

By Patrick Lowe

ENTER THE BEAVER

Lee Demarbre and the Debut of Can-Fu 禁

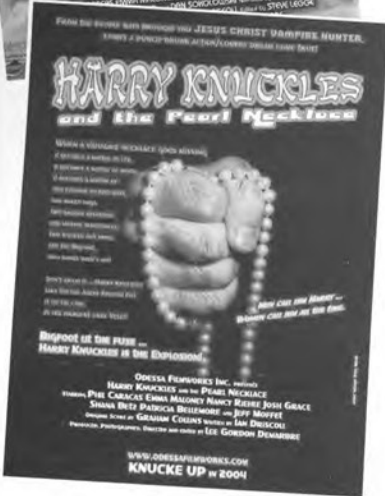


IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT of a four-door van, speeding through downtown Ottawa, Lee Demarbre is in a good mood. The large-framed, puckish filmmaker with a permanent Cheshire cat's grin, is in his element. "Tarantino said it best. Hong Kong cinema is the most visceral cinema ever," he declares, taking on a curve. "If you look at Hollywood films in the 1980s and 1990s, it's amazing how much they were

inspired by it. I can point to scenes in Stallone and Bruce Willis action films and show you exactly where they came from." Meanwhile, Ian Driscoll, his screenwriter and collaborator, sits silently in the back bemused by Demarbre, observing everything around him with a quiet but determined look. A white shadow of sorts.

Driving with the creators of the Canadian cult hit *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* (JCVH) does give the impression of being on the move. Likewise, the film, a zany "kung-fu musical" featuring none other than J.C. as a modern-day action hero, has been making a name for itself (one critic described it as "Jesus does *Buffy*"). It's also proving to be an exception of sorts: an English-Canadian feature that actually made its money back. "A producer friend of mine checked it against other films," enthuses Demarbre, "[saying] that if you look at the budget of JCVH and how much it grossed theatrically, it was really the most successful Canadian film of 2002!" Parking the van, he tends to an errand while I press Driscoll for further insights into Demarbre's psyche. "It takes a while to get to understand [Lee's] particular brand of madness," he explains. "Once you do, you discover he's actually a, you know, functional maniac. A functional member of society who's just a little bit deranged."

The accounting department at Alliance Atlantis might yet challenge Demarbre's claim of making Canada's most successful 2002 net-profit film; nevertheless, *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter* has been doing remarkably well. Made on a budget of \$45,000 and released independently through Odessa Filmworks, Demarbre's own company, our nation's first indigenous kung-fu—or "Can-Fu"—flick has been making waves at rep houses and college campuses across North America. Now enjoying a DVD distribution deal in the United States, it's also pulling in the necessary revenue for Demarbre, Driscoll, lead actor Phil Caracas and collaborator Josh Grace to finish a second feature, *Harry Knuckles and the Pearl Necklace*, due for release in October 2004. "There's a sense of joy in his films that put audiences at ease and predispose them very quickly to enjoy themselves," explains Tom McSorley, head of the Canadian Film Institute in Ottawa (and Demarbre's friend and former employer). "The cinema is



not a church for Lee Demarbre. It's a carnival."

JCVH features the Messiah (Caracas) back on Earth conducting baptisms by the Ottawa River. He is recruited by a local parish to do battle against a punk horde of sunlight-immune vampires sporting a death wish against the city's lesbian community. (The Trinity, as it turns out, is actually pro-lesbian. As the Virgin Mary puts it, "God loves them so. They get so much done in a day, don't you think.") Aided by Mary Magnum, a buxom vigilante in a

portrays a modern-day saviour who is half streetfighter, half United Church liberal—the King of Kings as the king of kickboxers. "I think it proceeds from a pretty simple idea that Jesus is or was a man of action," explains Driscoll. "He's the guy who threw the moneylenders out of the temple. He didn't just ask them to leave politely. He grabbed them by the scruff of the neck and tossed them out. He's not one to back down from a fight." Unlike Kevin Smith's *Dogma*, which got bogged down by its own sour moralizing, or that other Jesus film by Mel Gibson, *JCVH* never gets preachy or overbearing (save for one short sermon, happily free of any proselytizing). "I have a certain faith," says Demarbre, "but I don't need to practise it or show it off by going to church every Sunday, which is sort of like watching the same bad movie over and over again."

Theology aside, it's *JCVH*'s camp value that infuses the film with its spirited, manic energy. It shamelessly draws from that cinematic well of inspiration—the 1970s drive-in flick. "That was the era of the great exploitation movies," says Driscoll. "By the time you get to the 1980s,

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one-piece reflective outfit, and Santos, a paunchy, masked Latino wrestler (a homage to El Santo, the Mexican matinee idol), Jesus takes on the forces of darkness Bruce Lee style, occasionally stopping to do a musical routine or rough up a gang of 20 atheists out to put him in his place ("Let's get on with the conversions," he growls).

Both reverent and irreverent, Ian Driscoll's clever, hard-boiled script

it's all Wall Street, corporate and homogenized. The 1970s were the last time that you could do the really free-wheeling independent film and work in the genre of exploitation, which *Jesus* clearly is." But unlike more high-polished efforts in cross-genre comedy like Lance Mungia's *Six-String Samurai* or Don Coscarelli's *Bubba Ho-Tep*, Demarbre's films don't just seek to mimic or parody yesteryear's exploitation. Like his Winnipeg predecessors John Paizs and Guy Maddin, Demarbre is out to make the Real McCoy, warts and all. Shot in washed-out 16 mm with post-sync sound, the grainy photography and dubbed voices recall the style of a late-night Filipino horror show.

"Anything done on 16 mm inspires me," Demarbre admits. "Italian zombie, Mexican wrestling films, none of that stuff was ever done on video. It's not right for the medium." Even other drawbacks, like the occasional

Images on this page from *Jesus Christ Vampire Slayer*.



hammy acting and cheesy makeup, enhance the film's deliberately tacky *mise en scène*, invoking an even more authentic grindhouse flavour. Or as McSorley puts it, "Lee's inside the mask, he's not just constructing (it). Like the best of Paizs, it's done totally straight up. Original and completely derivative at the same time." Add this to ample blood-squirting, a song-and-dance number à la Andrew Lloyd Webber, plus a theme song, "Everybody Gets Laid Tonight," which should've won a Genie, and the result is the most self-effacing Canuck camp since Chris Windsor's



1983 unheralded *Big Meat Eater*. A worthy entry in the annals of "Canuxploitation," writer Paul Corupe's term for our national schlock.

In this light, it's tempting to see Lee Demarbre as Canada's answer to Quentin Tarantino or Kevin Smith: a fast-talking video-store cinéaste sincerely devoted to whatever is located at the bottom of the sell-out bin or East Asian section. The problem is, however, as even Demarbre admits, today everything from *Starsky and Hutch* to *Kim Possible* is a tip of the hat to 1970s Asian retro-homage, especially that other love letter to the grindhouse, *Kill Bill*, a film that may potentially overshadow Demarbre's future efforts. Not that he feels threatened. "I felt Tarantino made it for me," chuckles Demarbre. "I was so in love with every aspect of the movie even down to the end credits. But I find what goes into *Harry Knuckles* is very different than what inspired the *Kill Bill* movies. His films are spaghetti Western meets wire-stunts martial arts; mine are the Florida exploitation films of Herschell Gordon Lewis meets Italian horror meets Sammo Hung." In any case, Demarbre insists that what he does is not parody. "The Zucker brothers do parody. I make genre films. I don't parody the movies I love, [otherwise] I'd be making fun of them."

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Sketch for
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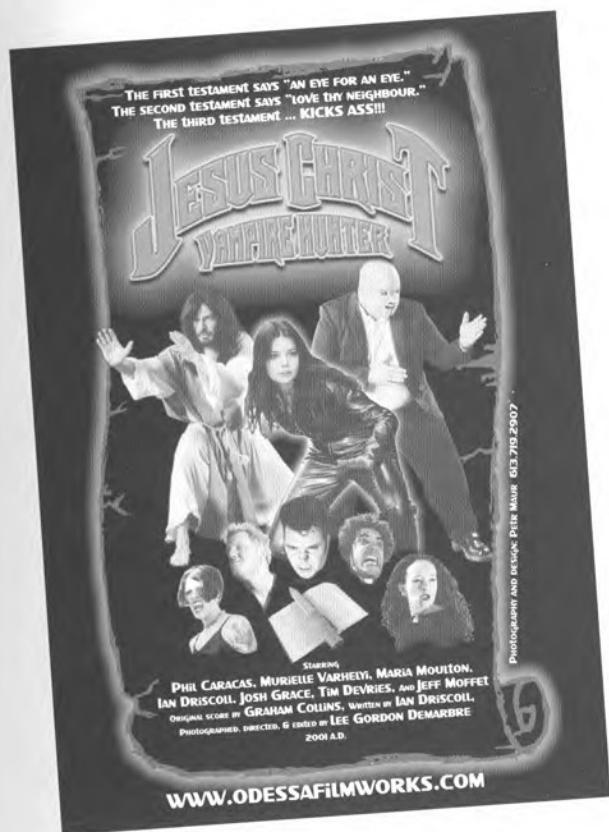


Discovering those very sources of inspiration happened only after Demarbre had finished his film studies at Carleton University in the mid-1990s. Still unsure what to tackle cinematically, he began visiting the Chinatown video stores where, in addition to the usual staple of Jackie Chan and John Woo, he found his own muse, Hong Kong auteur Sammo Hung Kam-Bo. ("He's the one who inspires me the most, or I let inspire.") Finding his spark, Demarbre sought out volunteers for his first film, little more than a collage of action scenes. To play the lead, he enlisted the short but charismatic Phil Caracas, manager of the Bytowne cinema, with Driscoll coming on-board to help write narration and flesh out the structure. The end result was *Harry Knuckles* (1998), a five-minute mock trailer. The collaboration continued the following year with *Harry Knuckles and the Treasure of the Aztec Mummy* (1999), a half-hour adventure featuring Harry once again in what could be described as an *Indiana Jones* snack pack. This garnered further accolades, including the Spirit Award at Slamdance and a distribution deal with Troma Entertainment.

The idea for *JCVH* came one evening during production on *Aztec* when Driscoll and Demarbre were driving to Toronto to buy a Steenbeck. "As we were driving," explains Ian, "Lee had Michael Jackson's *Thriller* album playing for some reason. That music fired off a sequence of synapses in my brain, and the words Jesus Christ vampire hunter came out. We realized it was too good a title to waste." And so *JCVH* saw the light of day in true independent, guerrilla-style filmmaking. It was shot on a Bolex during week-ends and off-hours, with a volunteer cast and crew, donated services, the assistance from the Independent Filmmakers' Co-op of Ottawa, plus a smidgen of government assistance from local agencies. This is all the more impressive if one considers the scope and ambition of the martial-art sequences, which are the film's *pièce de résistance*. Granted, lacking a bigger budget or the martial arts expertise of, say, Yuen Wo Ping (*Iron Monkey*), the extensive fight scenes, mostly by an amateur cast, contain more than a few visibly missed punches and lame throws. But Demarbre never slackens the pace and keeps it coming fast and furious. Plus, the fights do improve. Each scene gets wilder, choreographed with an off-kilter panache resulting in moments worthy of the *Drunken Master* films.

Asked about the logistics of choreographing martial arts on the cheap, Demarbre explains, "There were a few karate guys, but mostly I asked friends to pretend to be like Jackie Chan. I'd rather have an actor pretend to know martial arts, then a martial artist pretend to act. It's movie kung fu, not real kung fu. I cut it up, not to be flashy or to cheat, [but] to follow Sammo Hung's lead that the camera should be the third arm in the fight." For the atheists





scene, I tell Demarbre that it looked as if he called up every judo club in town, inviting anyone interested in being Bruce Lee for a day. “Actually, for that scene, I invited every bouncer in town who was bugging me for a year to punch Phil, because he’s a regular at some of these places,” he laughs.

With the success of *JCVH*, Demarbre is now putting the finishing touches on *Harry Knuckles and the Pearl Necklace*, where the Spanish Super Fly does battle with a bionic Bigfoot, as well as Harry’s own evil twin brother. Demarbre is promising an even wilder and funnier ride, with more action sequences, including such interesting tidbits as Harry battling a gang of half-naked nuns on Hwy. 17, Santos’s wedding ceremony (in a wrestling ring) and an appearance by Lloyd Kaufman, president and founder of Troma. Plus, there’s an unofficial cameo by Jean Chrétien, whom Demarbre got on film by sending his cast out to Parliament Hill on Canada Day to shake hands with the PM. “Very guerilla style,” he recalls. “I was standing there in broad daylight, holding a Bolex camera with a pistol

grip and big lens on it, which kinda looks like a gun the way I was holding it. [As] I was pointing it at the PM in this big crowd, I looked up at the rooftops and there were men up there with rifles and binoculars. There must’ve been a sniper pointed at me.”

This approach by Demarbre to doing things off-the-wall and on-the-fly has its rewards (and risks), but it also puts him outside the boundaries of the industry. Despite *JCVH*’s success, Telefilm Canada, even in light of their new commercial policy, declined funding for *Pearl Necklace*, skewing Demarbre’s plans for a bigger budget. But it’s perhaps the way he prefers to operate: on his own terms, with his own camera, outside IATSE and ACTRA—by any means necessary. Or as Driscoll puts it, “[Lee] has a fierce determination to get the project finished. As much as he demands from everyone who works for him, he works a hundred times harder than anyone else. Much as we kid around, he does inspire the people who work for him.”

Yet a question still lingers: How long can Demarbre and his fraternity continue what they’re doing? In an era when so many movies and television shows are mining yesteryears’ conventions for the sake of nostalgia or parody, be it *Far from Heaven* or *That ‘70s Show*, the process of postmodern referencing risks turning stale. So how

“It’s a hustle, but everybody gets laid in the end.” — Lee Demarbre

far can someone like Lee Demarbre go with his tribute style until he must turn to real life for source material? Well, Demarbre has, in fact, faced this critique from none other than his former professor, Canadian film guru Peter Harcourt. “He loved the first *Harry Knuckles*. Then when we did *Aztec Mummy*, he said ‘make more personal films.’ That little sentence said a lot. He wants me to get a voice. But I love these films. I eat and breathe them. That’s all I do. I might not have much to say, other than Sammo Hung is a fantastic filmmaker, and while it might be valid criticism to say that I don’t have my own distinctive voice, I can’t imagine making films any other way.

“It’s a hustle, but everybody gets laid in the end.”

Patrick Lowe is a filmmaker and writer residing in Winnipeg.