

CineVegas '07 Interview: "Sun Dogs" Director Andrea Stewart

by Erik Childress

The "Sun Dogs" Pitch: Jamaican entrepreneur Danny Melville was tired of the prevailing ganja and guns image of his beloved island. He wanted to do something to make the world smile again when they thought of Jamaica. When he learned that dogsledding could be done on dry land, he knew what he needed to do. Melville recruited unwanted stray dogs from local shelters, convinced a couple willing, if bewildered, Jamaican mushers to join up and asked Jimmy Buffett to pause looking for his lost shaker of salt long enough to become a sponsor. The Jamaica Dogsled Team was born. Now there is a cry that can be heard around the world: "Mush Mon"...



How did this film get rolling at the beginning? Give us a brief history from writing to production to post to just last night.

ANDREA: I have a friend who has family in Jamaica. We were waiting for a screening to start at the Toronto International Film Festival in September '05, and we were chatting. She mentioned that her cousins, who import dog food to Jamaica, were sponsoring the Jamaica Dogsled Team. When I heard their story, I said 'Someone should make a documentary about that'. Then we looked at each other. I got in touch with the Team and started the ball rolling. Things fell into place when I flew down to Jamaica and met Chris Blackwell of Palm Pictures. He really got behind the film and the rest is history.

What are you looking forward to during your CineVegas experience? If you're a festival veteran, let us know your favorite and least-favorite parts of the ride.

ANDREA: Well, I have spent most of my career in doc television, where the completion of a project is so anti-climatic - you call your mum and tell her what time it's on - by comparison the festival experience is so exciting. I've had a short in a few festivals and Sun Dogs premiered in April at the ReelWorld Festival in Toronto, so I am still a relative festival novice as a filmmaker. My least favorite part is just the anxious worry that comes with anticipating exhibition. What if no one comes? What if people walk out? You start to fear the polite and sympathetic applause. I tend to imagine the worst! Of course, it is never as bad as you fear - usually it's more fun than you realize it will be. I am just looking forward to taking in the whole festival experience - the events, taking in other films, meeting people. Festivals as a rule already have an electric energy, I can only imagine how CineVegas will be, being set in a place of such pre-existing amperage. As we like to say in the rural parts of Canada: "I'm just gonna give'r."

Back when you were a little kid, and you were asked that inevitable question, your answer would always be "When I grow up I want to be a ..." what?

ANDREA: I was dead set on being a Solid Gold Dancer. And there is still time.

Not including your backyard and your family Handycam, how did you get your real "start" in filmmaking?

ANDREA: When I was still in film school, I got roped into art directing a music video. I ended up being an art director on videos and commercials for a few years - it was the mid 90s, the heyday of Video. I directed a couple videos - stop-motion animation ones. I look back fondly on the collaboration of those days - it was a great environment to experiment.

Do you feel any differently about your film now that you know it's on "the festival circuit?"

ANDREA: It's a great validation, definitely. Which, I am sure many would agree, is great to have after you have lived with a film for well over a year and have lost all perspective.

Of all the Muppets, which one do you most relate to?

ANDREA: Grover. He's hopelessly romantic about all aspects of life and also a little shy. As am I.

During production did you ever find yourself thinking ahead to film festivals, paying customers, good & bad reviews, etc?

ANDREA: A little. But then I stopped. You can go mad trying to second guess what other people would want/like but the only way reliable measuring stick you have is your own judgment.

If you could share one massive lesson that you learned while making this movie, what would it be?

ANDREA: Trust your own judgment! It took me months to learn that one in order to sound so wise in the previous answer.

What films and filmmakers have acted as your inspirations, be they a lifelong love or a very specific scene composition?

ANDREA: For narrative films, the list is endless - I love the French guys - Jean-Pierre Jeunet, Denys Arcand, Robert LePage and also the Coen Brothers, Soderbergh, Winterbottom, Mike Leigh - so many really. But for documentary, you really just can't beat the body of work of the Nation Film Board of Canada. I was weaned on the NFB, and really, in terms of experimenting working the documentary framework, while translating a good story - they are king! But, it's hard to see ones mitts on the classics - 'cause where are you going to broadcast a 17 minute doc on prospectors in northern Quebec from the mid 70s, even if it does kick ass??

Did you watch any movies in pre-production and yell "This! I want something JUST like this ...only different."?

ANDREA: I really loved the feel of 'Born into Brothels', how the cinematography was languid and so loving of its subjects. It also succeeded in capturing the essence of the place, which was important for us too - because Jamaica is really our main character.

If you were to make a live-action version of your favorite cartoon, whom would you cast?

ANDREA: G-Force starring Paul Dano and Elisha Cuthbert.

Say you landed a big studio contract tomorrow, and they offered you a semi-huge budget to remake, adapt, or sequelize something. What project would you tackle?

ANDREA: I would take the Existential Detectives (Dustin Hoffman & Lily Tomlin) from I Heart Huckabees and throw them into the midst of another philosophical collision.

What story hasn't been told through documentaries that you'd love to start on tomorrow if you could?

ANDREA: The world of Women's Billiards. Oh, hey, I am starting that tomorrow!

Who's an actor you'd kill to work with?

ANDREA: I LOVE Jim Broadbent. I just find him mesmerizing, actually. Is that a strange choice?

Have you "made it" yet? If not, what would have to happen for you to be able to say "Yes, wow. I have totally made it!"

ANDREA: No. I am really still a newbie. I don't know about 'making it', but I think just more time working, more experiences in the field, more opportunity to bring ideas to fruition would make me feel deserving of the title of filmmaker.

Say you win an Oscar for this film. How do you fill your 45-second speech? And what do you say to the orchestra to get some extra time?

ANDREA: I trip up the stairs. Gerard Butler helps me up, because he's a gentleman. We share a moment. There's a scant few seconds left. I thank my crew, friend and family. I offer to buy the orchestra a round of drinks for more time... but they play on. I realize later, drinks are free at those after-parties.

Honestly, how important are film critics nowadays?

ANDREA: I think they are important. I read reviews all the time when deciding whether or not to bother with a film. You just have to be discerning when you read. Besides, critics are vital to the independent filmmaker. How many critics have gotten the word out about a film that might otherwise go quietly into the night? I think critics are often unjustly equated with the image of the poison pen, but it's also about imparting story information, providing a forum for the filmmaker.

What do you say to studios and publicists who consider print critics the "cream of the crop" and onliners as third world citizens?

ANDREA: This thing called the 'internet' - I think it's going to be really big. Seriously, I think they need to get with the times. It's the new word-of-mouth. When critics get too far removed, that's when people stop trusting them. On-line communities have the feeling of 'peer-review' hence, more trust.

Give us your favorite documentaries from last year.

ANDREA: Sharkwater (that's this year!) Metal: A Headbanger's Journey

You're told that your next movie must have one "product placement" on board, but you can pick the product. What would it be?

ANDREA: Vespa scooters - for a quick getaway for our heroine down a twisty Roman street...

What's your take on the whole "a film by DIRECTOR" issue? Do you feel it's tacky, because hundreds (or at least dozens) of people collaborate to make a film - or do you think it's cool, because ultimately the director is the final word on pretty much everything?

ANDREA: I don't have a hardline stance on it, but really, only some directors are auteurs and could arguably say it is their signature

film. I spent time working on features as a production coordinator. When you see how some directors are just puppets for hire and it's really a collective will making the film, you see how ridiculous a notion it can be. Also, I think it's a slippery slope buying into your own hype. I didn't do it. It felt all wrong.



In closing, we ask you to convince the average movie-watcher to choose your film instead of the trillion other options they have. How do you do it?

ANDREA: It's a sweet story with some funny, endearing moments. Killer soundtrack. Spend an hour and a half in Jamaica while munching popcorn - you won't regret it.

Andrea Stewart's *Sun Dogs* will have its world premiere at the [2007 CineVegas Film Festival](#) on Wednesday, June 13 at 6:30 pm (at the Palms' Brendan Theatres.)