

GAY OF THE DEAD: “ALL ABOUT EVIL” Writer/Director Joshua Grannell (Part One)

Written by Sean Abley
Thursday, 04 March 2010 16:22



I first became aware of Joshua Grannell and his alter ego, Peaches Christ, on a trip to San Francisco in 2000? 2001? I was dating a guy who had moved down from SF to Los Angeles, and on one of our many trips up north, we took in a screening of SHOWGIRLS at the Midnight Mass summer film series. Peaches was the host of the evening, and the show opened with a re-enactment of both the “Goddess” number and the “Nomi F**ks Zack in the pool” scene with drag queens (and one drag king playing “Zack”). I was hooked.

Over the years, I would try and catch Midnight Mass screenings whenever I was up in SF. I found out that Peaches was actually Grannell, who was actually a manager at the Bridge, the theater in which the madness took place. Grannell programmed the series, and created unique preshows with his drag co-conspirators Martiny (the “flawed sidekick”), Heklina, Squeaky Blonde, Troll Girl, Vinsantos and many others. Beauty pageants, scene recreations, short films, awesome special guests (Mink Stole, FRIGHT NIGHT’s Stephen Geoffreys, Cassandra “Elvira” Peterson, Linda Blair, Edie McClurg, Patrick Bristow—the list goes on and on...), free lap dances “with a large corn” and a truly terrifying roller derby, with drag queens careening around the theater on skates, were just some of the mini-extravaganzas kicking off each night.

One of Grannell’s short films, GRINDHOUSE (yes, we have to say it, no relation to the Tarantino/Rodriguez film of the same name), was the seed that would eventually blossom into the upcoming feature version, ALL ABOUT EVIL. Starring DIE, MOMMIE, DIE!’s Natasha Lyonne as a theater owner who decides to make and show her own snuff films, EVIL also stars Thomas Dekker (from TERMINATOR: THE SARAH CONNOR CHRONICLES and the upcoming NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET remake) and a host of other cult-worthy actors, many of whom have been special guests for Midnight Mass screenings.



Grannell is one of those success stories who thrills a geek like me. As he says, he came to SF

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with "a wig and a dream," and now that dream is coming true with a real, honest-to-goodness horror film he has written and directed. All hail the queen!

SEAN ABLEY: Hi, Joshua! Where are you, and what are you wearing? (I like to start with a softball question...)

JOSHUA GRANNELL: I'm at the laundromat wearing ratty old shorts, sneakers and my favorite Leatherface T-shirt. The laundromat is called, get this, "Wash And Dry." It's in Hayes Valley, San Francisco.

ABLEY: OK, I know you went to film school. Didn't you have an encounter at Penn State with John Waters that got you to San Francisco?

GRANNELL: You've done your research! I co-hosted John Waters' visit to Penn State with my friend Michael Brenchley (a.k.a. "flawed sidekick" Martiny), and we were talking about places to move to after graduation. He was sharing stories with us about San Francisco, The Cockettes and how much he loved SF. (*SEAN: Gay History 101: The Cockettes were a legendary drag performance group working in SF in the late 1960s.*

) It really put the seed in our heads that this would be a great place to come.

ABLEY: And why SF instead of LA?

GRANNELL: I wasn't really drawn to LA. I enjoy it and I love visiting, but the city hasn't ever felt like home to me. When I visited San Francisco the first time, I felt like it was home. There's a sorta spooky magic here that you either connect with or you don't. I was really interested in the underground film scene here and wanted to be where people like the Kuchar brothers were, and explore the bohemian performance scene and wild world of drag that is so rich in San Francisco. I didn't know I'd stay here this long, but it has definitely become home for me.

ABLEY: Favorite line from a John Waters film? My personal fave: "I don't want no white man looking at my Tampax!" from DESPERATE LIVING.

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GRANNELL: Mine is when Mink Stole tells her stepfather, “I wouldn’t suck your lousy dick if I were suffocating, and there was oxygen in your baaaaaaaaaaaaawls!!!” in FEMALE TROUBLE.



ABLEY: Now, was Peaches Christ born when you arrived in SF? Or was she percolating before you got there?

GRANNELL: I first did Peaches for my senior thesis film at Penn State. It’s called JIZZMOPPER: A LOVE STORY, and there was a fairly large part for a drag queen. I was directing the movie, and the actor we’d hired to play the queen was flaky. I stepped in to play the part when it looked like we might lose the movie if we didn’t find our queen. That’s where Peaches was born. Little did I know this would lead to a career in drag infused with movies and filmmaking.

ABLEY: How does the early version of Peaches compare to the one that appears in ALL ABOUT EVIL?

GRANNELL: Well, her “look” has certainly come a long way—but the sensibility is still very much the same. Peaches doesn’t take anything too seriously. I’m always surprised when I meet a humorless drag queen, but trust me, they’re out there. I don’t think Peaches could ever take herself too seriously. She still celebrates the underdog, cult movies, transgressive art, and is inspired by all things flawed. Regarding her evolving look, I’m fortunate to have found some fantastic creative collaborators, like Peaches’ longtime costume designer Tria Connell. Tria has been designing for Peaches for over a decade, and there has definitely been a style evolution. Tria is part of Peaches in the same way that I am. I like to think of Peaches as a collaborative

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effort. In some cases, it takes a village to raise a drag queen.



ABLEY: For those who haven't experienced it, tell me about the drag scene in SF. I found it quite refreshing when I first discovered it.

GRANNELL: I'm of course biased, but I think it's the best scene in the world. Every type of drag is represented here, and almost any form of drag expression is given a fair shot and respected. The talented, most original people tend to rise to the top quickly here, because there's so much love and support for drag. It's part of the fabric of the city—straight, gay, young or old, it's part of what makes living in San Francisco special. The city is full of artists and freaks. We are the "other," and many of us ran away to SF to become the people we were meant to become, to reinvent ourselves. It wasn't about having a "career." That's often a happy accident. People perform for the sake of performing in SF. The audiences are the best in the world. The performers support and love one another. The city is beautiful and inspiring. I don't think I'd have the same career or support in any other American city. When I moved to SF in 1996, Trannyshack had just started. I was 22 and began performing there. I had no idea that the nightclub would grow to become an entire new movement in drag and performance.

ABLEY: Just to explain to my dozens of readers, Trannyshack was, until recently, a weekly drag performance series at the Stud in SF. At my first Trannyshack show, I remember thinking, "Wow, this is performance art..." I think that particular show had Vinsantos (composer for ALL ABOUT EVIL) trying to light a TV on fire by spraying it with lighter fluid, then using a circular saw on the outside of it to create sparks. And this was ostensibly part of a lip-sync performance, although he had a mouthful of lighter fluid as well, so there wasn't much syncing of the lips.

GRANNELL: Oh yes! Vinsantos does an amazing Wendy O. Williams homage where she's smashing television sets and lighting shit on fire. Don't stand too close. Trannyshack was the launching pad for so many amazing talents. It was full of vibrant, creative, hungry performers and it's where I met many of the people I work with today. Vinsantos and I met through Trannyshack, and he has become an integral part of Midnight Mass, as well as my filmmaking career. It's such a thrill to hear his score for ALL ABOUT EVIL and see his name in the credits,

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because I feel like we grew up together creatively. We're proud of each other. It's a great feeling.



ABLEY: So you got to SF and you started working at the Bridge theater. I believe all horror-film fans would love to curate a film series, but even if we do work at a movie theater, rarely are they the kind that would just let us do so. How did *Midnight Mass* come about, and how in the world did you convince the Bridge to let it happen?

GRANNELL: *Midnight Mass* began in summer 1998. I wanted to create a show that merged my love for drag and performance with my love for B-movies and cult cinema. I was inspired by *ROCKY HORROR* and the Cockettes, thanks to John Waters. I was running the Bridge at the time, but I really have to give a load of credit to Landmark Theatres for giving me the chance to prove myself. They operated the Bridge and I worked for them. When I pitched the idea to the higher-ups, they didn't freak out. Midnight movies had died in SF. Even *ROCKY HORROR* had moved to the suburbs, so when I was trying to sell them on a midnight movie event hosted by a drag queen—with the last name “Christ”—they had lots of reasons to say no. But they didn't and were always encouraging.

ABLEY: I get to SF frequently, and always try to hit at least one *Midnight Mass* screening when I'm there. I remember there was a time when I heard through the grapevine that you were going to shut it down, and now, after doing a little research, I read that about that time, you were starting to hate Peaches. And somehow that turned into shooting your first short, *SEASON OF THE TROLL*. What's the scoop?

GRANNELL: I guess they call it “Saturn returns” or something where in your later 20s, you start to freak out and question your life. I went through that and sorta felt like I was hitting a ceiling

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with drag. I needed to find a way to make it all unique again, and that's when we decided to make our silly little video, SEASON OF THE TROLL.

ABLEY: What was the SEASON production like?

GRANNELL: It was really meant to be something screened at a Halloween event I was hosting as Peaches. We weren't thinking it would have a life beyond that. I wrote it in an afternoon, we shot it in two nights, edited it in a couple of days and screened it for an audience. From start to finish, it took less than a week and cost us less than \$50. I often say that all you need is "a wig and a dream." We screened it at the Halloween drag show I was doing, and there was a Frameline film festival programmer there who loved it, and programmed it the following summer. From there, it started playing queer and underground fests. Those screenings were completely unexpected.



ABLEY: Next up was NIGHTMARE ON CASTRO STREET, which seemed to be a reaction to one of your cohorts, Squeaky Blonde, moving to LA. Can you give me some backstory on that short?

GRANNELL: Well, after our unforeseen success with SEASON OF THE TROLL, it seemed like there had to be a sequel. Squeaky Blonde is another creative collaborator and close friend from the early days of Trannyshack and Midnight Mass. She'd recently moved to Los Angeles, and part of her SF persona was being an out-of-control party queen, often scaring people with her debauched and outrageous appearance. I was sorta playing on the idea of a "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde meets Freddy Krueger" nightmarish surrealism...in drag. It probably sounds smarter than it actually is. We had fun making it, and it too had a life at film festivals and stuff.

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ABLEY: What's your take on the whole SF-vs.-LA thing? I have to be honest, when I hear someone from one city genuinely bitching about the other, it seems so high-school to me.

GRANNELL: I don't get the SF-vs.-LA thing at all. I don't think the two cities could be more different. Sadly, I'm worried that SF might be the unnecessarily bitchy bunch. I never get a negative reaction in LA when I tell people I'm from SF. Usually, people down there say they love SF. It's almost like SF has an inferiority complex or something, hissing when I bring up LA on stage or something. I wanna say, "Calm down, you're fierce too." I don't get it.

ABLEY: Quick sidebar: I have to say—all of you queens are really cute boys! You, Squeaky, Martiny, Heklina—all cute!

GRANNELL: Awww, shucks. Thanks. You're making me blush. I'm single and available, by the way!



ABLEY: Next up was **WHATEVER HAPPENED TO PEACHES CHRIST**, the third part of the "Tran-ilogy of Terror." **BABY JANE** seems like such a perfect fit for a drag parody.

GRANNELL: Well, it was really perfect for forcing me into only doing a "tran-ilogy." I knew that if I set the last movie in the future and put us in old-lady drag, we'd definitely not make another short. I was ready to move on to something non-Peaches-centered. I, of course, love **WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO BABY JANE?**, and there have been tons of parodies, so it was fun to put our own little spin on it.

ABLEY: At this point, were you getting more serious about these shorts? Had you started thinking, "Maybe I could do a feature?" Were you just making them when you were inspired to

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do so? What was the context there?

GRANNELL: Oh, definitely. I was starting to think about ideas for a feature, and knew that I wanted it to cast a wider net, and be something made in the spirit of *Midnight Mass*, cult flicks and the world of movie theaters. I knew it should be a movie about movies and was tossing around lots of different ideas. I also knew that I didn't want it to be a drag-driven film. I was feeling trapped by Peaches projects and wanted to push my own ideas into a different direction.

ABLEY: *Midnight Mass* has come to an end, at least in its current form. I know you're looking for ways to transform it into something new and fresh, but I have to ask: Have you ever thought of creating a new *ROCKY HORROR* out of another film? Doing an open-ended run of just one movie with a stage show? My vote would be for *DEATH RACE 2000* or *I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE*.

GRANNELL: *Midnight Mass* was always presented as a summer weekly series of shows in San Francisco. So the only thing that's really ending is the idea of a "summer series." I won't come back and do nine back-to-back shows next summer. However, we plan to continue producing *Midnight Mass* events in all sorts of various forms, experimenting with what we can do, and right now the sky is the limit as far as our brainstorming goes. We did a *DEATH RACE 2000* show a few years ago with Mary Woronov in person, and I fell in love with her. I'd love to do a movie with Mary in it some day. She's such a talented actress.

(In Part Two of this interview, Grannell and I will talk about how his final short film, GRINDHOUSE, transformed into ALL ABOUT EVIL, with some good dish about his star-studded cast.)

More about *Trannyshack* [here](#)

More about *Grannell and Peaches Christ* [here](#)

More about *ALL ABOUT EVIL* [here](#)

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