

## A Conversation with Gregor Hagey A Shooter of 'Independent' Stature

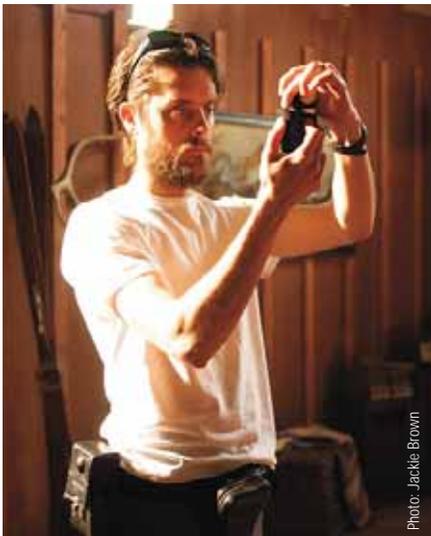


Photo: Jackie Brown

DOP Gregor Hagey on the set of the TIFF-screened short *If I See Randy Again, Do You Want Me to Hit Him with the Axe?*

**"I like working with directors who have a passion for filmmaking"**

By Don Angus

When Associate member Gregor Hagey e-mailed that he had three shorts premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in September and an independent feature at the Vancouver International Film Festival this month, it set off a memory bell.

This was the same young cinematographer whose first full-length feature film, the low-budget indie *Bad Days*, was the cover story for the February, 2000, issue of the CSC News. In the ensuing six-plus years, the Toronto-based director of photography has been busy lensing a host of made-in-Canada shorts, features and documentaries – many of them a shade on the offbeat side of the cultural scale.

This year's TIFF entries which he shot were the dramatic short films *The Tragic Story of Nling* (directed by Jeffrey

St. Jules), *The Runner* (Robert Deleskie) and *If I See Randy Again, Do You Want Me to Hit Him with the Axe?* (Vivieno Caldinelli). The feature *Run Robot Run* (Daniel O'Connor) had its premiere at the Vancouver fest.

"Yes, I do have some offbeat films I've shot," he conceded, and the unusual is not always limited to the script. For instance, "*The Tragic Story of Nling* was shot on 24P mini-DV, edited, then every frame was printed out with a black-and-white laser printer, each character was cut out with scissors and rescanned, animated and composited with prints taken from model shots."

**'I am attracted to good scripts that tell an interesting story'**

To date, Hagey told the CSC News, he has shot seven indie features and a TV movie. There has been *Run Robot Run*, a romantic comedy by Daniel O'Connor; *The Limb Salesman*, a tragic love story directed by Anais Granofsky; *Phil the Alien*, a sci-fi comedy directed by Rob Stefaniuk; *Rub & Tug*, a dramatic comedy directed by Soo Lyu; *Little Raver Girl*, directed by Garth Hagey (Gregor's younger brother); *Cruel Masters*, directed by Joe Woolf; and *Bad Days*, directed by Neil Lewis.

He has shot well over 50 short films since 1993, one of which – *Filthy*, directed by Seth Poulin and produced by the Canadian Film Centre – was nominated for a CSC Award in 2003.

"I've been working in documentary a bit more these days and to date I've shot five feature documentaries, 39 episodes of documentary series and reality TV, and seven docu-

mentary shorts," he said.

"I've been very fortunate to have had eight films at TIFF," Hagey said, listing the indie features *Rub & Tug* (2002), *Phil the Alien* (2004), *The Limb Salesman* (2004), the shorts *Mothers, Fathers & Other Strangers* (2004), *Letters From "R"* (2005), and the three shorts this year.

**Q: What attracts you to low-budget indie films?**

**Hagey:** "I can't say that I'm attracted to low budgets, but I am attracted to good scripts that tell an interesting story and whose characters engage you on an emotional level. I like working with directors who have a passion for filmmaking and are great collaborators. A sense of humour is good, too. Filmmaking is a team effort and everyone needs to respect each other's ideas, but not take offence when they get shot down. Ultimately the sum of a film should be greater than its parts."

**Q: Do you seek out offbeat films?**

**Hagey:** "I've never sought offbeat films, but I like unusual ideas. In short films I certainly think that directors should challenge themselves to make something that is outside their comfort zone. There are no commercial pressures for a short so be creative and take risks. Perhaps being offbeat is a trait of Canadian features. We have a unique perspective being so close to



A scene from the short film *If I See Randy Again, Do You Want Me to Hit Him with the Axe?*



A scene from the feature *Run Robot Run*, which had its premiere at the Vancouver International Film Festival this month.

the U.S. but still separate from them. Maybe if Canadian features could dominate the home box office, Hollywood movies would seem offbeat.”

**Q: What is the biggest theatrical feature you have DOPed so far?**

**Hagey:** “*Phil the Alien* probably got the most laughs and press of anything I’ve shot. Apparently it’s a big rental with university students. *The Limb Salesman* is probably the feature on which I feel my work was most successful. It felt good when both the TIFF guide and *Now* magazine complemented the cinematography.”

**Q: Do you prefer to shoot narrative drama or documentaries?**

**Hagey:** “I get a lot of pleasure from working in both documentaries and narrative. I came up from the lighting department and I truly love expressing my creativity with light. Even though it’s only one of the many different elements of design, it’s an incredibly powerful one. I also love exploring and testing different ideas during prep and feeding off the director’s ideas. It’s also a rush to see great actors bring the script to life and make the characters real. This can inspire you to come up with a new way to light a scene or place a camera.

“Documentaries offer very different challenges. Shooting hand-held verité is very intense and can be very creative. You need to stay in the moment and follow what’s happening around you, but also try to come up with creative shots and give the editor everything necessary to cut the scene together. The small crew size is a nice contrast to narrative and gives greater

freedom to work quickly and adapt to change rapidly.

“Documentaries have forced me to really look at available light and how it illuminates a person or set. It has changed my lighting style in narrative drama from being a bit stylized to trying to be more natural. I am very interested now in keeping my lighting true to the setting, scene and characters of the film and not just try to make the shot look sexy or cool for its own sake.

“Beautiful naturalism is what I’m interested in now. Of course each project has its own needs. I just had a lot of fun shooting a black-and-white short in August (*Crazy Loven*, directed by Veronika Belianina) that demanded highly stylized lighting to create the surreal world of a man with multiple personality disorder.”

**Q: Do you prefer to shoot shorts or features?**

**Hagey:** “Shorts are a great way to try out ideas and work with different directors, but features are much more satisfying creatively. With a feature you have a large enough canvas to work with to try out mature and deep-

er ideas with your work. A feature is like shooting 10 short films back to back.”

**Q: Do you prefer to work in film or video?**

**Hagey:** “I love working in film, but it’s becoming quite rare in the indie world. I first started shooting HD in the winter of 2000 on a short film called *The Test*. *Rub & Tug* was the first Canadian feature released in theatres that was shot with the Sony F900 – the workhorse of HD cameras. I’m glad that HD is finally taking off because for a few years a lot of shorts, features and docs were being shot on mini-DV, which is a very feeble way to acquire images – though I do have a soft spot for the DVX100B. It’s not uncommon for me to work with directors who have never shot film. In some ways it’s a disadvantage not to have the experience of the discipline of film, but small video cameras can give you the freedom to create shots that would normally be limited by a film camera’s size, weight and cost. Ultimately though I always look forward to working with film because nothing beats the quality of a 35mm image.” •

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