to launch the program and was basically given carte blanche; they asked me to make a 30-minute film of any genre that took a general look at the sense of community amongst Seattle's gay men.

I tried a number of different approaches before settling on a talking-heads documentary, but I wanted to give that format a unique spin, so I took the original interview footage and replaced the humans with puppets. Then I framed the whole thing like an episode of SESAME STREET, complete with a whimsical theme song, a puppet-on-the-street segment, a human and a puppet sounding out the word 'community' and animated interstitial bumpers. I don't think the health org liked it very much, and it's not like any of my other films, but I had a blast learning how to work with puppets. It's available on-line, if you do some deep Googling.

ABLEY: And now we come to the "Let's talk about your first feature" portion of the interview! After watching CREATURES FROM THE PINK LAGOON, and knowing that you're a theater geek as well, I felt like this is a script that at some point was a play. Am I totally wrong about that?

DIANI: CREATURES was never a play, but my theater-geek background clearly seeped into the project, both in the stylized language of the script and in the way I chose to frame much of the film. That said, I do have plans to turn CREATURES into a stage musical. Hell, it's practically a musical already! I'm hoping Scott House—the brilliant composer of "Hungry for You" and the Exit 5 Rest Stop song—will work with me on that project.

ABLEY: Why a gay horror/comedy for your first feature? Was this a case of seeing HELLBENT and thinking, "Wow, the door's wide open now..."? Was there some sort of political statement you wanted to make? Maybe you just love horror movies?

DIANI: I'd love to say I had some well-thought-out plan, in which a gay horror/comedy was the first step in a series of brilliant career moves, but really, I just love horror films. The original idea came to me while spending the summer of 2002 at my parents' house on Cape Cod, recovering from a bad breakup. I was holed up in my old bedroom, feeling sorry for myself and watching big gay melodramas like LOVE! VALOUR! COMPASSION! and THE BROKEN HEARTS CLUB and—of course—THE BOYS IN THE BAND. Seeing these drama queens bitch and argue and emote made me realize how ridiculous I must have seemed, and soon I was back in the land of the living. I ended up joining a weekly discussion group for gay and bi men, and it was during a beachfront barbecue hosted by two members of that group that I came up with the idea of

Gay of the Dead: "CREATURES FROM THE PINK LAGOON" Writer/Director Chris Diani, Part Two

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combining the classic group-of-gay-friends-spend-the-weekend-together-in-a-remote-beach-house setup with a Romero-esque zombie attack. I went home and wrote the first draft of CREATURES in five days. And believe it or not, I didn't see HELLBENT until after CREATURES was finished!

TO BE CONTINUED

See the CREATURES FROM THE PINK LAGOON website [here](#) .

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