

Interview with Michael Dominic

Native New Yorker Michael Dominic came to make *Sunshine Hotel*, his 96 minute profile of the residents of a Bowery flophouse, by a roundabout route. As a film student at the School of Visual Arts, he made a 40-minute film, *Soup & the Dead* (1993). The film caught the eye of producers at London-based Spidercom Films, who recruited him to make music videos. Four years and many music videos later, he returned to New York to try other genres. With a brand new digital camcorder, he began to pursue a friendship with several Bowery residents. Over a period of 18 months, he chronicled the lives of the resigned and often exasperated Nathan, who runs the hotel; Vic, his assistant, who mixes hardwon wisdom about alcohol with his philosophical questions; Ray, a recovering drug addict who holds even his boss to account; Bruce, who plays errand boy, sips endless beers and keeps his dark side mostly in the dark; Kasmir, a drag queen who spends every last penny on plastic surgery, cosmetics and clothes; and "L.A.," a Vietnam Vet who has dreams of getting it all together. The film offers no social recipes or cures, and it does not ask spectators to judge or commiserate. It invites viewers to meet characters who become hard to forget.

Dominic was just emerging from an intensive editing process that took a half-hour off the film when the World Trade Center collapsed. Within minutes, he was on site and stayed for eight days as a volunteer.

He talked with Center Director Pat Aufderheide for the IFP shortly afterward, and just before he went to pick up a 16mm print of his film, to ship to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for Academy Awards eligibility.

How did you become interested in the subject of the film?

I was a waiter about ten years ago, on the Bowery, in a place called Phoebe's. Some of the busboys were from the hotels, the flophouses. I always found them interesting and didn't understand what a flophouse was. Then in 1998 I heard a radio program on NPR, about the flophouses. So I was very interested, and went down to *Sunshine Hotel* and started talking with Nathan. We became friends and I started shooting a few months later.

Did you have trouble establishing trust with these men?

When I originally went down, most people were pretty standoffish. Nathan likes to talk, but at first he didn't want me to do a documentary. The more I spoke to him the more he opened up. We became friends; I'm still friends with him. I got everybody's trust through Nathan. I'm also still friends with Ray. They come over to watch boxing with me on occasion. Now Nate has lung and stomach cancer, and the prognosis isn't good.

You reveal the characters slowly, and some of the news is quite a shock. How did you decide to structure the film?

I structured the revelations the way they came to me. With Nathan I knew him for a couple of months before he laid on me that the television channels were talking to him. I had wondered

why he was down here. I didn't expect that. I tried in the film to structure it with the same element of surprise that it hit me. When Bruce gets involved in his story, which exposes so much violence, you can see at times that the camera's backing away. We were sitting talking with him pretty much all day, and he kept saying, "I'll tell you this story, but I have to get prepared, and you can't mention the state it happened in, because I'm wanted." He told that story for about 12 minutes, which is cut down to about six in the film. And it really took us by surprise. But I think you also realize before that he's got a violent anger within him, when he's in his room and he pulls out the knife he keeps for self-defense.

How did you get the resources to make the film?

I made the film on a couple of pairs of shoestrings, with my own money, and some borrowed from friends and family as well.

What equipment did you use?

I used a Sony DSR-200A, a DV-cam. I come from a film, not a video background. So I had never used a video camera for more than recreational use. It's far easier. I would still rather shoot film, because it's more beautiful. But now with the high quality of video, if you can afford to transfer the film, it can be very little difference. I learned not to use auto-focus, to set the aperture myself, although it's not always possible. And always to set my own sound level, and use an external mixer. I used a letterbox format, because it's more filmic to me. Even though it's documentary, when I could really control my shots I wanted them to be aesthetically pleasing. The shots of the hallway, and the buildings outside—I wanted them to have a nice filmic quality throughout the movie.

Why did you decide to make a documentary?

I didn't know how to make a documentary when I started. I'd just done narrative and music videos. I really wanted to do it, so I bought Michael Rabiger's book and just dove in. I interviewed these guys, and others who didn't make it into the film, over and over again. I just let them talk, and I never knew what I was going to get. I shot for five or six months. I put it on the shelf for about six months, and went back to work at doing graphic design, to raise some more money. And then I took off another six or seven months and edited. I used Mac's G3 Blue and White and FinalCut Pro. So I was able to do all the editing at home. I thought it was great not to have to spend a fortune. Now, for \$6,000 or less you can have a complete editing system for digital video. And of course you never have to stop working on your project.

You never finish a film, you abandon it. That's what I did when I had the two hour version, but I can see it's too long. I was glad to go back to it and cut it down. I'm glad I had access, so all I had to do was start up the hard drive and continue. All I had to do was reimport the sound mix.

The sound track is spare. What choices did you make for the music? The jazz music is by a friend of mine, Martin Krusche, who has a new album, Martin Krusche and Friendship Pagoda. The only other music is "Claire de Lune" at the very beginning. I wanted the sound to be representative of the *Sunshine Hotel*. That jazz sound pretty much is the ambience of the Hotel.

When you walk down the halls that's the music you hear from every direction. And then one day I actually heard "Claire de Lune," which made me happy because I had wanted to use it but I didn't want anything in the film that didn't belong to the life there. I think in a documentary every aspect should represent the topic.

You minimize your own character in the film; occasionally people refer to you, but you don't narrate or describe your connection to the characters.

I didn't want to narrate it myself, and I didn't want to make myself a character in the story, although I have liked films that feature the filmmaker. The fact was that I wasn't on the Bowery. I have a cushy apartment I can go home to. Instead of hiring an external narrator—and I didn't want it to be narration heavy anyway—I decided I would have Nathan narrate the film and introduce the characters to the audience as he had to me. Most of the narration is taken from things he said. I wrote it, and then he looked at it and changed things. The historical part I wrote and he added bits to it. He has a writing credit in the film.

Was there something in the documentary filmmaking process that surprised you?

I think the editing took me by surprise. It was a daunting task. This is trying to tell a story from real life, with about sixty hours of material, and just the challenge of cutting a story that's about 20 minutes long down to four minutes is daunting in itself. I didn't want to edit it myself, actually, but I didn't have money to pay an editor.

You gotta kill your babies. You have to say to yourself, it's important to get rid of this. Great scenes go. Great characters go. I originally interviewed 15-20 people. It's tough to make a doc that's longer than 90 minutes, and even that is hard. Even PBS wants 53 minutes.

I want to do more documentaries now though. I liked the idea of a film having a social conscience. You're not just telling a story, you're exposing something important to people who might not necessarily get to see it. I really enjoyed meeting people I wouldn't have gotten to meet. A narrative film is a more rigid process. This is a freer way to make a film. You can go when you want, stop when you want, and you never know when the end is there. For me the end was there when I was exhausted.

What's the next step for the film and for you?

I don't have a distributor yet; I just finished the film market, and there seemed to be some interest. I sent the film to every festival I could, which is why I've been broke for the last two years. It worked, though; festivals helped build a reputation. Some festivals were very helpful, both for showcasing and for contacts: the Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema, the 50th Melbourne International Film Festival, the Doctober International Film Festival of IDA, which qualifies me for the Academy Awards, and the Durango Film Festival, a brand new festival, but they had an awesome section of documentaries and I made great connections.

The thing that brought me the most success so far, though, which I wish I had done earlier on, was to join the International Documentary Association, the Independent Feature Project, and

the Association of Independent Film and Videomakers. After I joined these organizations I got a show at Lincoln Center, I got in the Film Market, I got pitched to PBS and I got qualified for the Oscars.

What do you hope that people get out of watching Sunshine Hotel?

I think by getting to see this part of society, you realize that just because these people are not in your social or economic class, it doesn't mean that these people don't have value, that they're not important, that they don't have something to say. I really think that even with their quirks, even with their paranoias, they have poetry in what they have to say. I think that perhaps by people seeing this, maybe they'll have a better tolerance for what they might call a bum.