

Long Live the New Flesh: Director Joseph Christiana, Part One

Written by David Pace

Saturday, 18 June 2011 07:02



[Last week](#), I introduced you to THE NIGHTMARE, a tightly shot and whip-smart piece of independent horror. It was one of the films I saw that really had me convinced I needed to start this blog to document this new movement in film. This week I want to introduce you to the writer/director of THE NIGHTMARE, Joseph Christiana. I got a chance to ask him some questions and I think the result is, well...I hesitate to say “inspiring,” because that just sounds insincere and tacky, but that’s honestly how I felt after reading it. He’s out there making remarkable, quality productions with off-the-shelf gear while juggling career, art and family.

This is what the new flesh is. Art. Sacrifice. Risk. Will. Passion. All these things and more describe Christiana and the new flesh in horror.

FANGORIA: When did you know you’d lead a creative life? Was there a moment? A film? A book? A person?

JOSEPH CHRISTIANA: It wasn’t a single occurrence, more like a chain of events. But one thing seems to jump out at me just now: My grandparents took me on a pretty amazing journey through Italy when I was young, maybe 12 years old, and I saw incredible works of art. I had no idea how seeing Michelangelo’s work—the Sistine Chapel or the Pietà, for instance—could possibly affect me at the time, but thinking back, I realize that the experience must’ve sunk deeply into my DNA. I was in a foreign land, away from my parents for the first time, at a very

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formative crossroads in my development, and I didn't speak the language. It was during that summer that I learned the art of inner dialogue. Trying to figure out what these fantastic things I was seeing meant to me, what they meant to the people around me, was my main occupation for a while. I spent large amounts of time thinking, because trying to speak made me feel foolish. I remember staring at the worn-down feet of the statue of St. Peter and trying to fathom how many lips had to have kissed them in order to smooth down the stone...and what compelled centuries of pilgrims to do so. The idea astounded me. I think it was there I realized that art is inseparable from religion, that art is religion. In hindsight, just now actually, I see the tremendously exquisite irony in it—that people had such passion for a work of art that they were compelled to touch it, and in doing so, wiped away its form forever.

FANG: Will you always pursue something creative no matter what you're doing with your life?

CHRISTIANA: No question. If I'm not actively working on something, I feel a depression, a sense of dread, a weight, an anxiety. It's that feeling you get when you've just left the house for a big trip and you swear you forgot something but can't remember exactly what. It's the dread of nightmares, to be unproductive.

FANG: What is your single biggest influence?

CHRISTIANA: This is a difficult question. So many things influence my work, and they shift and change on an almost daily basis. I can rattle off a list of artists I love and people in my life, but if I chose one single influence, it'd feel incomplete, inaccurate or downright dishonest.

I think the closest I can come to an answer is to say that whatever my immediate previous work was is the single biggest influence on whatever I'm currently working on at the time. Without fail, my "current project" is always either a direct reaction to, or a developmental progression of, whatever I was just working on.

Right now, for instance, I'm working on a script that I plan to shoot on my own with a very limited budget. It's a script that's so unconventional, it would send any respectable Hollywood producer into an epileptic fit. And it's a direct reaction to a screenplay that I just optioned to one Hollywood producer. It's a script that rails against narrative convention and genre expectation in a way that simply cannot be done in the mainstream system—at least not by

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someone like me, who isn't thoroughly vetted and deemed "marketable." What excites me most is that in spite of that, it'll get made. There's something liberating about that. Something empowering.

FANG: When did you start writing?

CHRISTIANA: In college, I started writing lyrics for one of my childhood friends, Ron Muga. We still write songs together. Wrote one a few weeks ago, actually. It was also around then that I started writing sketches for short films, maybe the occasional short story or freeform poem.

But really, my writing is merely an extension of my visual art, so it wasn't until I started actively making films that I started taking my writing more seriously. I was already almost in my mid-20s when my wrestling match with the written word got serious.

FANG: When did you start making your own films?

CHRISTIANA: The first film I made was for an independent study in college. Sort of. I was a graphic/industrial design major, and it was a time when technological developments were changing the way graphic and industrial art were practiced. Along with the graphics software came early versions of Adobe Premiere. So to say that I made a film for my industrial art class isn't entirely accurate. I made it in spite of the class? In tandem with it? Anyway, I made the film purely out of curiosity, only because I could.

The film was a semi-abstract take on the silent-film genre that incorporated animated elements. After it was completed, I took a Super-8 camera and filmed the piece off the computer screen. Then I took the Super-8 film and wound it into one of these looping-cartridge projectors that I found in the back of some thrift-store graveyard. During the senior thesis opening, I projected the looping film from inside one of the art offices onto a translucent sheet stretched across a window facing the main courtyard. So everyone who walked into the building saw this looping abstract film playing with no explanation whatsoever. One of the repeated motifs in the film was a sequence of extreme close-ups: an eye, an ear, a gag. It seemed to engage in some way with the whole notion of "art school."

It wasn't until a couple of years later that I made a film for a co-worker who was "taking an acting class for fun." He knew I loved film and asked if I wanted to shoot a monologue for him

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for his class. He had no idea what he was getting into. We ended up making a half-hour short about a man who wakes up in an empty world. It was my first collaboration with my cinematographer, William Bourassa Jr.

FANG: What is the average budget of one of your productions?

CHRISTIANA: MOTEL AMERICANA VOL. II, a feature-length collection of short films, was made for something like \$6,000, spread out over a period of a year and half. The other long projects I've worked on cost less than even that to produce. THE NIGHTMARE, a six-minute short, cost about 15 bucks, I think—the cost of three mini-DV tapes.

FANG: How many people are involved in a typical production?

CHRISTIANA: Including myself, MOTEL AMERICANA VOL. II had a crew of three, sometimes four. We had a makeup artist for one or two days of shooting. Other than that, it was just the actors. For THE NIGHTMARE, it was really just me and my son. When he was on screen, I was handling the camera. And when I was, vice versa. There was no script, and I had no idea where the film was going. It started like this: My son and I got kicked out of the house for the day because of my daughter's "girls only" birthday party, so we spent the afternoon in the woods shooting an abstract chase scene. I was watching a lot of Jan Svankmejer at the time, and I was interested in filming something that existed in a seemingly disconnected universe. A nightmare universe, one drawn solely by emotion. When I started editing the footage together, I fell in love with the natural sound of his panting. It was almost accidental that I got the sound actually, but it sounded to me just like pure recorded emotion. So I focused on it. One thing led to another. One idea or scene fed the idea for the next and the whole film became about breathing. The film, in that way, was entirely improvised. Impossible with a budget and a crew.

FANG: How much support do you get from your friends and family on these projects?

CHRISTIANA: My wife is a saint.

FANG: What kind of gear are you using?

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CHRISTIANA: We were using a Sony PD170 until recently. My cinematographer, William, just picked up a Canon EOS 5D that we've been testing out. We're dying to put it to proper use. We expect to shoot something very soon. We edit on Premiere, and AfterEffects is always fun when we need it.

FANG: What does it mean to you to work outside of the creative establishment?

CHRISTIANA: It means having the freedom to fail. If you aren't afraid of failing with a scene or a shot or a performance or even an entire film, you're suddenly liberated. You find yourself able to play, to explore, to improvise. And from that process, ultimately, you'll end up with something unique and, in my opinion, worthwhile—something of value.

There has to be risk involved in art, or else it becomes something else. It becomes commodity. The eternal battle between art and commerce has been described more eloquently and at greater length than I'd be able to here, and I'm afraid any elaboration on my part would sound more pedantic than I have a right to be, so I won't begin a long-winded diatribe. But I will say that it seems to me that, with rare exceptions, anything that gets pushed through the system is done so with more effort put into the hedging of bets than into coming up with something illuminating, or challenging, or even mildly interesting.

It's understandable. There's so much money involved, so many investments to protect. And don't get me wrong, I chomp on popcorn on occasion too...but in the end, I'd choose to watch a graceful failure over a blockbuster common denomination any day of the week. From what I can see, the great irony is that when you allow yourself the freedom to fail, you're more likely, at some point, to have great success, the kind that lives on long after you do. But if you play it safe, hedge all your bets, more often than not you get uninspired, lukewarm successes at best, and usually, you're at greater peril of finding an ugly, formulaic failure on your hands.

TO BE CONTINUED