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Director Russell Brown on "Race You To The Bottom"

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Cole Williams and Amber Benson in *Race You to the Bottom*.

Move over, *Will and Grace*. In the new film, *Race You to the Bottom*, opening on May 4 at the Quad in New York City, director **Russell Brown** presents the story of a gay man who embarks on a six-month affair with his favorite fag hag, to complex and heartbreaking results. This LA-based filmmaker spoke with us while vacationing in Paris about friendship, love and disillusion in the backdrop of Napa Valley wine country.

"Maybe their boyfriends should worry," reads the film's tag line. *Race You to the Bottom* explores a convoluted affair between straight girl Maggie (Amber Benson of *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer* fame and), her best gay buddy Nathan, (Cole Williams of *Harry and Max*.) This film turns *Sideways* on its head when Maggie leaves her lackluster boyfriend Milo, to visit the Napa Valley with Nathan, who has a boyfriend of his own, but also dogs after his friends' friends, random waiters, and whatever other trade passes his eyes. Although their relationship is a tenuous mix of codependent friendship and

playful sexuality, Brown says the two are drawn together by the unhappiness in their primary relationships more than a passion for each other.

"The characters are both trying to deal with things in their own life that makes them unhappy, and are using the other person to hide from something," said Brown. "Their sexuality is part of that. People use sex for different reasons; in this film they are using their relationship as a way to hide."

So when Nathan and Maggie head out on road trip to Napa Valley, Nathan says, "I'm in charge of all the details."

"He is definitely a guy who wants to control all of the situations, because when things get out of control it makes him uncomfortable," said Brown. "With him, things are very controlled, very thought out." And Nathan is truly a virtuoso at running the show.

On a lunchtime stopover with friends Tom and Carla, this translates to a pre-lunch hand job on Tom in the backyard shed. Meanwhile, in the kitchen, judgmental Carla lauds her "100 % real man" as she chastises Maggie for her affair, saying, "Bisexuality is just a stop on the road to Gayville."

This ironic line, notes Brown, "says that in terms of sexuality some people are very fluid. Some people are comfortable with it, and some are not. Carla cannot be comfortable with the idea of fluid sexuality, so she has to put some label on it to try and make it understandable, to make a joke out of it."

But the laughs stop when Maggie actually falls for Nathan. Although Nathan appears to have an element of self-loathing to his sexuality, he is primarily gay, and can't accept the reality of being loved by his straight best friend.

"In terms of [Nathan's] bisexuality, I always thought of him as gay man who is having an affair with one special girl, who he feels strongly about," said Brown. "In terms of self loathing, he is not uncomfortable with being gay, but with the culture of gay people. He hates that he has to be part of this larger gay culture."

The two leave wine country and head for San Francisco, where they watch the sun set on the beach. This scene epitomizes their relationship. Instead of the iconic image of the sun setting over an embracing couple, we see Maggie and Nathan sitting with wide gap between them, hugging themselves close.

"The final shot of this scene was very intentional," said Brown. "The beach sunset scene is a standard romance shot, but this scene reveals the gap in their relationship. In the middle of this romantic, perfect beach sunset, there is a fissure between what they are both feeling, and in that shot you are definitely seeing that."

Maggie and Nathan eventually part, and return to their respective partners. They run into each other six months later, while hiking on a trail, and reconcile.

"It is sort of a bittersweet ending, because they've both moved on in their lives, but they still have this passion for each other," said Brown. "You're not sure if they will get involved again, but in that moment they are able to relive the beautiful, sensual things about their time together without regrets. The bad things between them have sort of faded with time, which I think happens."

"Race you to the bottom," says Maggie, and the two are off.

"There are a couple of different meanings to this," said Brown of the film's closing line and title. "It is about getting to the bottom of a wine bottle. Also, for these people, once the fuse is lit for conflict, there almost becomes an increasing snowball effect of anger toward each other. When they finally get to the bottom, the real gritty stuff, that's the climax point."

"It is also gay pun, because the word bottom is kind of funny to use for a movie about a gay guy who doesn't want to be gay," Brown continues. "It's a series of disappointments that escalates until it reaches a horrible moment. The last line of the movie is just being playful, because once they kiss and have this sexual moment, it has to be broken by the idea of playfulness, so they can resume their kid-like relationship."

Race You to the Bottom is Brown's first feature film. His PBS documentary, Mama Laura's Boys ran to critical acclaim at the Tribeca Film Festival, as did his short film, Reality USA. Brown says he has just finished shooting his second feature film, The Bluetooth Virgin, which he describes as a film about what happens when you don't like your friend's art. It will premiere in festivals by the fall.

For more information about this film, visit the [film's website](#).

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she writes about local restaurants in her food blog, <http://brooklyniscookin.blogspot.com/>

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