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Rushlights – More Money More Problems



By Briega McGarrity



Up-and-coming filmmaker **Antoni Stutz's** latest film is an indie thriller filmed in a neo-noir style. Co-written by **Stutz** and **Ashley Scott Meyers**, **Rushlights** stars brawny actor Josh Henderson of *Dallas* fame and beguiling newcomer **Haley Webb** as Sarah. The duo, who have genuine on-screen chemistry, play lovers from the suburbs of Los Angeles who meet in a diner, fall in love and end up travelling to Texas to falsely claim a dead friend's inheritance. Not surprisingly, things start to get hectic and very complicated.

Drugs, greed, self-destruction, violence, corruption, revenge, twisted thinking, betrayal, dark lighting, small town mentality, young love and a heroine all

feature! Seasoned actors **Aidan Quinn** and **Beau Bridges** play brothers working in two different arms of the law, which should help the film's theatrical life in select markets. Overall, whilst a bit hectic, clichéd and over the top sub-plots, IFQ was impressed with Stutz's attempt at a modern day film noir romance and enjoyed chatting to him briefly about the film.

Independent Film Quarterly (IFQ): There's a lot going on in your screenplay; was it really based on real events?

Antoni Stutz (AS): A card at the beginning of the film reads "inspired by true events." Some years ago there was a newspaper article about a young couple in Alabama trying to pull off an insurance scam revolving around an inheritance. That and few personal experiences served as the foundation. Then the "what if..?" process started, the brainstorming and out of that came *Rushlights*.

IFQ: It seemed a bit like you and the co-writer definitely wanted to shock the viewer?

AS: That certainly was not our intention. For example, the violence we see in *Rushlights* is not gratuitous.

If the imagery (however upsetting or disturbing) is part of the story, then consequently showing it on the screen is justified. Story always is the main focus.

IFQ: Overall your direction was sharp, the film looked stylish and had good locations. Were you satisfied with how the film came out?

AS: Well, thank you. With respect to the look and the performances the answer is yes. Gregg Easterbrook, the DP, really understood what I was after and delivered. The actors were for the most part a delight to work with – nobody shied away when I pushed the envelope. There were many magical moments between action and cut and I'm very grateful to my actors for their trust in me. Also, the production design was rather well executed. Other parts of the film, from today's POV, I would do very differently. I think I learned tremendous amount on *Rushlights*, and I'm really looking forward to apply that learning curve to my next project.

IFQ: The acting performances were solid - Josh Henderson was a good choice for shady Billy Brody; he is so used to double crossing and twisty plotting from *Dallas*!

AS: Actually Josh had not been cast in *Dallas* when we were filming *Rushlights*. The network called me months later and asked if they could see some footage from *Rushlights*. I was hesitant at first since I was in the middle of cutting and didn't want to show anything really. We were still in assembly. But Josh had

been such a good sport for many weeks on the movie, he's a hard worker – long story short, I sent over a couple of scenes – I guess they liked what they saw – a few hours later Josh called me and said that he got the role on *Dallas*. Now, I'm sure was he was the front-runner for the part in *Dallas* from the beginning – but if our film contributed a little with respect to finalizing the deal – I'm very happy that things worked out for him. I hear he is doing a great job on *Dallas*.

Josh is not just talented but he is an intelligent actor. That is what attracted me to working with him, because "Billy" is a tricky cat, full of surprises. Also, the way Haley Webb (who portrays Sarah) and Josh play off each other worked out very well. Haley is a strong actress with an unusually wide emotional range. Especially considering her young age. The chemistry between Josh and Haley was key to make the love story work.

IFQ: Yes, Josh and Haley were a good match. I was also impressed that Aidan Quinn and Beau Bridges had supporting roles – how did that come about?

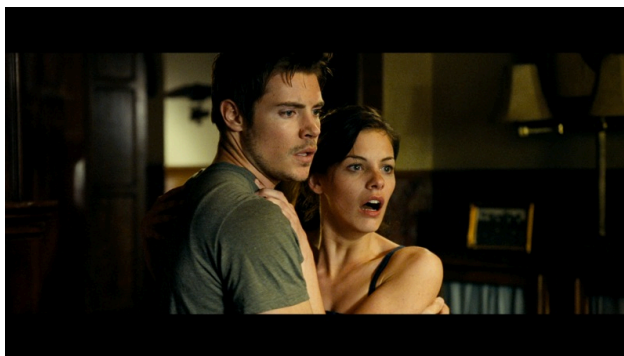
AS: Beau was a fan of the script from the beginning. He also liked my artwork and photography. I think I sent him a catalogue of my work along with the script. Anyway, we met, we clicked and as they say: The rest is history. Aidan came to the project relatively late. It was a somewhat controversial role and I believe he appreciated the challenge. Both actors are seasoned veterans that helped me a tremendous deal allowing me to focus on doing my job. Directing Beau and Aidan was more about nuances, listening and trying to stay out of the way on my end.

IFQ: You included quite a lot of violence and it was quite steamy in parts. Was it meant to be a neo-noir style thriller?

AS: As I addressed earlier: It's one thing when violence or sex are used as a necessary vehicle to support the story. It's another thing when it's being used gratuitously, for shock value only. That is not the case in *Rushlights*. Re the second part of your question: Yes, *Rushlights* is a mystery thriller photographed in the noir tradition.

IFQ: I have to say it gets a wee bit far-fetched in the third part of the film.

AS: Concerning the ending: I'm sure you are familiar with the phrase "suspension of disbelief." Far-fetched? Well, you are of course entitled to your opinion and I appreciate it. Actually I welcome it! After



all, exchanges of different opinions and tastes is what it's all about. But in my own as well as in the films defense: What is more far-fetched: The ending of *Rushlights* or a guy enclosed in a steel-case flying around with a rocket on his back saving the world? Point is: Both films are works of fiction.

IFQ: Fair enough. Your film made me think of a phrase my mother often said to us growing up "money is the route of all evil" - Do you have a particular message for the film?

AS: Maybe your mom is right. Maybe it is the devil promising us that money is the answer to all of our problems. I will let you know if it's true or not once I made a ton of cash. Might take a while though. I'm not sure there is a message. I'm not old enough to be that wise. Also, I'm not sure it's my job to interpret. I hope I made a decent film. I hope people like it, feel entertained. Meanwhile, I'm very proud and thankful to everybody who gave it their 110%. It was not an easy film to make. The means were very limited. I learned a lot about myself, a lot about people in general (good and bad) and for that I'm very grateful. Furthermore: The film appears to be a bit polarizing. Some love it – others are not so favorable in their opinion. At first I found these intense reactions to be a bit disturbing – naturally you want everybody to like your film. But that is not reality. And then it dawned on me, if the film stirs up so much emotion in both camps, I realized, as an artist, I have done my job. I generated debate. What more can I ask for?

IFQ: Are you a fan of the Coen Brothers? And any particular actor or director you would like to collaborate with?

AS: Who is not a fan of the Coen Brothers! There is exceptional talent out there. I would not know where to start. You know, I watched a film with Nicolas Cage last night and I was thinking, what is it that keeps my eyes glued to the screen when it comes to Nicolas Cage. And then it popped into my head, it's his unpredictability. You just don't know what he is going to do next. I love that in an actor. Marlon Brando had that quality. But I suppose as a director you have to have the confidence to embrace that unpredictability. Maybe I'm lucky enough one day to find out if I have the chops. We'll see.

IFQ: How has audiences and media interest been over the spring-summer season?

AS: The screenings at the festivals were the most interesting. Especially the Q&A afterwards. I really enjoyed talking to the film buffs. Folks that attend a festival because they like film. Period. Films that they usually do not get to see or will never see again. I met some cool people. Especially in Dallas. All ages, arriving alone or with friends, people that travelled by bus or hitchhiked – then watching 3-4 films a day. Most were not there for some red carpet event. Like I said the Q & A's were great: Very interesting questions. Stuff I never even thought about before. Audiences are very smart!

I do recall having done a lot of interviews (Still doing them) Not sure where they all go... the interviews. Also, not sure that everything I say or said was ingenious either. It can get very tiresome at times. And after 2 x 6 packs of diet coke at 10 pm – things can get blurry – it happens – you sit there, and have no idea what you're talking about. Sorry.

IFQ: How was your experience of getting a foreign and domestic distribution deal?

AS: Getting a deal is one thing. *Rushlights* is a thriller, it has a certain commercial appeal; there was plenty of interest from the beginning. Now, WHAT kind of a deal and who with, is another thing. One thing is certain: It is a lot of work getting your film out there.

IFQ: Are you working on another feature?

AS: Yes, and I'm dying to tell you what it's about...

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