

Interview with Erin Brown

Janos Sitar

Janos Sitar is a graphic designer and general crafty boy at Synoptique who wrote about *Troy* in Synoptique 3.

I first met Erin Brown in the fall of 2000 at the University of Victoria when we were both schlepping coffee and movie tickets at Victoria's Cinecenta and heading in parallel directions: she into the world of film production and I into the world of film studies. A friendship emerged quickly and now I have a chance to poke and prod Erin for the sake of intellectual curiosity. In an ideal world, this conversation would have taken place at the Tribeca film festival where her short animated film *The Home* (2004) screened, but instead we sat down in Victoria, BC to discuss her experience of Tribeca, New York and the world of independent film co-ops.

Janos Sitar: How did you get into Tribeca? Did you start by shopping it around to different festivals?

Erin Brown: I had been shopping it all over. Basically, I started really high. I started with Cannes and worked my way down to see where my film fit in. I got accepted into Vancouver [International Film Festival] which was pretty decent; it was a nice premiere to have. From there, I tried to find similar festivals in terms of the quality of their product and the quality of films they select, and the variety of people who come there. Somehow I found Tribeca, and I don't even remember how, I think I was told that it was THE New York film festival because there isn't really a Toronto International Film Festival for New York, and Toronto has sort of

become that way for people. So, I thought "Ok, this is supposed to be THE New York festival, and I want to go to New York because there are so many incredibly artistic minds there." But unfortunately I didn't have the money to pay the entry fee, so I took a gamble. It was Christmas time and I guess they were in the Christmas spirit because I told them that it screened on television, and at Vancouver, and that I don't have \$50 American because I'm Canadian and my money is worthless, so would you be willing to consider my film? And they said sure; they had 1900 submissions for shorts and somehow it got in. When they emailed me, I thought they made a mistake, seriously, but they wanted me and that was good. It was totally surreal because I thought there was no way I was going to get into New York City, you've got to be kidding me. . .

JS: But it's still a fairly new festival.

EB: It's a really new festival, but I had no idea until I was there how big a festival it was. It's got money, which is a lot different from the other festivals that you deal with. The advertisements were everywhere, all sorts of people and all sorts of celebrities were there, but it was funny because there's these two worlds: the independent, cheap, filmmaker world and the celebrity world. People were like, 'did you hear the Olsen twins are here?' Ugh, God, no, really? Ugh.

JS: (Laughing) With *New York Minute*?

EB: With this shitty feature film that they made. And it just seemed so separate whereas somebody else was like, "Yeah, I just ran into Steve Buscemi at the coffee

shop.” So you do have these separate worlds going on. And that was one of the most intriguing facets. Everyone says, “who did you see? Which celebrities did you see?” I didn’t see any celebrities.

JS: So you weren’t stalking Benicio Del Toro?

EB: No, no Benicio. He wasn’t there.

JS: How did you get involved in animation, because you’re really not an animator.

EB: Not at all, I can’t even draw a storyboard. I had a story that I really wanted to tell and I had no capacity or desire to do it in live action because I wanted it to be a sort of surreal landscape that could be anywhere, but is just off in a way. And to do that type of thing would take a huge, huge production budget and I would never have that amount of money. It’s a short film – you have to be realistic: what can you accomplish for a five minute film? What kind of money can you pull together? So, I thought about animation and some of the imagery that I was putting into the film was pretty intense and intricate and to do it in live action would have come off looking really hokey. I managed to meet some fantastic animators and talk to them about the idea and it just clicked. It was good for me as a challenge, because I come from a writer’s perspective. I’m a writer first and a director second, so having to sit down and think about all the visual aspects, I had to write character descriptions for everybody. What gender are they, what race, how tall, what colour are their eyes, what are they wearing? What type of location is in the background? Do you want buildings? Do you want an open park scene? Every element was excruciatingly thought out, and at that point in my artistic development, it was exactly what I needed. It was the best choice I think I could have made.

JS: And for that, did you find that people were more receptive when you were shopping it around?

EB: I think acknowledging my own limitations was really valuable because people see that you are a new emerging filmmaker and you’ve got all of these grand ideas. If I were to go around and say, “Hey look, I’m making live action and this is my story idea,” they would have laughed in my face. In showing that I recognize the limitations but also push them as far as I could, that was a really good choice. And then from there, I could use my inexperience as a sort of selling point to the people I wanted to collaborate with, like my animators who are very strong visually, but their weakness was

storytelling. I could turn to the musicians for instance and say, “I’m just learning, do whatever you want, these are the parameters I’d like you to work with,” and I’d let them take their area of expertise and run with it. But at the same time, I was surrounding myself with so many talented people that no one really noticed how inexperienced I actually was. So we ended up getting money from Bravo! to make it, and when I found out, I literally started bawling because it was such a shock. I thought, “wow, I’ve done very little with film and I’ve never done animation and they’re going to give me money to do it, they’re going to put it on television, oh my God, are they crazy?” I took the money and ran before they changed their minds.

JS: How is the funding issue? That’s the never ending struggle, but...

EB: I’m going into my second film now, and I always thought that if you do one, the next one will be easier. These festivals say, “great, so you did an animated short, but what can you do in live action?” You have to go around again and prove yourself in another area. I was really shocked at how difficult it is to find funding the second time. And again, you’re finding different pockets of money. With the animated short, it was a Bravo!FACT production, so the animation and music was considered as an art form and that’s what sold it to Bravo!FACT. This new film is a totally different project, so you have to try and tailor it. It can’t be too commercial for one funder, it can’t be too artistic for another funder. All these different choices you have to make, and eventually you have to come up with your artistic vision and say “this is what it’s going to be and I’ll try to get whatever I can to support that vision.” It’s tough. We might have money, we might not have money. We are still going to shoot the film either way. And I think that’s a nice way to do it, because then you know the people are there because they believe in the project and not simply because they’re getting a paycheck. And it helps you make a lot of choices too because I don’t have anybody looming over me telling me what to do or what choices to make.

*Writers’ note: At this point in the interview the façade of professionalism that Erin and I had established broke down for a short while as we began to make jokes about film content and the appearance of scantily dressed women (AKA booty girls). Eventually we regained our composure and began to discuss the process of writing and the learning curve in filmmaking

EB: After doing my piece of crap feature *To Be Decided*

that I did in university...

JS: But it was a learning experience. I guess I should backtrack and fill in some of the information regarding the feature. I still love telling the story of how when we'd be working together one of our other co-workers would slide you a piece of paper with the word "video" written on it and you would look at him and scream.

EB: (Laughing) Yeah, because at that point I knew I should have done video. I'm still in debt because of this godforsaken 82 minute piece that I made. This film that was a huge learning experience and I wouldn't change that for anything because it's what's gotten me to the point that I'm at now. But at the same time, I look at the money I spent and I know that it would have been smarter to do it on video. Fortunately, it gave me that kind of old-school street cred like, "She did film. She did 16mm and cut it on a Steenbeck. That's pretty hardcore."

JS: Do you think that it became your mini-version of film school?

EB: Absolutely.

JS: Especially coming from a writing background and meeting mostly film production students / graduates.

EB: Yeah, one choice I had was to transfer to UBC [University of British Columbia] and take their film program and possibly work on someone else's film. Or, I could stay in Victoria, use the resources that I had and make my own feature project. So I decided to do that instead. I think it was the best choice to make at the time because I was a writer in film studies, I didn't really know how to use a camera and no one really figured that out. They said to me, "Oh, you're making a feature, that's so cool." No one asked me if I had made a good short. I did do it ass-backwards. Now I know that the secret to making a good feature is first making a really good short, but at that time it was just a learning experience.

JS: One of the things that we aim for in *Synoptique* is to discuss things in terms of communities. We present ourselves as being Montreal based and coming from a specific program rather than hiding that. Keeping in line with that perspective, you are firmly located in Victoria and very involved in everything that goes on in film in this city and in particular CineVic. How does CineVic fit in with the general context of film in Canada?

EB: CineVic is a co-operative that helps create a community in a field that can be driven by isolation in the writing process, as opposed to sleazy networking and really scrambling to get to meet the people you want to meet. If you establish a community, a place where people can come together and meet like-minded people, it's like walking into a room where you're instantly friends with everybody because you have so much in common. I think that's the answer because we're all becoming so segregated. We're busy and scattered in so many directions, so to come to one place and be centered, focused and meet people that want to help you, that's really empowering. You're going outside the system. You're creating your own structure of meaning in your life.

JS: Do you find that the same thing is happening in different sites?

EB: Absolutely. We are part of the Independent Media Arts Alliance which is a national organization of almost all the film co-ops across Canada as well as exhibitors, distributors and whatnot. Last year was my first time going to the national conference and I realized how this is happening all across the country; CineVic has been around for 13 years, but some of these co-ops have been around 30 years. You look at something like LIFT in Toronto, Main Film in Montreal, The Winnipeg Film Group: these large organizations with this extended history. And yet, they've still got the same raw passion that you have in this little dinky town of Victoria. You really see that it's not just us [in Victoria], and if I go to these other communities you've already got a network of friends ready for you to be part of it all. Now they're talking about the Executive Director of LIFT coming out to Victoria to visit. We want to send some people out the other way and really start sharing different ideas from a different regional context. It's just amazing.