

15 Minutes of Film

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Richie Sherman (left) and Todd Rohal (right) set up a shot with a small man in a robot suit on location in Tibet.

Photo by Suzanne and John McDonnell

with Dick Glick

DG: So what was the first movie you ever made?
 TR: The first one I'd count was called *Single Space*. That was the first film we all made together. We shot for like 22 hours a day for like a week.

DG: What did you do with it?
 TR: I entered it in the first festival I'd ever entered — the Hampton Film Festival. They showed it along with all these NYU graduates' projects that were, you know, all these awful dramas about relationships. And it won, like, \$2500. And I was thinking that that's how every festival would be, that I'd enter and get all my money back. That hasn't happened. That's the most money I've made on one production.

DG: What makes you do it? Why bother?
 TR: There's just too much serious trape out there. (Is "trape" a real word?) It's just so mediocre and so redundant. It's just about saying something that's not being said. And not because it needs to be said. Just because it would be nice to hear something different.

DG: Your biggest success to date, *Knuckleface Jones*, what's it about?
 TR: That's what people complain about, you know... its structure. It's got more to it than [my] other films, though. They're basically all structured like a hero's "journey." But, you know, that's something people complain about, that they don't understand where the structure is. They're so used to having it spelled out for them, like in those NYU films. (a pause)

DG: So, what's it about?
 TR: It's about a guy who's been dumped by his girlfriend. (a pause)

DG: Maybe compare it to something I can understand.
 TR: I could compare it to, like, a Ween album, like *Chocolate and Cheese*. You start out with a great number, then you go on to someth depressing thing, then you go on to something with a long story in it or something. (a pause)

DG: So, you made this really innocuous movie about a guy who's dumped by his girlfriend.
 TR: Okay. She dumps him the woods, she spits in his face, then he goes off and these guys accost him and it's kinda profane. So, then he gets attacked by these boy scouts and sorta molested by this guy, briefly — it's not really graphic — then he goes off and meets this little black girl in this car, whose been abducted by this driver, who's sleeping. He goes on and meets this other girl, the Orange angel, Piper [Perabo] — who was also in *Coyote Ugly* and *Rocky and Bullwinkle*, this was before she did that — and she tells him to go up the hill and meet this guy, played by J.D. Hutchinson. And he tells him about this guy named Knuckleface Jones who didn't know how great he was. He'd pass by these girls, and try to impress them. [Hutchinson's character] tells him that he is

Knuckleface Jones, he can be Knuckleface Jones. He goes out and does a cannonball in the water to celebrate his newfound identity. Then he goes back to meet [the girl who dumped him] and she just ends up spitting in his cereal. Which is great because the audience always cringes. So, then he sits home depressed, but she comes back to the door, and they realize that they'd both been told the same kind of story. And that ends that story, so, I cut that off and we go to see his old girlfriend in misery, smashing television sets with these boy scouts who can't even stand her and she's left alone with these guys in a kind of hell of sorts. ... This is all in fifteen minutes.

DG: Fifteen minutes on film?
 TR: 16 millimeter.



Ed Ash portrays an underwear-sucking, robot-loving custodian in Rohal's new film, *Hillybilly Robot*.

Photo by Suzanne and John McDonnell

DG: So you've got some ca-z-ash coming in.
 TR: No, I pretty much paid for it. And while I was in school. (a pause) And I got a grant from the Princess Grace Foundation. (DG pisses himself laughing) Yeah, I was surprised.

DG: That must've been before you made the movie then? So, you sent them a proposal that was like, "and then she spits in his cereal?"
 TR: They just sent me a plain envelope with an announcement that I got it. I had to spend the money first, and they reimbursed it.

DG: Right cheap dead princess.
 TR: And I had to put that on the credits. There was always someone laughing.

DG: So, what happened with the movie?
 TR: I moved to Baltimore after I'd made it. I showed it at a few festivals around. The Hopkins Festival

there was the first big thing to happen. They had it scheduled for one night, but, they showed it every night of the festival, 'cause they had all these people coming in. ... Then I entered it in the ROSEBUD festival [in DC], which is when I realized that there would be people who really wouldn't like it. Everybody at ROSEBUD pretty much hated it. And I started to see that it was pretty majorly divided. People either really hated it or they liked it a lot. But, Dave Nuttycomb gave it a good review in *City Paper*, and said that it gave him hope for the ROSEBUD festival.

DG: Tell me about your new movie?
 TR: It's called *Hillybilly Robot*. I'm editing it now.

DG: (I hesitate to ask...) What's it about?
 TR: It's about a guy who goes on a camping trip and a bunch of guys are sitting around making campfire noises.

DG: What's that?
 TR: Something that I made up for the film.

DG: What, like fart noises?
 TR: No, like, monkey noises, barnyard noises. Some strange version of male bonding. What would happen on a hunting trip. If I ever went on one. So, this guy comes up with this robot noise, and from then on, for the whole movie, he's accused of being a robot. He's this big chubby guy, Chris Morse, he's amazing. He's been in some John Waters movies. In *Cecil B. Demented*, he's in the theater masturbating. He was in the front row. But, that's not where I found him. So, there's this whole thing where his wife gets killed by this crazy Bulgarian guy who's a dancer. He attempts to go home, but he's blocked, and there's this band he's trying to get back together with but can't because of this whole discrimination thing — him being accused of being a robot. It's sort of like depressing comedy.

DG: They all sound a little hopeless, really.
 TR: There's always some sort of hope in [the movies]. They're about people in places they can't get out of with people they don't want to be around. About what happens when they're there.

DG: Is that somewhere you've been, or somewhere you are?
 TR: It's probably something everybody can relate to. It's probably why it works. (a pause) Maybe that's why good-looking people don't like my films. Only ugly people.

Two of Rohal's films are on the internet. *Knuckleface Jones*: www.atomfilms.com/default.asp?film_id=1198. *Single Space*: www.ifilm.com/ifilm/skeletons/film_detail/0,1263,424477,00.html. Or, visit www.comeandgetitfilms.com.