

GRAYSON

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

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he 2003 Internet debut of Sandy Collora's eight-minute

film *Batman: Dead End* not only evolutionized 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.

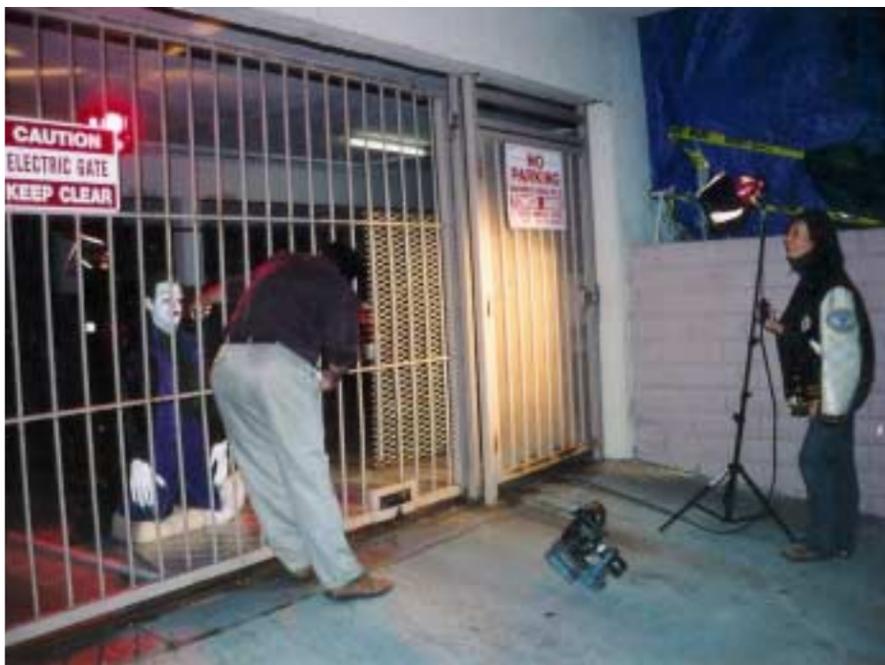
Having already shot several short films and trailers with cinematographer Gabe Sabloff under their independent production umbrella Untamed Cinema, Fiorella wanted to come up with something that

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.



guerilla tactics that would make a planet of apes 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 sparking from the impact of the bullets, which was created via the clever placing of fireworks. Shot for shot, the short stands as one of the

most impressive "fan films" ever made.

"I do view it as a film," says Sabloff. "If trailers are done well, they do have a story with a beginning, middle and end. To me, it felt like we were making a short film and I think it shows in the final product. You see the characters grow and change, the intensity and peril increasing with each passing minute. As for inspiration for the photography, that was simple. John and I were both huge comic book fans before we ever touched a movie camera. I wanted to make every shot feel like it was a panel cut out of your favorite comic book. Also on this film, John splurged on a lavish telecine session where

we sat with a great colorist and I was able to further sculpt my pictures into that comic book dynamic."

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

PLAYING HEROES & VILLAINS

In the following Q&A session, Kate Clarke, Paul Hasenyager and Brian Bethel reflect on playing, respectively, Wonder Woman, Superman and the Joker in *Grayson*.

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, "Whoa! 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 Fiorella 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.

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?



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

— *Shane Donahue, www.demolition22.com*

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

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 cccrrraazzzyyeeerrr.” 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.

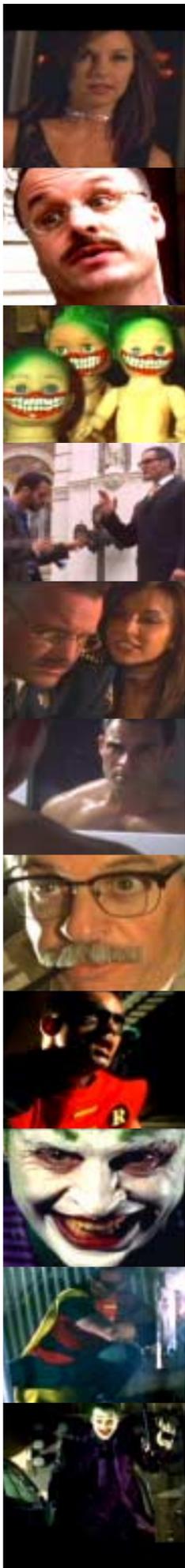
During the scene when Robin hits me with a cross, the thought in my mind was, “How would a man of steel react to being punched?” By the emails and chat board comments I have seen, I guess it worked in the final shot.

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 portray 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?



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 over 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

ODDS & ENDS WITH WRITER/DIRECTOR/ STAR JOHN FIORELLA

Online Entertainment:

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: You play Robin in this film. Is acting part of the equation?

John: If this was an A-list film, I would cast Tom Cruise, though I would imagine he's busy. I love acting. I started directing because anything I was acting in in junior high was so bad that I was constantly going, "If the camera was here and the music was pumped up, and if we cut to this shot over here, that could look cool in this little movie we're making instead of looking stupid." Besides, there's more power when you're a director. Everybody in this town is an actor. If you really want to get something done, you've got to be a director.

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 conflicted, and there's a little extra backstory I'm going to throw in there to increase tensions.

To tell you the truth, when I hear people comment on *Grayson*, I'm reminded that this is a film I'm proud of. But whatever I do next, it will most likely be my own creation. If I could sell a DVD of the film to everyone who wanted to buy it, I could retire, so the next time I do something, it will probably be something I own. I love *Grayson*. It's a fun project. But the objective now is, "What's next? Let's get some real money and move forward."



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



"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*

including the appropriate casting in all the roles. And I was more than happy to work with John again. He has a great vision and eye for shots that are dramatic, beautiful and interesting. So I knew with his passion and love of the subject matter that it would be something special. I

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-

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'll 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."



Send in the Clown: Makeup artist Susan Hwang transforms Brian Bethel into Batman's arch-enemy, the Joker. According to Hwang, for budgetary reasons she was extremely limited in what she could and could not do.

GIVING THE JOKER HIS LOOK

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."