

The Play's the Thing:

*Brad Fraser Discusses
the Perils and Delights
of Directing*

Leaving Metropolis,

*the Screen Version
of His Hit Play*

Poor Super Man

BY Matthew Hays

That Brad Fraser holds court as one of the driving forces in contemporary Canadian theatre would be a tough point to argue with. His plays, from the massively successful *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love* to *Martin Yesterday*, have been performed virtually everywhere, in numerous translations, to critical raves and multiple awards. Fraser is less known as a film entity. His 1994 collaboration with two-time Oscar nominee Denys Arcand, *Love and Human Remains*, though an intriguing snapshot of its time, was generally regarded as a failure. Fraser, who's currently in Los Angeles working on the writing team for next season's *Queer as Folk* and gearing up for his own Pride Vision talk show, *Jawbreaker* (which will debut this fall), is also releasing his directorial debut as a filmmaker, *Leaving Metropolis*. The film, about a gay artist (David, played by Troy Ruptash) and an ostensibly straight married man (Matt, played by Vincent Corazza) who fall in love, is slated for a festival run this fall (though the Toronto International Film Festival rejected it—"those fuckers," as Fraser refers to them, with a laugh). The script is based on *Poor Super Man*, Fraser's 1994 theatrical hit that Time magazine cited as one of the "Ten Best" plays of that year. While on hiatus in Toronto from his *Queer as Folk* gig, Fraser paused to talk to *Take One* about bringing his play to the big screen.

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What led to you directing this as a movie?

When the play opened and did quite well, there were people who were interested in making it into a movie, but after my experience with *Love and Human Remains*, I thought that this is the one play I want to hang onto and try to do my way. I wanted to try and capture some of what I do in the theatre. In fact, what had originally been the plan was a fast, cheap rendition of the play on film, as it had been written.

Sort of like one of Altman's stage-to-screen experiments such as Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean?

Yes. I started to check into that and applied for some funding from various places but didn't get it. I wrote a couple of versions on spec to send around to people. Then in 1998, I was approached by someone from Reel Time Films about another project and I mentioned that I was very interested in doing a film version of *Poor Super Man*. They were very familiar with my work and said, "We'd love to be involved." So I said, "Why not produce?" and they bit. I wrote another version of the script and then it became much more filmic, so I made it less like a play and more like a movie.

What did you learn from your experience on Love and Human Remains, Denys Arcand's adaptation of your play?

I learned so many things. I was on the set for a week of that movie. Denys was very careful to explain to me what he was doing and why he was doing it and I spent a lot of time with the script supervisor and the editor. I got a really strong sense

of how a film set should run—from one of the masters. It was really a positive experience for a beginning director. To watch him work was just stunning. The negative thing I learned was that I didn't really like the pacing of the movie and I thought the handling of the dialogue was really off. I felt some of the adaptation veered too much away from the play, which was my fault. I mean, I was encouraged to do that, and I chose to do it and say nothing. So I wanted to take the great stuff I learned from working with Mr. Arcand and double it with the dissatisfaction I felt from other aspects of the film. The real learning curve came with \$1.3 million in 2001—our budget for *Leaving Metropolis*—as opposed to \$6 million for *Love and Human Remains* in 1994. That's quite a difference. But I don't ever want it to feel like I'm dissing Denys. I'm not. I think he's a fabulous director. I think it was just a combination of the wrong scriptwriter and the wrong director, as much as we got along and were very compatible. I think I was a little too in awe of him and he was a little too in awe of the material.

What was the biggest challenge in terms of this adaptation?

The toughest part was taking a very talky play and making it cinematic, while not being afraid to allow it to be talky. I felt I wanted the characters to speak. I didn't want to change a lot of the dialogue or drop a lot of the dialogue. These are bright, intelligent characters and they speak a lot. The final month I had before I went to Winnipeg [*Leaving Metropolis* was shot in Manitoba], I drew the entire film as a comic book. This wasn't a storyboard, I just wanted to draw it to see what it looked like. It gave me a really strong sense of where we were cutting



Images courtesy of Film Tonic.

and what we were doing. The art director and the director of photography and the set designer, they got a very clear idea of what I was thinking. It gave them a very good jumping off point, so when we started shooting, we'd already been through the movie and people knew where I was coming from. We had a very well-thought-out shot list before we got to the set.

Sounds a bit like Alfred Hitchcock, who meticulously storyboarded everything—before, beginning and during production.

Yes. And don't forget I'd also directed the stage play five times, so I knew who these people were.

Was casting difficult for this movie?

Casting was really hard for this film, because it has nudity and simulated sex, and a lot of it gay. Right there you lose 60 per cent of your actors. They'll go naked but they won't go gay, or they'll play gay but won't go naked. There are all these rules that people bring to the table. Anyone who had any of those, I just said no to. I didn't even want to see them read, because I was not changing this film because of someone else's inhibitions. I wanted someone who was eager to do all of those things. I think an actor's willingness to disrobe indicates a willingness to do the same thing emotionally and with his fears, and I knew that would be really important.

Were you worried about the film feeling too stagy?

I was, because in the end I didn't want it to feel like a play on film. I wanted to make it a movie more like *All About Eve* or *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* When I watch it now, despite the fact that much of it is shot in interiors, I don't get the sense that I'm watching a staged play.

Were you worried about material feeling dated?

Yes. So much of the play had to do with the AIDS crisis and how horrible things felt in 1994. Shannon's story is predicated on the fact that she has AIDS and is dying, and that's not quite happening in the same way that it was five or six years ago. Those were really big considerations. People are still dying of AIDS, though, and I made the decision that Shannon was one of those people for whom the cocktail simply wasn't working—in fact, she's one of those people for whom it's actually making things worse. And those people exist. I'm hoping that after September 11 many more people will understand what a profound sense of loss is and be able to relate to David's journey. It's a difficult journey, because he goes from very cold and hard to just beginning to open up. I'm hoping that now straight people can share what gay people were going through in the 1980s and 1990s—to a similar extent, anyway.

I've always thought AIDS in the gay community has been a warning to the straight community. Anything that goes on in the gay community is going to go out into the larger community, because ultimately we're exactly like the straight community except that we have slightly different kinds of sex. I do think there's a connection between AIDS and September 11. I've been in L.A. a lot this summer and the kind of level of paranoia and underlying insidious fear that people now feel about being American is very similar to the way gay men felt in the 1980s and 1990s. Probably no one but me would ever see that, but that's how I see it.

Do you want to keep making movies after this experience?

Oh yes. I loved it. It brought all of my talents together in one thing. I felt completely comfortable on the set, I had an amazing crew and they did everything they could to help me; there was mutual respect between me and everyone else who worked on the film. It was probably the most rewarding creative experience of my life. I want to do it again, and I'm going to do it again, even though Telefilm just turned us down for money. *Snake in Fridge* [based on another Fraser play] is going to be my next film come hell or high water. That's what I'm working on now. I've got producers here who are working on getting the money now. As usual, people will say no initially, and it'll take time. But we'll get it done.



Brad Fraser

TAKE ONE