



ZAMMY SENSIBILITIES AN INTERVIEW WITH ALEX ZAMM

ALEX ZAMM? THE NAME GIVES you a hint. Could there be some kind of *Batman and Robin* connection? 'Kapow', 'Boom'. Yes ... there was a 'Zamm' in there somewhere. Is Zamm his real name? It turns out it is and as a kid, Alex loved seeing his name flashing on the screen—maybe a childhood incentive to see it up there one day for real.

PRU DONOVAN



Alex Zamm is the director of the latest fantastic comedy direct to DVD/video feature *Inspector Gadget 2* (IG2), which was made by Disney in Brisbane and is due for worldwide release 11 March, 2003, starring French Stewart¹ as the inimitable Gadget.²

Like his name, Zamm brings a level of energy, dedication and love to his writing and directing that is truly exhilarating. He reminds you a little of the RoadRunner. When he's moving he's almost invisible, and when he stops, he talks very fast and just long enough to ensure you have the information you need before he's off again to re-write a scene, or rush to a mix or start a new script in the ad break, and this after two years of complete dedication and immersion in the incredibly complicated visual effects movie IG2.

Unlike directors such as Peter Weir who take a year or so off between directing movies, Alex Zamm shows no sign

he will ever sit down. In fact it seemed uncomfortable for him to be still for this interview but like everything he does, Alex has a commitment, clarity and care that personifies the idea of inspiring leadership together with the rare combination of skills and talent that makes for a great comedy director. And it all started with his impassioned search for what makes comedy and stories work.

I was always one of those kids who was writing as many short stories as I could. I also studied painting for years and years—and adored Mad magazine when I was growing up, which was my humour training. When I was in college I started doing gag cartoons—which are single panel cartoons like Gary Larson used to do or Charles Addams³ You have one panel to set up a whole joke and you do it purely with visuals or you do it with a combination of words and pictures. Sometimes the words set up the visuals, othertimes, the visuals set up the words and it's very good training for

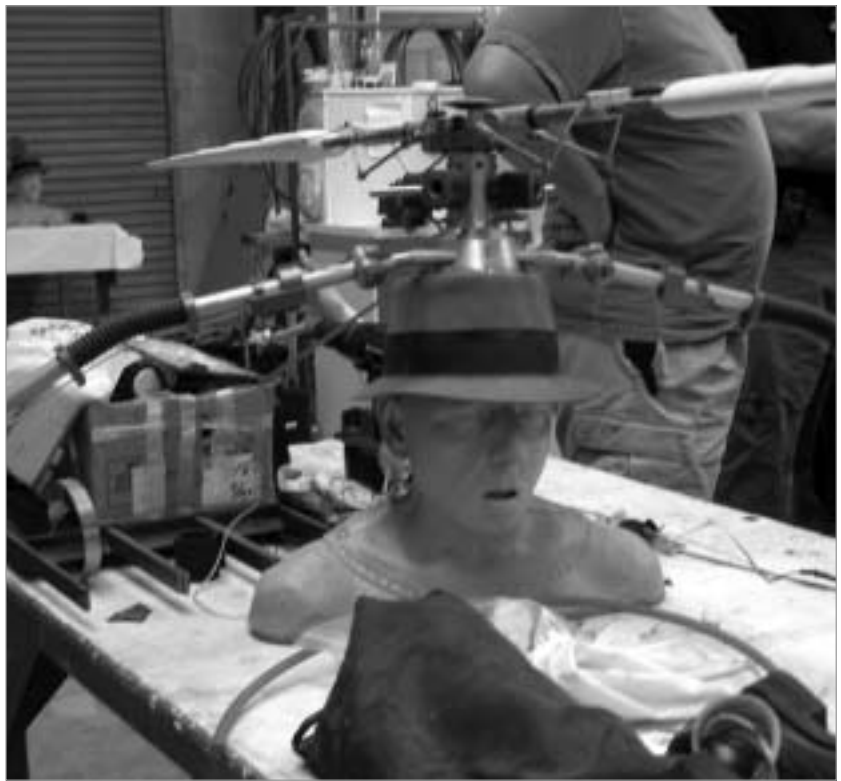


writing visual humour. You ask yourself what's funny, what's the minimal amount of words and images, what's the clearest composition, and what's the best character type that helps set up the gag.

At the same time as doing cartoons, I used to work in radio doing interviews for a radio producer in New York for a show called 'All things Considered' on National Public Radio. I loved talking to people. I would walk around with my Nagra interviewing people and then I started asking how to cut it together, so I learned how to use the razor blade and cut reel to reel tape and then I started doing my own pieces and after a year or two I became a co-producer with Jay Allison,⁴ which was great training in telling stories with sound only.

While at college, Alex also founded a humour magazine, MOO. Although he didn't plan on it, his interests in painting, cartooning, storytelling and comedy seemed destined to lead him to combine them and direct film. As Alex talks it's like watching an unsprung spring—has anyone seen a Coyote around here?

When friends of mine started making movies in my last undergraduate year I thought—my god this is fantastic, it's choreography, it's science, it's photography, it's theatre, it's art, it's animation—everything I'd always loved was combined in this one art form and as soon as I got that bug it never left and I wanted to learn everything about it so I started studying when I was in college. I was obsessed with studying Japanese and Russian and silent—everything I could absorb—I was like a sponge—and my film department at State University of New York, Binghamton was all avant-garde. If your films were in focus or the



sprockets weren't misaligned you were a pariah—so I was the black sheep of the family because I was interested in telling jokes and telling stories.

One of the first films I made there was called Croutons and You. It was a parody of 1950s public service announcements. I was interested in doing collage

work—taking found footage and mixing it with film that you've shot—and I was also doing early attempts at effects work. I'd take still images, cut out things and paste them on and light them properly to match the live action elements. I tried everything I could to find ways to put unreality into reality. It was great training and in retrospect I was very grateful that it was such an avant-garde department because it was shielded from the whole commercial aspect of film-making. You were taught and encouraged to make as personal a story as possible and even now as I'm doing much more commercial pieces, or what is perceived as commercial, I'm always looking for what's personal about them.

After undergraduate school I wanted to continue studying storytelling. I found that Columbia University had an amazing film programme and they attracted a lot of great writers and directors where other schools were more gear-centric. I loved learning the technology, but I was interested in things that were more eternal than this year's model of camera or lens. I thought it was more important to know storytelling, so I went to Columbia. Milos Forman⁵ was head of the department. I studied with him for 2 years and with Martin Scorsese who was teaching for a semester. It was a great programme that attracted amazing film-makers from all over the world. I wanted to take every course and was



able to spend half the time directing and half the time writing

Studying at Columbia was a truly exciting time for Alex. He started in a three year programme and stayed for five, working as a P.A. to earn money to make his short films. The lessons he learned are still with him today.

Milos taught me a great lesson. He wasn't interested in technology. He was interested in performance. He would watch the rehearsals and he would say 'I understand, but I don't believe,' and he would be chewing on his cigar. And as simple as that was, it was a huge lesson that sometimes you understand something at the cerebral level but you don't believe it, which means you don't feel it, so I'm always looking for that. You're constantly examining—whether it's the visual effects or performance—always trying to be sensitive to your gut reaction.

With Scorcese there were so many lessons, not just about getting performances but also how he weaves the threads of music, dialogue and sound effects—he was like a conductor—he talked about weaving the three elements together and the tendency to make things dialogue-centric—how he sometimes pulls the dialogue way down and you're just hearing the music or he would amplify a sound effect. The way you can use a zoom lens to magnify an image, you can magnify sound to draw you into abstraction and create an environment and a mood. He's a real master at that.

My best advice to up and coming filmmakers is to get egg on your face. Make mistakes. Don't play it safe. That's how you learn—how you find out why things



work or don't work. And now with video you can do it with minimal financial risk.

One of the first exercises I did at college was really exciting, but the way I presented the visual information wasn't clear. My directing teacher would constantly say that the information has to build on itself so the audience moves with it visually, emotionally and intellectually. We used to do this exercise of storyboarding 'Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water'—and you realize is it from Jack's perspective, from Jill's perspective—and you are asking, 'What are they doing? Did Jill kill Jack? Was it a bolt of lightning? Why does he fall down the hill?' It was the greatest exercise because it forced you to think visually and be clear about your visual messages. That was one of the best ones.

The extra years at Uni seemed to pay dividends as Alex created award winning scripts which drew the attention of a Hollywood studio, and gave him the enviable opportunity of an authentic *Barton Fink* (Joel & Ethan Coen, 1991) experience.

*I came out of film school and was lucky enough to start working right away. I got hired by Warner Brothers to adapt *The Green Lantern*. It was my first studio experience. I knew nothing. I had written*

*one script in my whole life other than lots of shorts and was paid to learn my craft. I'm sure if I read that script again I'd want to tear it apart from page one and start again. It was also interesting to realize the whims of the studio system. *The Green Lantern* is a classic D.C. comic book, about a test pilot who becomes a super-hero when he is given a special ring that emits a green ray that can take on any shape and manipulate reality, i.e. so a green boxing glove comes out that can punch something or do anything you want to do. It's an amazing story and I researched 45 years of the comic book. I was so excited and was going to be true to the comic book but the studio wanted the character to be an artist, so I made him a courtroom illustrator and I wrote a whole script based on that. They said 'Nah.' After months, they said, 'Now we want him to be a pizza delivery guy.' Ultimately it was a great learning exercise—it made me a better writer—it made me more politically savvy about the process. I was very grateful for the experience.*

Columbia University was also where Alex met William Robertson—his co-writer on *Inspector Gadget 2* and *My Date with the President's Daughter* (Alex Zamm, 1994). The achievement of *President's Daughter*, which was nominated for a Writer's Guild of America award proves that combined minds do create magic and that film schools would do well to continue to encourage directors who want to co-write films. Alex is a great proponent of creative collaboration.

*Billy Robertson and I have a great writing partnership. On *Gadget* I came on as a re-writer and we conceived the script with Billy. I think you want to make something as subjective as possible but you always want to maintain a degree of objectivity to make sure that you are clear visually and on a story level, so I think having a writing partner is great because we constantly challenge each other—which is true of all good collaborations. If you have a good producer, you are challenged. When you have a good director of photography, production designer, costume designer, editor—they are constantly challenging you*

to examine the story and to try to delve deeper.

I guess if it was just me alone I'd be writing novels. I never want the experience to be colour-by-number—of just, 'OK, here's the script, let's go shoot it.' It's a constantly evolving thing. A movie will take you where it wants to go. It's like when you're writing you are really letting the characters speak. For me what happens—when you first start writing the script you're writing from the outside—you're just pushing the words along trying to get from scene A to scene B and then something happens—you cross this line, it's like when you're half-awake and you suddenly go into the dream state and then you can't write fast enough because the characters are telling you what they want you to write and you're on the inside of the movie and you have to be true to it.

Alex's ability to harness that dream state has been put to good use, not only in connecting intuitively with his characters, but also in pushing the boundaries of his visual imagination. No simple fades to black around here.

As much as I'm interested in what's really there in terms of the emotional reality of scenes, I'm equally interested in what isn't there and by that I mean that I'm constantly looking to figure out how to insert some outrageous thing into reality. The Birthday Fish (Alex Zamm, 1987)⁶ is a love triangle between a man, a woman and a fish. My First Haircut (Alex Zamm, 1988)⁷ is a nightmarish visit to a barber-shop that turns into this bizarre fantasy.

I've always dealt with visual effects on some level. Even in my earlier short super 8, abstract, dreamlike films, there was always something optical or something dreamlike about them. I was always interested in surrealism and was always trying to find some incongruous image I could use. In My First Haircut which HBO paid for, I wanted the kid's eyes to bug out of his head à la the old Warner Brothers cartoon and there was no technology that existed back then to do that. I probably could have rotoscoped it but I didn't have access to that, so we made a light cast of the



boy's face, and made a wig that was just right. I had glass eyes made that looked just like his eyes—all these people were donating their services—it was a no money budget. And we put that on a homemade rail so we could have his eyes bug out over 18 frames. It took two weeks to get the 18 frames of this kid's eyes going pop, pop and back in. But to me that was great. It was so much fun learning everything.

After his first studio experience Alex continued to write for other studios, and then worked on three Disney/ABC telefilms where he developed a relationship with Peter Green and Charles Hirschhorn who later founded Fountain

Productions. When they were looking for someone to help develop and direct *Inspector Gadget 2*, they called Alex. Luckily the project suited what Alex would call his 'Zammy sensibilities'.

Gadget is like a dream come true, with outrageous special effects coming out of this guy every moment. With this guy you can do anything. It is the most challenging work I've done so far requiring the most amount of forethought and pre-planning. It's a completely interdisciplinary film. With Gadget, his wardrobe has to be just right because it may be that when he lifts up his hand it's not his real arm in one sleeve, but there's a real arm in the other. In one example scene, the fake sleeve has a hand being puppeteered by someone behind. Gadget's finger pops open, and there's a tracking marker for digital bubbles to be added in post-production, and you also have a talking car screen to worry about, so there's constantly a handing off between digital effects, mechanical effects, wardrobe effects, and even pyro effects.

Everything had to be thought out, there were a lot of in-camera things as well, so it was very complicated. That's why I'm a great believer in storyboarding and why my art and cartooning training were invaluable. We literally produced a thousand pages of storyboards. But the truth is, the movie was made in my head before it was ever committed to sto-

ryboard or film. The movie was made, for me, lying in bed late at night, in the shower, wandering around my neighbourhood, and then writing up shotlists and then working with the storyboard artist. I look at the final movie and I see the storyboards. We stuck very close to the plan and I'm really proud of that.

And very proud he should be. With close to 500 visual effects by Australian VFX houses Photon VFX and GMD, realizing IG2 was no mean feat. So take heed from an expert. If you want to make a VFX laden film, Alex's advice is relatively simple:

Plan. Imagine the movie in your head. Play it over and over and over again. Imagine every detail. Imagine everything that can go right. Imagine everything that can go wrong. Because if you don't ask for it, it's not going to be on the set. It's easier when you have a non-effects driven movie. You can say, 'You know what, I think the person's shirt should be blue—and it's not fair to the crew to spring things at the last minute—but they can find a blue shirt, or if you want it to rain they can find a rain tree but when you're dealing with effects work I think you need to plan it if it involves interactivity of live action and digital elements. I think you need to plan it out so everyone can prep exactly what they need, build only what they need, knowing full well the digital world can give you a lot of freedom too.'

There are things that evolve in the post-production that you can ask for. I did it on Gadget. We had cut out part of a scene that introduced Sigrid Thornton who plays Mayor Wilson and I felt it weakened her character introduction in the cut. In the first shot of the movie there's a billboard that welcomes people to Riverton, the town the movie takes place in, and I thought, let's just do a digital set extension to the sign and add; 'Mayor Wilson Welcomes you to Riverton'. Her picture's already on the billboard so it identifies her more clearly. That's the freedom you have in a digital world. If you have the resources, and the shot is there you can manipulate it afterwards. It's only the cost of adding that idea to the shot and that's an

enormous freedom, but I think planning is better.

Another bit of advice is to learn about visual effects. To me it was a hobby. I started reading Cinefex8 magazine years ago and I'd read as much as I could about photography as a hobby without the stress of, 'Oh, I have to do this in this movie'. Instead it was, 'OK this is what's available, these are the tools that are out there', and when the time came to use them I said 'OK, boom, boom, boom, this is what we need for this', and then I surrounded myself with a bunch of really talented experts and it made my job a lot easier because they educated me about what I didn't know. I think there are two other things that are really useful for anyone whose going to do effects work. One is to have a great partner in your effects supervisor—that's the person who's going to interface between you and all the artists and the effects house and will be the expert, and that person is your partner and you really treat them as your partner. The second one is to study everything and anything you can get your hands on. Understanding painting and photography and some degree of physics, watching how things behave in the world—why things balance and behave the way they do is really important. If you want to sell an effect and you go, 'why doesn't it look real?' you have to analyze that. You're observing reality. I think it's essential. I think that if you don't study how things are, you're not going to know why they don't look real. The human eye does billions of calculations a second so when you see an animated face someone is trying to pass off as photo-realistic and it doesn't look real, there's a reason why you can tell. I sat with my VFX supervisor Trevor Hawkins at Photon VFX and we spent hours talking about how Gadget's gadget would look real and we spent a lot of time talking about the physics of things—how things behave in the real world to make artificial things look believable.

Alex worked in Brisbane for over a year and says he had a fantastic time. And no wonder because his views on the best way to make a film match Australia's egalitarian value system.

It was a great crew on Gadget. I loved coming to work with these people every day and by the end of the movie it was a family for me. People had tears in their eyes when we had to leave and it was very sad for us all.

Peter the producer and I tried to keep that environment on set. I told French when we first started working together that I really believe the movie is the star of the movie and I can't work any other way especially with a movie on this budget and with this amount of action and visual effects. Luckily, he embraced that philosophy too, as did the producers.

Everything is in service of the story. Nothing is in service of ego. The ego is secondary to the needs of what the story wants. And I really believe that. My role as the director is like the protective parent of the movie. I have to tell the story but I have to protect the movie. There are a lot of suggestions that come in all the time and a lot of them are terrific and some of them are not and my job is to help make the best choices that will take the story from the beginning of production all the way through to the end to ensure that it's true and that's it's funny and that it works. So if you have star egos or people who think the movie's about them they're wrong—the movie's about the movie and I know it sounds very Zen-like but it makes my job a lot easier if everyone there's supporting it—then there isn't a lot of 'us and them' philosophy on the set. Everyone's doing a job that is equally important in the chain of making the movie.

And there are a couple of other things that give Alex the edge on the pack—as he seems to epitomize the words 'Carpe Diem.'

My Dad always taught me the definition of 'enough' is a little more. Anybody who has been on set with me knows that I redline every day, I try to push everything to the possible maximum. I try to squeeze as much blood from the stone every day. I try to put 10 pounds into a 5 pound bag every day because I realize that time's going to disappear, that light's going to disappear. At least I know I'm going to maximize the re-

sources of the people and put as much energy on the set as possible.

Also you know the movie is going to outlive you. The reality is, and I tell the people on set all the time, I'd rather have more pain now and less pain watching it later down the road. There's some kid in Ohio or Adelaide who doesn't care if I'm tired or how many revisions I have to do of the script. They don't care about that. All they care about is that they have a good enjoyable movie that's meaningful to them and if I can tell a story that some little kid sees and in fifteen years they go; 'Man, I loved that movie growing up' 'that movie meant something to me—it was a classic for me.' That means something to me, that you make something that has some integrity, that has some resonance in somebody's life. I guess that's really what it's about. So I'm constantly telling people on the set that everything we're doing is going to outlive us so let's give our best. So it's something we're proud to have been a part of down the road.

Thank you Alex ... We wish you all the best with ... Watch out ... he's gone.

Maybe next time we can catch him with some—'Um ... Acme director's chair glue?'

Pru Donovan is a writer/Director/Producer/post-production supervisor who recently worked with the VFX team on Disney's Inspector Gadget 2 where she learnt to speak VFX and added to her black T-shirt collection. In an earlier life, Pru series-produced the groundbreaking award-winning 12-part animation over live action series BrightSparks. Her filmography covers eleven features, seven short films, three TV series, and two doco-specials.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ French Stewart is most well known for his portrayal of Harry in the *Third Rock from the Sun* series. Other movie credits include *Stargate* (Roland Emmerich, 1994) and *Leaving Las Vegas* (Mike Figgis, 1995).
- ² Check out the really cool web site at <http://disney.go.com/disneyvideos/liveaction/inspectorgadget2/>
- ³ Charles Samuel Addams (1912-1988) or 'Chill' to his friends, was a prolific American cartoonist for

The New Yorker Magazine, amongst others. He originated the Addams Family cartoons, which later became the basis for the characters in the well-known TV series.

- ⁴ Jay Allison is a well-known American independent broadcast journalist whose work often appears on programmes such as National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, PRI's *This American Life*, and ABC News' *Nightline*.
- ⁵ Milos Forman, who won Oscars for directing films such as *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and *Amadeus* (1984), has held the post of Professor of Film and Co-Chair of the Film Division of the School of the Arts at Columbia University since 1978.
- ⁶ Selected for Sundance Film Festival, Finalist – Nissan Focus Competition, Invited US Film Festival, and First prize – Kinetic Image Film Festival.
- ⁷ First prize at Lassen, Rochester Film Festivals. 3rd place – Art's and Entertainment's short stories Film Festival.
- ⁸ Cinefex is a visual effects magazine available on the net.



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