Written by Sean Abley
Tuesday, 23 March 2010 15:21

Bart Mastronardi is part of the East Coast low-budget horror film community that seems to crank out genre features and shorts about once a month, more often than not with him behind the camera as the DP. His first feature as a writer/director, VINDICATION, was anointed by no less than Clive Barker, and the upcoming DVD release from Big Bite Entertainment/R^2 Films carries his seal of approval.

SEAN ABLEY: What’s your background? You strike me as a New York City boy through and through.

BART MASTRONARDI: I am a total New York City Italian boy through and through. I was born and raised in Queens, where I still live and work. I am proud to call myself a New Yorker. My family came from Italy and worked on the docks in Brooklyn, and then moved over to Queens. I come from a family of NYC police officers, but where the filmmaking and art love comes from is beyond me. But New York is the best city in the world, hands down. There is something about it that is inspiring. The look and feel of the city has always been inspiring and alive for me, lots of energy. The city has so much life and so many different ethnic groups that everyone and anyone is here. That’s what I appreciate about the city so much. You want anything, you can find it here, but then I like to go out of the city to remind myself how important the city is to me.

When I was filming VINDICATION, I made sure to shoot scenes on the subway and around the city to give the movie a certain feel. I hate when a movie is supposed to be New York City and it’s clearly Canada. I know it’s expensive, but you can tell the difference. VINDICATION was guerrilla filmmaking, which made it a bit nerve-wracking, but I made sure we moved real fast and gave the film a look that you can only get on a New York subway. I spend much of my time between New York and Pennsylvania, and there’s something about driving over the George Washington Bridge back into the city and seeing the skyline—like no other city in the world.

ABLEY: When did you come out? Was that a tough process for you?

MASTRONARDI: Oh, here come the tough questions. I promise I won’t cry like in a Barbara Walters interview. OK. This is tough, because my coming-out experience was not an easy process for me. I have some terrible memories, which is reflected in VINDICATION to a degree. At times, I hid for so long because I felt scared. I’m a Catholic, my parents wouldn’t accept it and what business is it of someone to know if I am gay or not? But today, I feel like I have a sense of responsibility to people who struggle themselves. I wish it were easier for me, as it is for some. It is not a good feeling when you’re uncomfortable within your own skin.

The stereotypical idea of being a gay person is what conflicted me was the most. I would look at the stereotypes and then look at myself and think, “That is not me.” But as I began to research and explore who I was and began searching out positive role models for myself, I started to feel more comfortable within my own skin. Stereotypes are just labels. People are who they are regardless. I value and understand that now.

Coming out for me involved reading The Advocate, cutting college and going to photo galleries that contained gay art or art from gay artists. I would read articles on gay rights and talk to people who were gay. I wanted to be sure of who I was and what I was feeling was true, rather than that silly notion of burning in hell. I believed as a young man struggling that God was going to punish me. How ridiculous was that? Now I believe that all of us are perfect creations. People make judgments out of fear. Knowledge is power. I understand now and valued myself more once I began to accept that my feelings were true to me. Life became so much easier and more rewarding once I understood that.

Now, that doesn’t mean I haven’t faced discrimination in some way. I was 25 when I was involved in a gay-bashing with a former ex and it wasn’t pretty…for them. [Laughs] Imagine five 20something-year-olds coming up to my ex and me calling us “faggot” and some stupid queer BS. One of them took a swing at my ex, and all hell broke loose. They thought they had the upper hand, and they had some punches and kicks in there and left us black and blue. But we certainly beat and kicked the shit out of them. To a degree, they were not expecting “faggots” to hit back. Go figure. My kickboxing class came in handy. No holds barred. They left with just as many bruises. I remember the next day I was in so much physical pain, but it felt great to have stuck up for myself. To hell with that.

Being gay is a part of me. It is a part I am proud of, and looking back now, it’s great to see this generation of young people looking past the fears and being accepting of all people even more. I am happy more people are opening up about their sexuality, and by that I mean just being honest. You don’t have to shout it out to the world, but there’s nothing wrong with being who you are. The world will always have its fair share of problems, but it seems to be getting better

with each new generation. Plus, now that I am in a relationship, life has only gotten better. My partner David has become my life.

ABLEY: How long have you and David, been together? How did you meet?

MASTRONARDI: David and I met through a mutual friend, Bryan. We e-mailed back and forth, and then Bryan had his annual great NYC Halloween party. I went out and bought a digital camera purposely because I am still a film nut, but I’d be damned if I was going home without instant photos of him. I thought if it didn’t work out, then, well, I took photos with this hot man. When I saw David that night, for me he was it. I knew in my heart. He looked at me and smiled and I melted. God, so corny to tell, but so damn true. We celebrate our anniversary on Halloween.

David and I have been together almost two years now. Still a young relationship, but it only gets better each day. As in all relationships, you have to be honest with what you want in it and make sure you keep it going. Like all couples in a relationship, there are days we argue, but I can sit and look at David from across the room and still it feels like that first day. We have been through a lot during our first year, with people close to us dying, and I feel that has brought us stronger together. Also, this past Christmas was fun because I brought David over to meet the family. My mom still has issues with my sexuality, but she is opening up and taking baby steps. David’s family is great; we have so much fun together.

I’m kind of glad that we have our perks, because it brings us closer together. We value our time together that much more. Love is a small word with a lot of meaning, and it needs to be respected more, and not confused with lust. I laugh because so many straight people, and gays too, in politics do not want gays to get married. But my God, the divorce rate among straight people alone is pathetic. All I want for David and me is to have the same protection as a married couple. Call it marriage, call it whatever you want, but allow me the rights, protection and privileges that other married couples have.

ABLEY: And what a score—you found someone into horror!

MASTRONARDI: I am the luckiest man alive, as is he. [Laughs] FRIDAY THE 13TH is our favorite horror movie! When we’re together, when we’re not busy, we will watch horror movies

all night. We love it. We go to the conventions and have so much fun. Our favorite is when we go out with our friend Alan Rowe Kelly: dinner, dessert and bad movies. To sit and listen to Alan and David laugh together all night—I love every moment. Yes, I am blessed. Horror movies have been as much a part of my life as being gay is to me, so to have a life-partner who loves horror movies in the same way is heaven on Earth for me. It makes the relationship so much more compatible. For Valentines’ Day, he gave me a bunch of FANGORIA issues I didn’t have. That is love, baby! I am a blessed man. David is gorgeous and loves horror. Hot damn!

ABLEY: Did you always want to be a filmmaker? Did you have other careers in mind?

MASTRONARDI: I remember always wanting to be a marine biologist and a filmmaker also. I saw JAWS, so I fell in love with the ocean and sharks, but looking back now it was JAWS as a movie that enthralled me. My father always brought my brother and me to the movies on a Saturday or when a big movie opened up. I loved to go out to the theater and see moving pictures, larger than life. I wanted to do what filmmakers did. I would get all my neighborhood friends from the block and we would put on small plays and play the movies I loved to watch, even the horror ones. Parents thought I was a bit sick in the head, but I was having fun. I knew the difference between fake and real. I remember reading FANGORIA at six and collecting it at 12. I would read it cover to cover. I still do. I wanted to make movies, particularly horror movies. FRIDAY THE 13TH scared the shit out me, but I went back for more. STAR WARS and FRIDAY THE 13TH: THE FINAL CHAPTER solidified my love for the movies. I knew I wanted to make them, but how?

As I grew up and went to college, I started to lose the dream. It became obvious that the only way to make a movie was to know someone or have lots of money. I had neither. With fear, we stop to go to a much more comfortable place of work. I sat as a pencil pusher behind a desk. What a waste of my time, education and my passion for making movies. I received my BA in Film Studies before digital became the norm, so again, no money for Kodak. Then I decided to use my degree and teach. If I couldn’t make films, I could at least inspire others about them. Then I took my money and took part in the Film and Photographic Maine Media Workshops in Rockport, ME, which still is the best summer of my educational life. I studied with the best ASC cinematographers around, and they showed me all the tricks of the trade. I studied hard and worked my ass off there. I wanted to be a cinematographer and a filmmaker. I was doing just that. I began living my dream. VINDICATION is a result of Maine. They taught me how to do simple tricks on any given camera with a low budget. I was inspired and motivated. Thus, VINDICATION began to form at that point.

ABLEY: You have a background in both film and theater. Do you plan to continue doing both?

Or is it film all the way for you now?

MASTRONARDI: I want to do both. From when I was a teenager into my very early 20s, I spent a lot of my time as a member of the Spotlight Players Community troupe in Ozone Park, Queens, where I trained a lot and learned my craft with a limited budget. Today, however, it seems filmmaking is pulling me. Both require a lot of work and focus. Theater is much freer for me, where film can be a bit technical. Both have their differences. My training ground has been the theater, and if you are truly serious about your craft, then you must study there.

It is a wonderful experience to work in the theater. I wouldn’t mind going back and forth between stage and film. VINDICATION derives a lot from theater and it shows, but it also uses cinema as its point of origin. I was happy to be able to connect the two elements together—though my next project, a short piece, will be more cinematic. However, I want to direct the play WHO’S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? with Alan Rowe Kelly and Jerry Murdock. That would be an interesting play to direct. Also, I would love to direct CORPUS CHRISTI by Terrence McNally.

ABLEY: How did you find the film community you’re so immersed in now? Or did they find you?

MASTRONARDI: The universe has a funny way of bringing people together in the most unlikely ways and moments. I was doing work as a cinematographer, and VINDICATION’S composer Billy Archiello was doing computer research and saw an ad for a low-budget horror movie that needed promotion—it was MALEVOLENCE by Steven Mena. Billy answered the ad and we went out to promote it. There I met filmmaker Adam Barnick, and we just started talking horror movies. He told me about a genre-meeting event called Mingle Mangle that Susie Adriensen ran. So I went to one, and in walked Alan Rowe Kelly, and he needed a DP—and I was one. To make a long story short, Alan hired me based on my short version of VINDICATION.

By March, we were filming THE BLOOD SHED, and from there I began meeting all these talented people and branching out. Alan knew Michael Gingold from FANGORIA and I shit myself, because I love the magazine. Who knew that a year later a few of us would be the subject of a major article in the magazine, and that FANGORIA would come down to visit my set when I was filming VINDICATION? From there it has been nonstop.

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

here *here* *here*