

TAKING THE PLUNGE—PART IV

Where Do I Find A Naked Lady?

By Robert Gregory-Browne brownne@screentalk.biz

So, tell me. Where *do* I find a naked lady? Because I really need one. I've tried simply rolling over in bed, but I guess I've been married far too long to be so lucky. Besides, no offense to my wife—she's a lovely woman indeed—but she's not quite what I had in mind.

I know. You're probably wondering what the hell you've just stumbled into. Is this a column about screenwriting or the musings of a middle-aged man hopelessly stranded in adolescence? Well, both, actually, but this time around we will once again be talking about my favorite subject: digital moviemaking.

So where does the naked lady come in? Well, uh . . . Act One, Scene One, to be precise.

LET ME EXPLAIN

I started this series of columns on the digital evolution with every intention of developing, producing and directing my own digital project. I came up with several ideas, punched up an old script that had never gone anywhere, but when it came time to move forward, I got cold feet. Wouldn't it be better, I thought, to avoid taking such a giant leap? Maybe I should start with a short movie that would allow me to cut my teeth as a director.

And so, *Otome Satsu: Murder Girl*, was born.

EXTRA PULP, PLEASE

I've spent a considerable amount of time watching what is commonly known in geek world as Asian Pulp Cinema. These movies are full of lurid scenes of violence and sex and nudity and are largely made by the Japanese, who have arguably the most twisted minds on the planet. Five minutes with Asian Pulp Cinema and you'll either be running in horror or find

yourself glued to the screen like someone watching a slow-motion replay of a public decapitation.

The stories are mostly silly—spies and assassins and whatnot—and naked breasts and butts take a back seat only to guns and knives and blood. *Otome Satsu* was designed to be a shorter, slightly tamer version of the genre, involving the trials and tribulations of a beautiful young Asian assassin who may or may not be human.

Since my mind is never out of “commercial” mode, I was thinking that if I could manage to produce a piece of work with a fair amount of quality—technically, at least—I might actually be able to market the thing as the first of a series of shorts involving the *Otome Satsu* character.

But marketing short movies is tricky at best. The solution?

HOT SPRINGS HOTEL

Besides watching Asian Pulp Cinema, I also spend a lot of time cruising through the satellite channels very late at night looking for something decent to watch. One night I stumbled across a softcore T & A show called something like *Hot Springs Hotel*—a half-hour “tit”com about the misadventures of a bunch of randy female hotel owners.

Since I doubt I'll ever be working for the people who produce the show, I think I can safely say this: *Hot Springs* is far from decent. In fact, it stinks. Its sole function seems to be to parade a bunch of silicone implanted females before the zombies who are too stupid to go to bed, and in that respect it's a roaring success. Otherwise it's poorly written, poorly directed, poorly acted, and the only artist at work is a highly paid plastic surgeon. But since I'm always in commercial mode, my mind clicked as I watched: what if I marketed


Otome Satsu to late-night cable? Hmmmmmm.

When it came to writing the show, however, I found it impossible to write “trash.” As a result, I actually wrote a script I'm pretty proud of. Not a masterpiece, mind you, but as an excuse to show a beautiful naked women in some of her most intimate moments, it's pretty damn good. Certainly light years better than *Hot Springs Hotel*.

Once I wrote the script, I broke it down, storyboarded and prepared a detailed shot list. As I did this, I sent out a casting call and got back a large number of responses. There was, however, a small problem. None of them could play the lead.

Why? First off, as you may have guessed, *Otome Satsu* is Asian. That in itself poses a small problem, because there don't seem to be a whole lot of beautiful Asian actresses out there who are willing to work for next to nothing. Worse yet, the part, as written, requires this same beautiful Asian actress to appear completely and unabashedly nude through at least a quarter of the show.

Casting that lead role has proven to be one of the most difficult tasks I've ever encountered and, as a result, the project has temporarily stalled.



▶ Robert Gregory-Browne is a Nicholl-award winning screenwriter who has worked with Showtime, Nu Image, Tri-Coast, Krost-Chapin Productions, Fox, and Silver Pictures. He was a story editor/staff writer on the Fox show, “Diabolik,” and has written several episodes of “Spider-Man Unlimited.” A WGA member and mentor, Rob is currently in pre-production on his debut digital project, *Otome Satsu: Murder Girl*, to be followed by the digital features, *Number Five* and *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*.

Rob is the writer/producer/director of the audio drama, *Hollywood Homicide*, the author of *How To Format Your Screenplay Like A Pro*, and is busy finishing up his first novel, *A Measure Of Darkness*. Every once in awhile he even manages a few hours sleep.

You can find Rob on the web at <www.successfulscreenplays.com>.

If I had more money, I might have more luck, but so far nobody's offering to finance this masterpiece. I'm not ready to abandon it quite yet, but thanks to that casting problem—and my commitment to a number of other projects—my digital moviemaking debut will have to wait. If anyone happens to know of a gorgeous and completely uninhibited Asian actress who's willing to work for union low budget scale, drop me an e-mail....

OH, SHUT UP, YOU WHINER

Believe it or not, there is a point to this story. Well over a year has passed since I started telling all of you to join me in taking the plunge into digital moviemaking and I have yet to follow through on my own advice. I feel humiliated and ashamed—although not quite as humiliat-

ed and ashamed as, say, Pee-Wee Herman and that guy from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. But my humiliation is compounded whenever I go to the website of Dastoli Digital <www.dastolidigital.cjb.net>—which is the *real* subject of this column, the one this long-winded monologue has been building toward.

THE AMAZING DASTOLI BROTHERS

In the time it took me to write my measly little half-hour script, do the break-downs and fumble around hopelessly for a willing and able naked Asian lady, James and Robert Dastoli have made at least—count 'em—eleven short movies.

These aren't just little home movies, mind you. These are stories of spies and action heroes and hustlers and deadly

damsels. Stories full of gunplay and laser duels and helicopter escapes and soaring spaceships on distant planets. And all of it is highly realistic, well directed and beautifully edited, topped off by amazing special effects.

And, get this: the Dastoli brothers are in their *senior year of high school*.

Here I am whining about not being able to cast my silly digital short and the Dastoli brothers are literally kicking my ass. They don't whine and complain and offer us bullshit about casting problems. They simply go out a shoot their movies and do a damn fine job of it.

Several of their movies have won or placed at regional film festivals and, according to their website, a feature packed DVD of their short, *Under The Gun*, is forthcoming.

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THE DIGITAL DIVER'S TOOLBOX

One way to avoid casting problems like mine is to consider the idea of turning to animation. If you're a cartoonist at heart, you'll immediately warm up to *Toon Boom Studio*. Brought to you by the same folks who created *USAnimation*, a high-end 2D application, *Toon Boom* is a treasure trove of useful tools that will free you from the rigid creative constraints of *Flash* and other SWF generating applications. Even better, *Flash MX* users have the luxury of being able to import *Toon Boom* files, giving them the best of both worlds.



There are three functions that make *Toon Boom* a real standout for animators: (1) Exposure Sheets; (2) Lip-Synching Tools; and, especially, (3) 3D Scene Planning.

The Exposure Sheet allows you to completely manage each and every element of your scenes, which is particularly helpful when trying to organize a complex animation.

The Lip-Synching tool takes what can be a tedious chore in *Flash* and turn it into an effortless task. *Toon Boom* analyzes your sound files, creates a phonetic lip chart you can follow to match your character's dialogue and free yourself of hours of frustration.

3D Scene Planning takes your two-dimensional objects and puts them in a kind of pseudo 3D world, allowing you to shift various elements of your scene around in that 3D space and create complicated camera moves, giving your work a decidedly high-end animation look.

Using the handy drawing tools, you can draw your characters and scenery directly into *Toon Boom* using a mouse (if you're crazy) or a Wacom tablet (if you're smart). I found the "ink" lines to be extremely expressive, giving my drawings a much more professional look. Coloring and animating your drawings is, of course, a snap.

If you'd rather work on paper, you can scan and import bitmaps, then put them through *Toon Boom's* vectorizing process. And when your animation is finished, it can easily be exported to QuickTime, allowing you the further freedom of editing your work with your favorite NLE.

I have to admit I was initially intimidated by *Toon Boom*. But the combination of the help files, a few on and off-line tutorials and a little concentration had me up and running in no time, creating a level of animation I would have thought impossible to create with such ease a few years ago.

My only criticism is that using this application is just too darn fun. And at under \$350, it's a bargain.

IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS POWERPOINT

James and Robert Dastoli started their creative odyssey working in computer graphics when they were still in middle school. A class project gave them their first taste of video, then a while later they created a PowerPoint presentation with animations that told a story. When they were freshmen in high school, they made their first video movie, a *James Bond*-like spy film—and this was *before* the digital revolution.

They next embarked on a *Star Wars* fan film. (There is, in fact, an entire website dedicated to such films—made by George Lucas fans the world over—some of which rival the originals.) Working on this film introduced Robert and James to the wonderful world of digital editing and special effects and they haven't looked back since.

As they finish one project, they're already conceptualizing the next and, true to Hollywood, they rarely start shooting with a completed script. Once a day's shooting is done, they immediately capture the footage into their computer and start compositing and editing, working both production and post simultaneously. It sounds a bit hectic to me, but you can't argue with the results.

Their considerable skills were acquired by practice, discipline and the help of a few online tutorials. They work with 3D graphic programs (3D Studio Max), compositing programs (After Effects), and edit using Media Studio Pro—not one of my favorite editing apps, but they make it work. (Hey, Sonic Foundry, if you're reading this, do these poor guys a favor and send them a copy of Vegas 4, the very *best* editing app currently available).

The typical budget for one of their movies is, and I quote, "Zero"—if you don't include occasional parking fees. They've already collected a fair amount of equipment and tend to work with sets and locations that are readily available. The actors, of course, are the Dastoli brothers themselves, as well as a regular cast of family and friends. Some of the acting is good, some of it not so good, but they get by with what they have and do a fine job of it.

Watching their movies, I've also come to the conclusion that if you want to attract beautiful girls in high school, all you have to do is offer them a part in your movie. Not that this is even remotely what the Dastoli brothers had in mind, but what

better way to get to know a campus head-turner than to write her into a kissing scene... (I told you I was hopelessly stranded in adolescence.)

Speaking of writing, this is the one area where the brothers fall a bit short. Their stories tend to lean toward cliché. They've readily admitted that their scripts are oftentimes no more than a "scrap of paper with scribbles all over it." I can only hope that when they head off to film school in Florida this fall, they will begin to pay more attention to the script. Not that they have that far to go. Some of their dialogue is very good indeed.

Their work is clearly influenced by films of the 30's, 40's and 50's. Some of their favorites are *The Maltese Falcon*, *Casablanca*, *Double Indemnity* and *The Asphalt Jungle*, movies they discovered only after they became filmmakers. Wisely, they have done what every student of screenwriting or filmmaking should do—bone up on the history of the craft. The love of that history can be seen in Dastoli Digital productions like, *The Up And Up* and *Nice Night For A Murder*. Their obvious love of caper/action movies shines through in *Under The Gun*. And, of course, the handprints of George Lucas are all over their latest *Star Wars* fan film, *The Vorsyd Gambit*, which was shot entirely against blue screen, with 3D backgrounds composited in during post-production. Check out the trailer. You'll be amazed.

WORDS OF WISDOM

When asked what advice they'd give to a screenwriter looking to take the plunge into digital moviemaking, the Dastoli brothers told me, "Never limit yourself. Think on a grand scale. If you want to make a story that takes place in the past in another country, do it." It's their experience that, "A lot of students seem to only make stories about high schoolers and their high school problems, but it's much better to try to put a real story on the screen."

In other words, the Dastoli brothers are making movies they love, and refuse to be limited by false constraints. There is no doubt in my mind that they will one day be working regularly in Hollywood and that we'll all be begging them for jobs. Unless, of course, we get smart and follow their lead. They've certainly inspired this old fart to finally get off his butt and dive in.

Why don't you join me? Clothing optional. ■