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P.J.: AN INTERVIEW WITH FILMMAKER RUSS EMANUEL



Once in a while, a film comes along that forever changes our lives. Russ Emanuel manages to do this in “P.J.”—an award-winning film concerning an ordinary man’s extraordinary insight. Unfortunately, this man’s journey to self and social-acceptance is arduous— and many, including his estranged girlfriend, believe him insane. It is this question of sanity raised by those who see beyond what is conceivably there, that insidiously entices and most disturbs.

What attracted you to adapt Mark McQuown’s award winning play written so many years ago?

It was my business partner Howard Nash (producer on this film, as well as all 3 of my features), who first brought this subject up to me. He had the rights to the play and wanted to make it. He had shown me several scripts he had, and I loved this particular one due to its “miraculous” story line. It felt right to make, and I am very glad to have done so.

How did you change the play, if at all, in the actual shooting of “P.J.” in regard to cuts, character, etc.?

First off, I received a very strong script (which was adapted by the brilliant Emilio Iasiello). However, due to location and shooting constraints, we had to be very conscious about our shooting locations. Therefore, in order to maximize the look of the film we decided to shoot in a Brooklyn warehouse that overlooked Manhattan. I thought it would make the film look beautiful if we could see the Manhattan skyline, especially the “magic hour” shot when John Heard and Glynnis O’Connor reconcile.

Also, because we needed to shoot during a short period of time, we maximized the use of the warehouse by changing it into various rooms in the hospital or into other people’s apartments.

The ending montage was also another creation of mine – I wanted to give each character a proper ending, thereby ending their story arc. I don’t want to give the ending away, but be on the lookout for this.

As a speculative-experimental filmmaker, I am intrigued by the cinematography in this film. There are shots that recall silent films, camerawork in Godard’s films, and so on. Can you speak about this?

I’ve always been a fan of German expressionism and film noir, so I especially loved the use of shadows. “P.J.” happens mostly at night, so we get to see the nocturnal side of human nature, that is, people who work the “graveyard shift”, year round.

There are also flashback sequences such as the ant scene, where we made it look like a home movie from the 1970s (and home movies back then were shot on film so we gave it a film look). We also wanted to give the flashback sequences their own feel, as per each character. The Shelly (Patricia Rae) character sees her past in black and white, being extremely bitter about her experiences with Charles (played by Howard Nash). The Dr. Shearson (John Heard) character originally sees his experiences with his daughter in a darker light, though with muted color, but by the end accepts his magical time with her. And of course, Charles sees his past in the most fantastic light, due to the “miraculous” things he sees and hears.

I’m also a big fan of the reveal. Therefore, you will see Glynnis’ character revealed slowly as the film progresses. Same thing with Shelly, Charles, and Claire (Dina Kriger) who is Dr. Shearson’s daughter.

What was your purpose in continuously, almost hypnotically panning the camera from side to side in one specific office scene?

It was to give the office space more flavor. We shot around 70% of the film in the office and wanted to give each scene its own essence. Hopefully my cinematographer Seth Melnick and I achieved that for the audience.

Did you design the camerawork, or leave it up to your cinematographer?

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him to collaborate. The final product is definitely a result of that.

I love the lighting in this film that recalls German expressionist silent film, pictorialism and later film noir. Can you speak about these techniques in the film, and your input as to its design?

As I mentioned before, I am a big fan of German Expressionism, especially the 1920s silent era and [of course] the later film noir look of the 1940s. When we first knew we were shooting in the warehouse in Brooklyn, my cinematographer and I looked at each scene and carefully constructed the lighting. He also worked closely with his key gaffer, Zeynep Catal (who was in charge of lighting), and told her exactly what we wanted.

For example, when you see the Charles character at the beginning of the film, half his face is “in shadow,” which is to convey the dichotomy of his character, or a split in his personality. I often use this dichotomy theme in my films, such as the Gwen Hunter character in my short film “Girl With Gun”.

We also worked with the production designer Sarah Kirchner to make sure the colors of the sets matched our lighting moods; the same went for other productions heads such as costume designer Lisa Faibish and key makeup artist Lauzanne Nel.

Are you a speculative person and did you handpick others who are like-minded?

I like to think I am a speculative person, a thinker if you will and yes I tend to pick people who are intellectually-minded. That said, when I interview a prospective crew member, I pick one with whom I can have a rapport – that is, someone I can get along with. For me, a filmmaking team is a family, and if it’s a “strong” family, it then ultimately translates into a stronger film.

What literary figures, philosophers and filmmakers influence your work?

I like a wide range of figures, many of them contemporary. For film, I love the works of Stanley Kubrick, Alfred Hitchcock and Steven Spielberg. Kubrick had a look which was quite fascinating. Same goes with Hitchcock, though I loved specifically his use of cinematography and the suspense techniques which were accentuated by strong scripts. As for Spielberg, I love his fantastic and optimistic approach to filmmaking, as well as his strong sense of family. If I were to pick the best film I would say “Citizen Kane” which, for me, was a perfect film. Film noir all around there (thank you Gregg Toland!).

As for more recent filmmakers, I am very impressed with the works of Peter Jackson – his “The Lord of the Rings” trilogy was an astounding feat, and each one a classic in its own right. To think he spent 7 years of his life nonstop on a project he so deeply loved (and which showed on screen) is just mind-numbing to think about.

As for literary figures, I am a big fan of Arthur C. Clarke, Stephen Baxter (both sci-fi writers), J.R.R. Tolkein, Robert Jordan, Terry Brooks (fantasy writers), and even present-day mystery writers like Sue Grafton. Each writer is able to transport me into their world whether it is the distant, far future, the imaginative fantasy lands beyond, or our contemporary Earth.

I am also a big fan of philosophies and philosophers which range from ancients such as Plato who founded Neo-Platonism as well as the teachings of Esoteric Buddhism of medieval Japan. I was especially mindful of these teaching when I directed “P.J.”

How does “P.J.’s” content fit into your prior and later filmography?

As I mentioned before, I make use of lighting to convey the dichotomy of certain characters – i.e. Charles in “P.J.”, Gwen in “Girl With Gun”, and Victor (played by William Devane) in “Chasing the Green.” I try to reveal each character, to show how they ultimately open up to the camera (and hence the audience) as the story is told.

As for story arcs, it is the optimism of life, which may not seem like the case as the film progresses, but nonetheless leads to a happier ending. I don’t want to give away the ending for “P.J.” but let’s just say a majority of the film is shot at night. This also fits with the dichotomy of the characters, as the film is about their resolution of these conflicts, and coming to terms with one’s own life.

How did you direct your actors in the building of their characters?

I talked to them about the story arcs when we conducted rehearsals. I explained to them what I thought of their character’s back story, as well as why they would behave the way they do. I also asked the actors what they thought, and we worked on that to build a credible three-dimensional outlay for their character. It’s a two-way process, much like the “listening” technique that happens between the actors themselves.

And while on set, we go through various rehearsals, then record various takes. It’s when I feel the actors have reached their emotional peak (especially in their close-ups) and I know that camera and sound departments are also good (and therefore I am good too!), is when we move onto the next shot, or scene.

Was the film tightly scripted or was improvisation used in certain areas?

The cast certainly improvises, from time to time. That said, the film was tightly scripted based on budget, shoot days, and locations. And if we needed to improvise logistics (e.g. if it were raining a certain day), then we’d think about plans B and C and go with it. Trust me, there’s never one way to go about shooting!

Technically speaking, I find it interesting that the visuals almost stand alone. This could very easily be a strong silent film. Have you ever shot a silent film?

No, but I would love to. And it’s funny you should say that. Although I’ve never directed a silent film, I’m currently overseeing a web series called “Cult 11” for producer John Paul Ouvrier. It was shot in black and white, and to date I’ve directed two episodes. The series is an homage to the original “Twilight Zone” T.V. series of the late 1950s/early 1960s (when T.V. was still in its infancy). So in a way, we went retroactive for that series and enjoyed every step of the process.

I do think that visuals (in general), if need be, can stand on their own along with music such as certain montage sequences in “P.J.” (which was scored using a full orchestra by our knowledgeable composer Neil Argo). Another good example visuals standing alone with only music was Stanley Kubrick’s “2001: A Space Odyssey,” a film that inspired me a lot.

That's the beauty of pre-production. You make sure you do your homework, and it becomes easier to keep track and intertwine. The difficulty is getting yourself immersed in their world and living in it, which you must do in the weeks before shooting. But that is how I go about each film as I prep.

Is Charles in effect, P.J.?

All I will say is yes and no (smile).

Is Charles/P.J. human, or a higher entity?

This is really for each audience member to decide. "P.J." is a type of film which has something for everyone. I like to think of it as a subjective experience which can be enjoyed individually.

Speculatively speaking, it's disturbing that one who investigates religion, the paranormal or something against the norm is often labeled as crazy. Can you address this issue?

I think it really depends on your point of view. A brilliant T.V. series that explored the paranormal was "The X-Files". Here you had two characters: one a believer, and the other a skeptic. This I think is the reality of our lives. We all believe in different things, and I think the beauty of humanity is that we can all "agree to disagree". I think if we were all the same, it would be a very bland world. Conflicts make for fruitful discussions about what one person may say is insane and what another may say is not – and I'm sure Mulder and Scully occasionally had such discussions!

Did Charles/P.J. really investigate other worlds simply because he didn't want kids or felt himself worthless, or is there another possible reason?

Again, I like to leave this to each audience member to decide. I will say this again: human nature is wrought with contradictions. You know the old saying, that you "love to hate" something (I even think the Shelly character said something to that effect). Well he may want kids, but he is also perhaps going through a mid-life crisis and had to figure it out for himself. Who knows? That's why it's up to each audience member to decide.

Is P.J. simply a moral tale, or something more fantastic?

I would like to believe it's something more fantastic but it's also, definitely a moral tale.

Can you speak about your next project and if it will explore the extraordinary?

My current project is called "The Legends of Nethiah" (which we shot last August, 2009). It's about a ten year old boy who must decide whether he will live with his mother or father who are in the process of divorcing (yet still at present live in the same house). Therefore, the maternal grandfather (played by Robert Picardo) is brought in and tells his grandson an incredible fantasy tale of a warrior named 'Nethiah' – who must go through his own trials and errors in order to find his way.

Overall, "Nethiah" is a moral telling, much in the same vein as "The Princess Bride". You can find more information at our official website www.legendsofnethiah.com. We are also on MySpace and Facebook, and the link can be found through the official site

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