

# Super-intelligent beaver



Phil the Alien

Phil the Alien images courtesy of Lions Gate Films; Ham & Cheese images courtesy of Black Walk Productions.

By Tom Lyons

# Black Walk Takes a Walk on the Funny

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ON SEPTEMBER 2, 2004, the startled and bewildered face of Rob Stefaniuk stared out at the citizens of Toronto from the covers of 100,000 *Now* magazines. The young Oshawa actor/writer/director had landed the cover of the alternative weekly on the eve of the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) for his new film, *Phil the Alien*. *Now* liked first-time director Stefaniuk, and it liked his movie—an anarchic, low-budget comedy about an alcoholic space alien (named Phil and played by Stefaniuk with the same startled bewilderment) who lands in Northern Ontario.

Phil is variously befriended by drunken hosers, betrayed by “a super-intelligent beaver” (voiced by *SCTV* alumni Joe Flaherty) and is saved by jail-house religion. Meanwhile, over at the Top Secret American UFO Base, located under Niagara Falls, The General (John Kapelos) has discovered Phil and sends Jones (played with manic intensity by Bruce Hunter) to eliminate him. Throw in a beautiful Québécoise assassin (Nicole De Boer), a bartender called “Wolf” (Graham Greene), assorted cameos by the likes of Seán Cullen and Canadian Idol Ryan Malcolm and the music of Neil Young and Rush, and you have the makings of a Canadian hoser classic in the tradition of *Strange Brew*. *Now* described Stefaniuk as the “poster boy for new Canadian cinema at the film fest” and declared that *Phil the Alien* heralded a “Canadian comic renaissance.”

Geoff Pevere, the influential film critic at the *Toronto Star*, likewise raved about the film: “This is highly funny stuff in a proudly asinine Canadian tradition.” Guy Dixon of Toronto’s *The Globe and Mail* was only slightly less laudatory, giving the film three stars out of four and writing, “those who find *Kids in the Hall* funny and endearingly Canadian will love this film.” Before TIFF was over, the indie flick that had become the talk of the festival had landed a Canadian distribution deal with Lions Gate Films.

*Variety*, however, was buying none of the Canuck buzz and publicity. It panned the movie. “The sort of Canadian comedy that sounds funnier on the page than it looks on the screen,” wrote critic Eddie Cockrell. “Story structure is too choppy to work up any comic momentum...Pic won’t fly beyond the border, though it should make tube and homevid landings...Tech credits are functional; print caught was grainy and dark.” For good measure, Cockrell hammered another movie from the same Toronto indie house, Black Walk Productions, which had made *Phil the Alien*. “Emotions run hot but story blows cold in *Ice Men*,” he wrote, referring to the Black Walk buddy drama directed by Thom Best that screened at the 2004 Montreal World Film Festival. “[*Ice Men*] will quickly skate to cable and homevid after something less than a championship season at undemanding fests and in limited domestic play.”

That *Variety* was training its sights on Black Walk Productions might have seemed like a bad thing, given the back-to-back pans. But the fact that the new indie film company from T.O. was on the magazine's radar screen at all was regarded as something of an accomplishment by more than a few Hollywood heavyweights. That's because yet another Black Walk film, *Ham & Cheese*, had recently received a rave review from *Variety*'s Ken Eisner, who described the mockumentary about two hapless wannabe actors (played by T.O. writers Mike Beaver and Jason Jones) as "a must see" and "a potential cult classic" which "rarely lets up in the laughs department."

"*Ham* helmer Sonoda does an excellent job of ratcheting up the yuks, with each adventure being a bit more outrageous than the last," Eisner wrote of the ultra-low-budget comedy, which had been rejected by TIFF in 2003. Shortly after the *Variety* rave appeared, Black Walk's phone started ringing off the hook. "That review really started everything," says Warren P. Sonoda, 31, the director of *Ham & Cheese*. "The day after, Universal, Paramount, Fox, Miramax, everybody called wanting to see the movie. Three months after we premiered [*Ham & Cheese*] at the Victoria film festival [in January 2004], I was in New York City taking a face-to-face meeting with the head of production at Miramax. I mean, it happened that quickly." Nothing solid has materialized so far from those meetings, although at press time Black Walk had a U.S. deal on the table with Screen Media. (Screen Media distributes motion pictures to television, cable, satellite and home video markets rather than theatres, according to the Hollywood Byline Web site.)

But Sonoda and the rest of the Black Walk regulars aren't exactly discouraged. He compares himself and his colleagues to "farm team" players who feel confident they are about to be called up to the "big leagues" where they will make their mark. Established as a feature-film company just two years ago, Black Walk currently has a dozen more films on its production slate, evenly divided between directors Stefaniuk and Sonoda. And with its own studio space, production facilities, talent pool, financial



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resources and distribution company—all carefully built up over the 10 years in its previous incarnation as a music-video production house—Black Walk seems heavily armed and determined to take on the world. For Mihkel Harilaid, the head and sole owner of Black Walk, the game is unfolding according to plan, which is something industry insiders predicted would never happen when Harilaid walked

away from his very successful music-video business in the winter of 2002.

"No one believed me," laughs Harilaid, 38, as he sits down to an interview with *Take One*. He is recalling the response to his announcement that Black Walk was getting out of music videos and into feature films. At the time, Harilaid's company had ruled the roost of the Canuck music-video industry for almost a decade, racking up 500 videos, truckloads of MuchMusic Awards and a prestigious client list including the likes of Creed, Shaggy, Hootie and the Blowfish and The Barenaked Ladies.

By contrast, Black Walk's first attempt at a feature film, Michael De Carlo's *Washed Up* (2000), had flopped. "People thought I was quitting because I was going bankrupt, and they had all sorts of ideas about why I was doing it," he says. "The real reason was I thought, creatively, it [music videos] had become a bankrupt form. You know, it used to be fun. It used to be that you could come up with a quirky idea or a cool idea or a funny idea and someone would buy into it. What happened was suddenly everyone

wanted hot chicks on cars and that was it." A hard-nosed

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assessment of the declining fortunes of the MTV North industry also figured in his decision. "I thought that the Canadian dollar's [exchange advantage] was going to decline against the American

dollar. And, since about half of our work was American, that I felt was really going to slap us around in terms of our competitiveness," Harilaid says.

director →

Warren P. Sonoda



He was similarly troubled by “the pervasion of Internet music and what I already saw was the steep decline in viewership for stations like MuchMusic....What it meant, practically, is that \$80,000, which used to be the standard for a Canadian first video, is now somewhere around half that,” he says. “Of course, the real thing is that we needed to focus on feature films because there was long-term value. When you do a music video, it’s work for hire. There’s no back end. There’s no residuals. It’s just done,” he says.

However, trying to work on both music videos and feature films proved impossible. “We found it very hard to focus,” says Harilaid. “So I sold off and parcelled out my music-video business to other people. I have to admit I thought it would be a couple of years before all of this impacted. In fact, it has turned out to be about six months. So my timing couldn’t have been any better. I finished my last music video in June 30, 2002.”

For Black Walk’s Sonoda and actor Jason Jones, Harilaid’s decision to enter the feature-film game didn’t come a minute too soon. They had been waiting for just such an opportunity to take a serious stab at the big time since the late 1980s, when they attended Hill Park Secondary School in Hamilton and signed up for the same drama program. After attending Toronto’s Ryerson University together in the mid-1990s, Jones began carving out a living in Toronto doing television commercials and sketch comedy specials on CBC and CTV with the Bobroom Troupe, which included Mike Beaver, Jennifer Baxter, Rob Tinkler, Shaun Majumder and Stacey De Pass. Sonoda, meanwhile, began pulling down decent money as a video director at Black Walk after Harilaid convinced him to drop out of Ryerson’s film program at the age of 20.

“I’d been at Black Walk, kind of just hanging out. It was like the Wild West back then for music videos in 1993 and 1994,” recalls Sonoda. “It was very easy for a kid like me to show up one day as a PA, and then a week later be directing.” As the new century began, neither Sonoda nor Jones were starving. But their respective plans for making movies had both been rotting in a variety of development hells. “I had started to write scripts for Mihkel as early as 1996, to get something up and running,” says Sonoda. “[But] no one was going to give me two or three million dollars to make a movie, and these were the kind of scripts I was writing.”



From the top: A captured space alien; Sean Cullen; Stefaniuk seated at centre; Stefaniuk with De Boer; and with Brad McGinnis.

Bruce Hunter



Jones and his writing partner, Mike Beaver, were likewise getting restless on the sidelines. For us, “*Ham & Cheese*, was born out of the frustration of seeing low-budget films out there, and thinking ‘Hey, we could do this too,’” says Jones, on the phone from New York, where he now has a recurring role on the long-running television soap *As the World Turns* and a steady gig as the host of a television game show. “Mike and I had been writing for quite a while at that point, but we hadn’t really gotten anything off the ground. Canada really loves the development stage. We were in development with a couple of networks in Canada—I won’t say which ones—that strung us along for years.” Jones’s and Beaver’s pitch to Black Walk for *Ham & Cheese*, by contrast, was approved in a couple of hours. A drunken conversation with Sonoda at Toronto’s Black Bull Tavern on Queen Street West in the spring of 2002 led to a green light from

Phil the Alien →



Jason Jones with Samantha Bee

“Comedy’s got a shelf life. And if it spends too long in development, it’s just not going to be funny.”

-Jason Jones

*Phil.* “The lesson that we really learned is just going out there and doing it,” says Jones. “Don’t bother developing it, because especially with comedy, it’s got a shelf life. And if it spends too long in development, it’s just not going to be funny three years down the road.”

Jones is currently gearing up for yet another movie with Sonoda and the Black Walk crew. Titled *Camp Killer Wannabes*, and co-scripted by Jones and Beaver, it re-teams the *Ham & Cheese* duo as counsellors at a Muskoka summer camp who start murdering people for fun. Sonoda describes the movie, slated to start shooting in the fall of 2005, as a “comedy/horror film.” He is also working on a horror movie called *Hangman* as well as a children’s movie. Stefaniuk, meanwhile, is preparing a rock ‘n’ roll vampire flick called *Suck*. “It’s kind of fun to be in a company that allows you say, ‘well, what do you want to make this week?’” says Sonoda. “And Harilaid really has that kind of entrepreneurial showmanship that Canada needs. You need a guy to say, ‘You know what? We’re going to make this movie. I have no idea how we’re going to do it or what’s going to happen to it, but I have a business plan. I have a marketing plan. We have the equipment. You do the creative, because that’s what you guys do. Let’s make this movie.’”

Harilaid the same day. Black Walk self-financed the digital-video-shot film for about \$100,000, a budget range Harilaid prefers to call “micro-cinema.” (*Phil the Alien*, which received support from Telefilm, was made for less than \$500,000.)

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The cast of *Ham & Cheese* was stacked with friends from the Toronto comedy scene, including Bobroom regulars and Kids in the Hall alumni, all of whom agreed, with ACTRA’s permission, to work for less than scale. Beaver’s wife and fellow Bobroom jokester, Jennifer Baxter, took a role in the film, just as Jones’s real-life wife, Samantha Bee (a comic actor on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*), played his spouse. Many of the *Ham & Cheese* cast returned for roles in *Phil the Alien*, including Beaver, Dwayne Hill, Boyd Banks and Jones, who turns up as a fatuous American intelligence operative named “Agent Orange.” Sonoda and Andrew Kowalchuk, one of his co-editors on *Ham & Cheese*, helped Stefaniuk with the film’s editing. And, keeping things literally in the Black Walk family, Harilaid’s wife, Amy Barrie, served as production manager on

“That’s how *Ham & Cheese* and *Phil the Alien* were made. I think that’s the way the next 20 films are going to get made.”

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Jones and Mike Beaver