Beyond trying to impress Hollywood, independent filmmakers John Fiorella and Gabe Sabloff had one goal in mind: to prove that Robin could be cool

Fiorella spent $18,000 on a project that he, legally, would not be allowed to make a dime from, much had been the situation with Collora who had ponied up some $30,000 for Dead End. And he chose to focus on Robin? Not even Nightwing, but Robin! “I was never a Nightwing fan,” he shrugs. “I understand the direction of the character going there, but it’s like Steel. Steel is not Superman, like Nightwing is not Robin. “Believe me, I had to address all of that myself when I dove into the project,” Fiorella adds. “First of all, I’ve had this idea in my head for five or 10 years, and I was, like, ‘I’ve got to get this shot on film. A, I think it’s a good idea; B, I think people will respond to it; and, C, it’s driving me crazy.’ Of course, when you sit down and say, ‘I have this great idea about

The 2003 Internet debut of Sandy Colbra’s eight-minute film Batman: Dead End not only revolutionized online entertainment in one fell swoop, but simultaneously raised the creative bar to such a level that it seemed improbable that anyone would be able to match it.

His effort was impressive, offering up one of the best on-screen depictions of Batman ever, while successfully managing to throw in a couple of well-done Aliens and Predators for good measure. It all culminated in an unlikely on-screen match-up that managed to work despite the odds of it being little more than a fan boy’s wet dream. The real question, when all was said and done and Collora had managed to get his directorial career jump-started, was whether or not someone would be able to match or top what he had done. Enter John Fiorella.

Having already shot several short films and trailers with cinematographer Gabe Sabloff under their independent production umbrella Untamed Cinema, Fiorella wanted to come up with something that would make people stop and take notice. The result? An $18,000 extended trailer that would preview a film that in all likelihood would never get made called Grayson, chronicling the adventures of…Robin, the former Boy Wonder.

Not to be obnoxious about it, but let’s take a moment to re-emphasize that point: Fiorella spent $18,000 on a project that he, legally, would not be allowed to make a dime from, much had been the situation with Collora who had ponied up some $30,000 for Dead End. And he chose to focus on Robin? Not even Nightwing, but Robin! “I was never a Nightwing fan,” he shrugs. “I understand the direction of the character going there, but it’s like Steel. Steel is not Superman, like Nightwing is not Robin. “Believe me, I had to address all of that myself when I dove into the project,” Fiorella adds. “First of all, I’ve had this idea in my head for five or 10 years, and I was, like, ‘I’ve got to get this shot on film. A, I think it’s a good idea; B, I think people will respond to it; and, C, it’s driving me crazy.’ Of course, when you sit down and say, ‘I have this great idea about

Creative Challenge: The making of Grayson is a genuine testament to the creative perseverance of everyone involved, who did whatever was necessary to complete production.
Robin, nobody wants to hear it. It's the dumbest idea on the planet, until you put it on film and share it with people. Then everybody's like, 'That's awesome.' Then it's the whole challenge of filmmaking. What's funny is that the more people say no to an idea, I think the greater the chances are of that idea being a success. And I ended up hearing no from everyone under the sun.

With the exception of Sabloff, who has been friends and collaborators with Fiorella for the past 11 years.

**DRASTIC MEASURES**

As Sabloff explains it, the idea for Grayson first came up about two years ago when the duo got together in Westwood, a part of Los Angeles, to discuss the future of Untamed Cinema, for which they had had collaborated previously (www.untamedcinema.com).

“We both agreed that drastic action need to be taken,” says Sabloff, who shot Grayson on a 16mm Bolex wind-up camera. “For some strange reason, when you come to Hollywood as a director, the first thing out of any producer’s mouth is, ‘What have you written?’ So for the last few years, John had been trying to write screenplays and was fed up with the whole process. So we hyped ourselves up to get back to basics, to shoot something outrageous without any rules, the way we used to in college. We actually complement other’s skills. John focuses on the flash and sizzle you see on the outside, while I am the man behind the curtain who focuses on the more technical aspects and details.”

But the one pertinent question is, again, why shoot a trailer for a non-existent film? “We have made trailers before,” he notes, “so this is nothing new for us. John and I are huge trailer fans. The people who make them great are the most unappreciated people in Hollywood. There is no Academy Award for best trailer, which is ironic because the trailer is one of the biggest keys to a movie’s success or failure at the box office. In low budget filmmaking, you always want to minimize the elements that make you look low budget: Bad sets, mediocre acting, shaky sound, etc. By making a trailer, you never have to dwell on any one thing for too long to let the audience see the seams. The idea to do another trailer also came out of the meeting we had in the park where we were fed up with screenwriting and wanted a different way to pitch our ideas. And the appeal of this particular idea is that it was a John Fiorella film, and I know that John makes great movies. I never needed any more reason than that. I was skeptical about the idea of making a film about Robin at first. Out of all the superheroes, why did he have to choose the lamest one? But once I understood what John was going for, I was even more into it.”

What Fiorella, who not only directs but cast himself as Dick Grayson, had in mind was a tale in which Batman has been murdered and justice is not being served due to the corruption of the Gotham City Police Department. Dick Grayson realizes that he will have to take the law into his own hands and begins a one-man war against the police, the Joker, Selena Kyle, the Joker Girls, the Riddler, the Penguin, Wonder Woman, Green Lantern and Superman. The only one who actually seems on his side is Batgirl, and that’s pretty much only because he’s married to her alter ego, Barbara Gordon.

Outside of the basics, it’s a little tough to tell what the story’s about, because the only place it exists is inside of Fiorella’s head and he ain’t talking — unless he can convince DC to go forward with a graphic novel version. “I have a 50 page outline of the story,” he says, “and it’s way bigger than the trailer. What’s great is so many people email me wanting to know the story; people are offering me money to know the story.”

**GUERILLAS IN THE MIST**

What is known is that Grayson truly stands as a testament to those involved with its production. Practicing
guerilla tactics that would make a planet of ages proud, the duo used every trick in the book to get what they needed. That meant stealing locations for virtually every shot in the trailer and employing a number of innovative cinematic tricks. For instance, the stunning image of Superman (Paul Hasenyager) lifting a tank was created by using forced perspective— a tiny toy tank was in the foreground, while the actor stood far behind it. Then there's Robin fending off machine gun fire from the Joker with a piece of metal that's sparring from the impact of the bullets, which was created via the clever placing of fireworks. Shot for shot, the resulting image was a piece of metal that's sparking from the impact of the bullets, which was created via the clever placing of fireworks. Shot for shot, the resulting image was a spectacle that was both visually striking and technically innovative, setting a high bar for visual effects in superhero films.

Online Entertainment: Naturally we've got to ask — how did it feel to put on that famous costume? As goofy as it sounds, was it empowering at all?

Kate Clarke: It's funny how it wasn't until I put the costume on, and gave my hair some curl that I even went, "Wow! I do look like Wonder Woman." Empowering? Yes. I think it was a little, now that you ask.

Paul Hasenyager: Putting on the suit meant big boots to fill in many ways. I wanted to give this character life and realism and attempt to do justice that other actors had done before me. And, I'm sorry, you just have no choice than to feel empowered while lifting up a tank! My objective was to make Superman real and believable. John was going for a more Kingdom Come type of Superman, hence the graying temples.

[John Florella notes: "I definitely set the whole tone older, because when I think of Superman, I think of Christopher Reeve. To get past that, my idea was to set it 20 or 30 years ahead of that. What would Christopher Reeve look like if the character aged? It's so far ahead of Superman the young 26 year old. Besides, I like the notion that as everyone gets older, who knows what's happened to them? The conflict of age makes it a better story."

Brian Bethel: It was not empowering at all. My face itched so bad it made me feel Closter phobic. Not until I looked in the mirror did I see the character born.

Online Entertainment: Is it difficult to "find" a character when you're there visually without much in the way of lines and in a trailer rather than a more extended storyline?

Paul: No, it really isn't hard to find the character. Many characteristics portray a character: posture, expressions, and body language as well as language. So having no lines really make it more simple to focus on the other aspects that the audience would be seeing. For myself, and many other actors I'm sure, if you think it and believe it, it will read to the audience.

Peter Conner: Is it difficult to find a character when you're there visually without much in the way of lines and in a trailer rather than a more extended storyline?

Paul: No, but we do have to remember that the audience would be seeing a character. Many characteristics portray a character: posture, expressions, and body language as well as language. So having no lines really make it more simple to focus on the other aspects that the audience would be seeing. For myself, and many other actors I'm sure, if you think it and believe it, it will read to the audience.

Online Entertainment: In your mind, what was going on in your sequences?

Paul Hasenyager: While most of Grayson was filled with difficult shots to achieve, one of the toughest was a sequence in which the Joker pulls a lever that dumps Robin, who's chained to a chair, into a pool of water. Physically, the most challenging scenes to shoot are the ones that draw blood or almost kill you," says Sabloff. "There were a few on this production. Like the time John stuffed me in his makeshift submersible and sent me to the bottom of his pool to get the underwater shot. Let's just say, John is no great structural engineer. The water pressure almost forced perspective — a tiny toy tank was in the foreground, while the actor stood far behind it. Then there's Robin fending off machine gun fire from the Joker with a piece of metal that's sparring from the impact of the bullets, which was created via the clever placing of fireworks. Shot for shot, the resulting image was a piece of metal that's sparking from the impact of the bullets, which was created via the clever placing of fireworks. Shot for shot, the resulting image was a spectacle that was both visually striking and technically innovative, setting a high bar for visual effects in superhero films.

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Brian: It's not difficult as long as you do your homework. John is such an amazing director. The day of the shot he would fax the storyboards and then, while I was in the makeup chair, we would review the shots. This was a very visual piece, so as long as I understood what John wanted to see, we usually got it in three to four takes.

Kate: I don't feel I need lines in order to have the essence or get into the soul of a character, but I definitely wish I'd had a full feature film to play Wonder Woman. I keep hearing about Joel Silver's plan to make his version of Wonder Woman. I've love to get that call — "Kate, Joel would like to see you Tuesday for the role of Wonder Woman."

Online Entertainment: In your mind, what was going on in your sequences?
crushed me. Then there was the other time when John leaped over a gap between two buildings forty feet over the concrete. There were some shots that were logistically challenging, too. Shots where we had to wrangle several actors or a group of extras on and off a stolen location without getting caught.

Concurs Fiorella, "Throughout the whole thing my mindset was, 'Don't get arrested for trespassing!' That's the mindset when you do a film like that. The making of the film was an 18-month process. Ten months of production, three months of preproduction and five months of editing. I guess the most nerve-wracking part of the film was trespassing, because we trespassed everywhere that we went. Aside from that, it required a lot of discipline. I live in Hermosa Beach. Gabe Sabloff lives in Glendale, which is where the edit stage is.

I'm just wondering if any of you came up with your own mental scenarios in terms of the dramatic set-up.

Brian: No, my approach to acting is very simple: Just do it. You believe 110% of what you are doing. We did this when we were kids. This is very easy for the three to five second shots that we were doing. The only shot that was hard was the "lever pulling" shot. I was holding an ax handle, which was attached to nothing. John wanted it to look like it was really hard to push and then it releases when Robin falls into the water. Well, I have a hard time walking and chewing gum at the same time; I'm not the smartest person you will ever meet. If I would get the lever right, I would be totally out of character. Mind you it's 3AM, we are behind John's apartment building, under someone's bedroom window who keeps yelling at us. Then I would hear my favorite Fiorella line: "Brian, that was good. Let's try it again and I want to see crazzzzyyyyyyy." Which I usually interpreted as, "Open your mouth as wide as possible."

Kate: John really set up the scenario for what he wanted to capture in that shot — he really knew what he wanted. Then I just had to do it.

Paul: Well, yes and no. I didn't create elaborate back stories for each scene. To this day people ask why did this happen, what was going on there? I don't have all that. Those secrets are locked in the mind of John Fiorella. Hopefully some day with the blessing of Warner Brothers we all will know the answers to those detailed questions. But back to the question: the tank lift was a technical scene that we had to shoot 10-20 takes to get all the aspects right. If you see the "behind the scenes" section, you will see how we did it. So during that scene my mind was 60% on how heavy this tank was supposed to be and 40% on technical matters that I had to make work, for example the speed and height of the lift.

During the scene when Robin hits me with a cross, the thought in my mind was, "How would a man of steel react to being punched?" By the emails and chat board comments I have seen, I guess it worked in the final shot.

Online Entertainment: What's the appeal of a project like this — again, a trailer as opposed to something longer?

Brian: It's work, and who knows if I will ever get the chance to play the Joker again? I will say that in preparing for the role I went back and watched Jack Nicholson and started reading comic books again. The Joker is crazy, but he is crazy in his reality.

Paul: It was a trailer or nothing due to licensing rights and budget. So in this business we all use one job to get to the next and that is the plan for both John and myself. With the wide reach of the Internet, Grayson has been seen by people I would never have a chance to get in front of personally at this point in time. And I feel it pays to have lots of hooks in the water when one is fishing.

Kate: I had recently completed the feature Grace where I portrayed a woman who dies of Lou Gehrig's Disease — the complete opposite of Wonder Woman, I guess. And it was refreshing to just have some fun. The whole appeal of Grayson was really just the chance to be Wonder Woman. I mean, I guess I could just go buy the costume and wear it any time I wanted, but that would just be weird, wouldn't it?

People think Grayson is going to be a movie. That's perfectly understandable — there was nothing amateur about it.”

— Shane Donahue, www.demolition22.com
suite is. So when we shot for 10 months, he would come down here every weekend and then when we edited, I would work in a lamp store selling lamps for 10 hours, then I would drive up to Glendale every night. I’d get there at probably 10:30 and start editing until four or four-thirty the next morning. We did that for five months. When you consider that a feature could have been shot in the 18 months we used, it’s pretty frustrating. But what’s funny is that nobody really knows what goes into the making of something like this.

“We had the movie in the can,” he continues, “edited with sound. We had a foley on the sound, so we had to dub all the actors and bring in actors to record the voices and all of this crazy stuff. Then for about six weeks we couldn’t figure out how to get the greatest quality from the computer and onto a DVD. Here we are sitting there with these huge manuals trying to figure it out. When we finished a week later, the owner of the company bought this new software that just requires a push of a button. Hey, nobody said it would be easy.”

“I encourage anyone who’s filming anything to use storyboards, because they serve as a great tool in terms of a creative and visual shorthand.”

— Shane Donahue, www.demolition23.com

THE EXPERIENCE

Maybe not, but Grayson has succeeded on a number of levels, not the least of which was the experience itself for a number of its stars. Actor Brian Bethel, for example, jumped at the opportunity to not only play the Joker, but to work with Fiorella.

“John received my picture and called me about the Grayson project and I said, ‘Sure, I’ll do it,’” he relates. “But then I did not hear anything for about a year. Of course, being an actor in LA, I moved many times in that year. I lost touch with John. I don’t remember how we reconnected, but thank God we did. At this point I still had...
Obviously Grayson has gotten a pretty impressive response from fans. What kind of feedback have you gotten on a personal level?

John Fiorella: On the industry side, I hooked up with a great management team and we’re in the process of interviewing artists right now to illustrate the graphic novel of Grayson. The reality of me directing the film is pretty slim at this point, but the story is something that I would love to tell. I’ve always been a fan of comic books, so right now we’re looking for an artist that has the right look and weight that we can go into DC with and try to convince them that this is a good idea. I’ve also hooked up with Dark Horse Comics about creating my own comic. They’re a great company and they said they would be interested in doing a comic or a movie with me. Maybe both. It’s just a matter of finding the right material. In the meantime, I’m putting the final touches on a screenplay that I think I have investors lined up for. It’s a small script, maybe a $10 million production. It’s relatively doable, so hopefully that can get going.

Online Entertainment: Have you actually spoken to DC about Grayson?

John: No. We have yet to make contact with DC or Warner Bros. I think we’re waiting to load up the guns before we go in there. I am emphatically not trying to make any direct money from this film. I get emails from filmmakers all the time who are doing kind of the same thing and midway through they get shut down by Warner Bros. I wish I could have told these guys ahead of time, “Don’t tell anyone. Don’t put anything on the Internet. Just do your thing until you get it out there.” Grayson was definitely a lot of work, but if you’re a filmmaker, that’s what you do. The goal now is to get paid to do more of the same. Hopefully that will happen.

Online Entertainment: Have you actually spoken to DC about Grayson?

John: Obviously there’s a lot of Dark Knight Returns in this, but Superman is essentially the sheriff in this town and has to uphold the law. Their ways of crime fighting are very conflict-ed, and there’s a little extra backstory I’m going to throw in there to increase tensions.

Online Entertainment: Acting wise, how did you see the character in your mind?

John: Very rarely do you have the opportunity to delve into and become the character, at least on that level. You take the angst of waiting tables and selling lamps and apply that. You’re going into theatres and spending $10 to see these horrible digital effects movies that no nowhere. The whole story of Grayson hardly has any effects in it. It’s about people, the characters, and I think that’s why I wanted to make this movie and have Robin be so ticked off and seeking vengeance.

Online Entertainment: You certainly had conflict between Clark Kent and Dick Grayson.

John: A lot of people have said, “Why is he the bad guy?” Obviously there’s a lot of Dark Knight Returns in this, but Superman is essentially the sheriff in this town and has to uphold the law. Their ways of crime fighting are very conflict-ed, and there’s a little extra backstory I’m going to throw in there to increase tensions.

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not met John yet, so we set up a meeting. When he asked me to play the Joker, my first response was, ‘YES!’ Then John and I met in Santa Monica and he pulled out my original headshot that was submitted. John had colored my hair green and face white. I thought he was crazy. John has such amazing energy about him. It was like your best friend asking you to come out and play cops and robbers in the backyard. Little did I know it was going to be one of the best experiences of my career."

Kate Clarke, who plays Wonder Woman in the film, explains, “John had seen me in a film called Los Enchiladas. I’ve been told that I resembled Lynda Carter a little, so I wasn’t too surprised when I got the call. My response to the idea was, ‘Cool – that will be fun!’ and then I just hoped that the project would turn out good. I’d never worked with John before or seen any of his work, so I just had to go with what he told me it was going to look like. And it turned out amazing, don’t you think?”

One person who shares that point of view is Paul Hasenyager. "John Fiorella and I had worked together on a couple of other projects; says the actor who brings a Kingdom Come-era Superman/Clark Kent to life in the film. “He evidently had always wanted to put Grayson together, but he was very intent on doing it well – think that Grayson stands as a lesson to all on what can be done with vision, passion and a will to succeed.”

The innovation employed by the filmmakers is evident in the online documentary Pieces of the Puzzle, a 29-minute look into the making of Grayson that’s narrated by Fiorella. It’s that creative look at ways around problems that Sabloff feels is the film’s most important lesson for aspiring filmmakers. “Most film schools don’t teach the art of guerilla film-

“John will send his ideas in the form of rough drawings, then I basically translate his ideas into a more finished form. My creative suggestions might be in the form of the angle or composition.”

— Shane Donahue, www.demolition22.com
“Making,” he muses. “They teach you how professional shoots operate and fill up young filmmakers’ heads with misinformation about how to operate on a low budget. The key to low budget is to not spend one bit of time, resources or brain power on anything that’s not going to show up on film. I’ve been on so many short film sets that have 25-person crews, state of the art equipment and spectacular catering, and the films come out mediocre at best. Grayson was shot with a wind up camera and as much equipment as we could fit in the back seat of John’s car.”

Which should put to rest the belief that Untamed Cinema went out and garnered the funds from investors. “I raised nothing,” Fiorella emphasizes. “I waited tables and I had four credit cards. I quit the waiter job because we started editing at night, because we could only get to do so when the studio was closed. Then I had to get a day job, which I currently have.” He pauses a moment before offering: “I sell lamps. It’s one of the worst jobs I’ve ever had in my life. I’m a lamp salesman and the funny thing is that on my lunch break I drive up to Hollywood and have a meeting with the head of Dark Horse Films about a $3 million film, and then I go back to selling lamps. It’s so bizarre. I feel like I’ve got a secret identity, because the people at the lamp store have no idea that I make movies, and I’m not sure if the people who make movies have any idea that I sell lamps.”

When Susan Hwang answered the ad in Backstage West for providing Joker makeup in Grayson, she felt up to the challenge she would be facing in a production with an extremely limited schedule and budget.

“I’ve learned different techniques from my makeup school for special effects such as using latex and hair,” says Hwang. “I’ve also helped on a set where there was a Joker and I saw him getting his makeup done. I just tried to take an image of Joker I had in mind and put it on to the actor’s face. I was totally under a budget, so I had to resort to ‘cheaper alternatives.’ For example, it would have been easier to use special paint that doesn’t smudge off for Joker’s white face, but I just used clown white face paint. There was no prosthetics at all. I just used my grease paint to do the contour to make the eyes look wired and haggard, and I used Revlon lipstick and my grease paint to create the creepy grin. I just had to do everything from scratch. But it was very rewarding to see that it turned out very convincing on the screen.”