

Rae McGrath

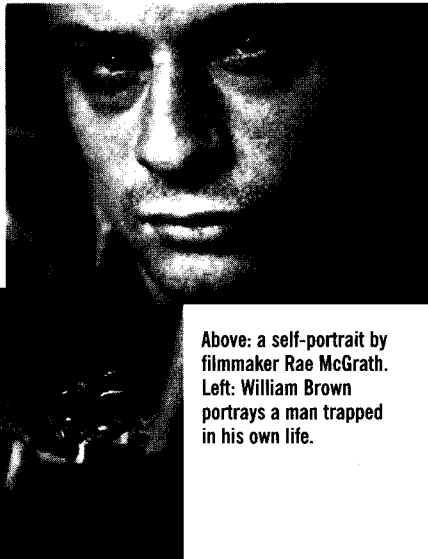
NYC artist prizes everyday settings

BY ARI KAPLAN

INSPIRED BY RISK-TAKERS AND MOTIVATED by a creative addiction, Brooklyn-born photographer-turned-filmmaker Rae McGrath uses film and video to capture the evolution of the ordinary into the extraordinary. McGrath's star is on the rise after successfully premiering, *Lefty-Right*, his widely acclaimed new short feature at both Slamdance in Utah and at Clermont-Ferrand in France. Set for Belo-horizonte Short film Festival of Brazil in June and then European distribution later this year, *Lefty-Right* was produced by Blue Collar Pictures, the production company McGrath formed in 1998.

The short film is based on the eccentric personality of the main character actor, William Brown, and McGrath has depicted the human drive to challenge its very existence through the story of a man trapped by the world he so desperately wants to escape. Brown plays Mel Cobb, who, after hearing a report that left-handed people die earlier than right-handers, decides that becoming left-handed is his best option for shortening his life span. Set in New York City, the film follows Mel's journey along the road between hope and despair and uses black and white film to reflect this contrast. McGrath's video to 16mm film transfer process created a "surveillance camera-like" feel for the piece. "We, as the audience, are voyeurs peering in on a lonely man trapped in a vicious cycle of monotonous daily activities. I wanted the look of the piece to give you that impression before a single word is spoken," comments the director.

As impressions go, anyone viewing the film is immediately struck by its post-apocalyptic tone that poignantly captures the mood of the city in the weeks following September 11th. Though shot months before the tragedy, it features images of its



Above: a self-portrait by filmmaker Rae McGrath. Left: William Brown portrays a man trapped in his own life.

characters alone on the subway, downtown and on the Manhattan Bridge in complete isolation. The World Trade Center towers even loom over an eerie backdrop for some of the scenes as a terrible reminder.

The visual impact of the piece is a result of what McGrath describes as his documentary style approach. "I usually have the camera, some lights, a sound guy and the actors. Working with a small crew creates a false sense of reality which I use to my advantage," he remarks. Actor Daniel Weiss commented, "the film had a renegade filmmaking style to it, almost like street performing. That's kind of fun for an actor because it leaves you without a net." Brown echoed Weiss' thoughts noting, "Rae sees a script as more of a blueprint for trying out all sorts of different things."

The freedom of creation that he offers to those with whom he works is a virtue that he first taught to himself very early on. McGrath started drawing at 4 and by 12, he was a pop and graffiti artist. But, it was not until he turned 16, when his mom bought him his first camera that he realized the beauty of everyday people in everyday settings. "I started wandering the streets photographing life and fell in

love with the wide-angle lens," McGrath remembers. McGrath feels that "it is one thing to stand across the street and photograph someone with a long lens; it is another to get right up close and personal to find that special something that makes them, and hopefully your interpretation of them, unique."

McGrath is excited about *Lefty-Right's* success at Slamdance and Clermont-Ferrand, confessing that he thrives on festival crowd responses. He reveals, "it is rewarding to be in the audience and hear them react. It tells me that they can understand and relate to a project I have sweated over for so long." In his opinion, "what was so amazing about the Clermont-Ferrand Film Festival is that each film took you to a different village or city and showed you a day in the life of its people."

McGrath's experience in France was heightened because of his passion for language and travel. "I see the way people live in different places and want to tell their stories—sometimes symbolically. A starving family in a third world country can translate into a single mom in Brooklyn trying to make ends meet. Human struggle transcends all cultures."

A vocal proponent of fusing film with digital video, McGrath encourages other young filmmakers to "start with a good story and then get out there and shoot something." As for money, the rising director who financed *Lefty-Right* on a budget of just over \$10,000 (much of which was funded by credit cards) recommends creativity. For *Lefty-Right*, he built kino-flo style lights using hardware store fluorescent bulbs and fume cor and designed a dolly track from sliding door rails.

McGrath notes "my main goal is to keep learning and challenging myself in every way possible. As an artist, you never want to reach the finish line because that would mean the bulb is broken and you're out of ideas." two feature-length screenplays he is trying to turn into reel credits, McGrath's journey has just begun.

Visit www.bluecollarpictures.com to learn more about the film.

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