

# monito

## NEW YORK INDEPENDENT FILM

# the long and the short of it

BY ARI KAPLAN

Inspired by his roots, Brooklyn-born Rae McGrath has become an artful master of urban dramedy. With his triumphant return to the Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival this month and the French premiere of his 25-minute short, *A WOL*, the director has once again proven that he is one of today's rising stars of independent film.

Characters plagued by isolation against a post-apocalyptic backdrop have become his hallmark. He consistently reflects on those souls lost in existential struggle with themselves. His renegade style and prescient timing earned him worldwide critical acclaim in 2002 for his digitally shot 50-minute short feature, *LEFTY-RIGHT*. The film provides an extraordinary glimpse into the eccentric mind of a man desperately trying to walk along the narrow road between hope and despair. That man, Mel Cobb, 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. McGrath's intentional use of black and white film potently reflects the film's extraordinary contrast and the 16mm transfer process create a voyeuristic surveillance-camera feel that captivated audiences worldwide. The powerful story and skillful direction earned *LEFTY-RIGHT* a place in the features competition at the 2002 Slamdance Film Festival, as well as at the 2002 Belo Horizonte Short Film Festival in Brazil and a special program in the 2002 Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival.

This time McGrath shot *A WOL*, the story of a gambler consumed by desperation, in 35mm color. In an effort to outwit a cunning bookie, Benny, portrayed in an extraordinary performance by Daniel Weiss, disappears and sets off on an arduous journey into a wall and in search of some peace. Ultimately, his efforts fail to convince his pursuers and the dumb luck of a bumbling hitman causes Benny's fortunes to wane. In a game of cat and mouse, Benny and his shadowy hunter, Goose, a lumbering but ferocious character who thrives on torture, live parallel lives on different planes—Benny in the wall and Goose above it. *A WOL* provides a compelling look inside the mind of a predator and his prey, revealing that both are afraid of the same thing and ulti-

mately share a common fate.

The film provokes a response from the audience by taking what seems familiar and stripping it beyond recognition. And, provoke a response it did—the main screening of *A WOL* at Clermont Ferrand in the Cocteau Theater, which seats approximately 1400, was completely sold out. "The audience reaction was great and the comedic parts of the film were well received," McGrath commented. That's right—comedic parts.

Rae McGrath is an authority on irony. If a character is fearless, McGrath gives him a unique phobia. If he is vicious, McGrath forces the audience to feel sorry for him. At one point in the film, while simultaneously threatening him, Butch, a loan shark whose voice (that of Ken Seftanni) looms ominously throughout the film but is never seen, tells Goose, aptly played by Christopher McHale, to take a shower the next time he comes to see him. The viewers laughed, but felt conflicted. "I wanted to keep the audience on their toes the whole time, thinking 'should I smile or cower in fear?'" McGrath says with a smile.

On a shoestring budget of \$10,000, McGrath managed to transform his own apartment into a 1970s style set in which every item was carefully chosen for its color and designed to contrast with the barren filth of Benny's four-cornered prison. The toughest challenge though was engaging the audience members without ever having the lead actors speak to one another. Like irony, McGrath incorporates contrast into every frame. The bright scenes of the apartment were repeatedly juxtaposed against the darkness of the hideout. This contrast was reflected in the appearance of the main characters.

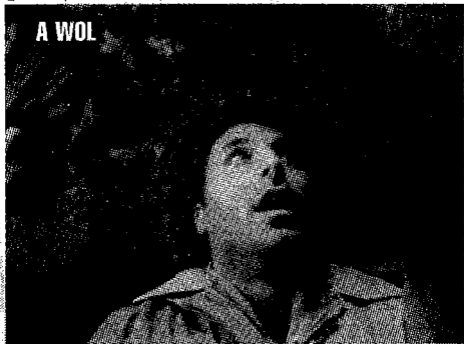
Casting Directors Brette Goldstein and Andrea Shane recalled that McGrath prepared for selection of the roles by visualizing



Working with his editor, Nina Chaudry, they developed a controlled system of jump cuts to accelerate the pace and to reflect the constantly shifting thought patterns of the characters.

It was the job of DP Jason Harvey to visually connect these accelerated scenes. "Jason treats the photography of a film like a dissection," McGrath states. At one point, Harvey decided to light an entire scene with a single cigarette lighter; the dim orange glow managed to reveal just enough of the set to spark the imagination.

Loyal to technique and preparation, it is the art of the process that fuels McGrath's passion. That process took Weiss and McGrath to New York's Off Track Betting parlors for days of betting and observing



gamblers in an effort to understand their addiction. McGrath has learned that if he has the perspective, he can experiment with it.

McGrath distinctively crafts his work to showcase the fates of the forgotten so that one cannot help but identify with them and recognize his own flaws. "His view of the world is so unique that the set is always electric with possibilities; risk is always in the air," says Weiss. Apparently those risks are paying off. With two feature-length screenplays waiting to be made, Rae McGrath is not going **A WOL** anytime soon. *Ari Kaplan is an attorney and a freelance writer in New York City. He can be reached at [ari@arikaplan.net](mailto:ari@arikaplan.net).*