

TrustMovies

Movie criticism, news and ideas from James van Maanen, who's been reviewing for GreenCine for several years -- and has finally taken the big blog step. This blog, by the way is designed for best use via Mozilla Firefox. It works with other browsers, too, but the design will appear differently, and not so well. In fact, with the addition of the latest version of Firefox, I find almost every one of my posts has changed in appearance -- and for the worse. Bummer. But that's technology....

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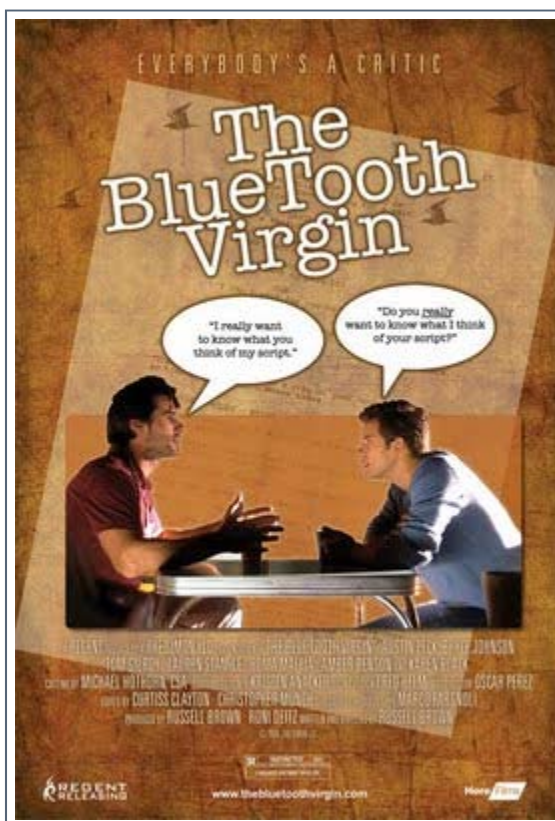
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thursday, september 24, 2009

BLUE TOOTH VIRGIN opens on both coasts; interview w/Russell Brown and Austin Peck

BLOGBURST




As usual, a lot of movies are opening this week, not to mention what's on tap at the New York Film Festival (more of which tomorrow). So how do you choose? If you're smart or have any interest in writers & writing (or maybe want to do some yourself), there's one little gem of a film you should not, under any cir-



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cumstances, pass up. With a title like **THE BLUE TOOTH VIRGIN**, you're not likely to forget it.

That title actually doubles as the title of the screenplay that one friend gives to another in order to get the latter's feedback on it.

This is the second film in a month -- the Hungarian Holocaust family drama **Tickling Leo** was the other -- in which the title doubles as the title of a piece of writing important to the film.

Other than this odd coincidence, the two films have little in common -- and *Blue Tooth* is by far the better film.

Initially, it appear that this will be one of those Hollywood tales of jealousy and ambition, creative yearnings and human foibles. Indeed, all these are present and handled with humor and grit, even if we've seen their like on film before. Then the movie begins to morph into something deeper: an exploration of why we write and what we hope to get from our endeavor. In the process, writer/director **Russell Brown** (shown above) delves into other areas: self-deception at work/home and niche vs mainstream are two such. The movie has but a few scenes, almost all of which take place between only two characters. This could be deadly, were it not for the dialog -- which is spot-on most of the time: funny, acerbic, and meaningful -- and the movie's theme, which grows richer as the tale moves along.



Brown also peppers his film with smart and pointed quotes about writing -- and the process of -- which add to the movie's meaning and pep up its style a bit. (The accompanying animated visuals are fun, too.) Then, in the middle of the film, come two astonishing

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scenes: One between the character of David (well-played by **Bryce Johnson**, above) and his therapist (the wonderful **Roma Maffia**, below), the other between Sam (a nicely needy and off-kilter **Austin Peck**, two photos below) and his "script consultant" (played by **Karen Black**, shown three photos below, who finally, after several decades, has a memorable role again). These two scenes are as good as any I've witnessed in a movie in a long while.



Ms Maffia does a therapist "turn" unlike any you will have seen; she's sensational (but is this behavior typical of today's L.A. shrink, I wonder?), but the scene with Ms Black that follows is quite extraordinary. It begins by sounding like your typical Hollywood, holistic, feel-good babble. But no: It's for real and soon morphs into something wonderfully profound, during which Black's character does an infinitely better job of psychoanalysis than does Maffia's shrink. (This scene also manages to address -- among other things and from an odd angle -- the difference between mainstream and niche.) A final scene in a coffee shop takes us back to the film's beginning but cleverly adds a new voice to the mix that topples our expectations and make us reconsider these characters anew.

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James van Maanen, Jackson Heights, NY

Movie-loving male, 68 years old and 6' 8" tall. This will change as the years go up and the height, due to bone loss and shrinkage, goes down. For now, we're stable. Photo by JoelWeberBTI@nyc.rr.com

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I cannot recommend *The Blue Tooth Virgin* highly enough. I realize that writers (and those who would like to write) will find it especially meaningful, but since self-deception is such a deeply human trait, I doubt that many moviegoers, if they think about it for more than a moment, will be immune to the movie's message and delights. The film opens via **Regent Releasing** in a limited theatrical run on Friday, September 25, at NYC's **Quad Cinemas** and in L.A. at the **Laemmle Music Hall**. Although current playdates -- cities and theaters -- are not yet mentioned, I hope they soon will be [here](#).



It's rare for **TrustMovies** to get the chance to speak with both an actor in and the writer/director of a new independent film, but that was the case with *Blue Tooth*. He first met soap opera star **Austin**

Peck (formerly of **Days of Our Lives** and currently on **As the World Turns**), who plays Sam, at Manhattan's **Playwright Tavern (8th Avenue between 45 and 46)** for a quick interview that turned into a lengthy talk about soaps and soap acting, careers, and fame. (Because the *World Turns* is shot here in NY, Peck is able to live on the east coast, although he was raised in Los Angeles.)

To call this guy a hunk is to severely understate the case: Dressed in jeans and a white t-shirt, he stands 6" 3", with chiseled facial features, an expansive chest, and arms that look as though they're rarely disengaged from a bicep machine. Though I avoid watching soaps, I suspect the actor's physical attributes are better put to use there than in *The Blue Tooth Virgin*, in which Peck appears near-nerdy, glamming down noticeably behind eye-glasses and keeping his undistinguished-looking clothes on rather than off.

TrustMovies: I noticed on the [IMDB](#) that you won an award early in your career -- from [Soap Opera Digest](#)....



Austin Peck: *Soap Opera Digest* fans are known for being the biggest fans and buying the most materials of any magazine. I started out on the soaps back in L.A. in 1995 and also did some theater while I was doing the soaps.

I have always had the sense that soaps were over-written and under-acted. How do you feel about that?

I think it can be true. It's funny: Soap opera writers always imagine that if there is not constant train of dialog, people will stop

watching and turn their TVs off. So they never let anyone be quiet or have nice, silent time. Also, most people watch soaps differently than you watch other TV or a film. It's not the way you watch something like *Mad Men* and be riveted. Instead, people are eating their lunch or watching their kids or walking from one room to another, doing some other activity. Soaps are kind of geared toward that. As actors and writers, we are kind of victims of this genre that was created years ago.

Is acting any different for you on soaps or on film?

No, it's the same thing. Sometimes on the show I am bad – because it's just a bad day. You're doing the script and saying the same thing you've already said six times. It's hard, whereas when you are in a film and or play with a beginning, middle and end, it's different. On daytime TV it's just the same moment over and over and over again. The average person views the soap opera only maybe 2 or 3 days per week. So the writers have to make their audience always know what going on. So there's a lot of repetition. Everybody on soaps is victim to what started years ago. I don't really think it *has* to be that way anymore. But the writing is always over-written. Always. I am not being critical. That's the way it is.

Have you ever written anything yourself?



I like to write, but it's not like, I'm going out there trying to sell it.

Once I was away from soaps for awhile, and when I came back to it it was like I saw it in a different way. During the time away I had

been reading about String Theory -- how Einstein had died trying figure it out: How $E=MC^2$ squared might fit into quantum physics and how these two things could then work together. I was watching this program aboutt he whole t hing, and suddnely I thought: "God—it's like soap opera. And soap opera are like a diffeirnt dimension! Real life is here, and then soap opera in in this *other* dimension. . And with that, I had freed myself of having to take repsonsibility for it!

On that note, there's this scene in the movie that kind of takes the movie into another dimension. It's the scene between you and Karen Black, which was, for me, the single best scene I've seen in a movie since... I can remember when.

WOW! Well, Karen is such an icon. She really is.

Did you realize how important his scene was when you were filming it?

Well, no, it just took up the day for the coverage, you know...

Does a single scene usually take that long to film?

Well, yeah, with the coverage and all —the lighting and everything else. I'm amazed at the reaction people are having to this film. It was a real joy to do – I connected really clearly to the struggle that my character was having. And the whole creative process thing: To be edified by your creativity. But then at the same time, the *fear* of being edified, of being validated. You're seeking after something, and then you get it, and you wonder -- Is this what I was really looking for? When I finally saw the film, I saw that it had translated differently from how I remembered doing it.

Ah.... Does this happened often?

No, and your response to this scene is really nice!

That's part of my coming at the movie from the standpoint of a writer. In this one scene it gets almost to the core of what we want and what we need and why we do what we

do.

Everybody has a story to tell -- which is why reality shows are so big right now. And probably why we all hate them so much...

Yes! They are *not* reality.

Right; they're all scripted. But still they about real people. Like, I like to write, and I think I'm good. People, like my mothers, will tell me what they think of it. The truth, too, and that's not always what I want to hear.



At the end of that scene Karen Black says, "Sam, you are a *great* writer." I wondered at the me, why is she saying that? But then at the end of the film, we get a glimpse of what she means. And the movie also takes in the idea of mainstream vs niche. And who wants what.

I really did like that about the script. You get the feeling, first, that Sam is not a good writer, but then at the end, the girl comes up and say to him, You actually changed my life. It doesn't get better than that! I made a decision about therole, after talking with a friend of mine, that my character will never ever be a mainstream writer, as much as he might want that.

That's his cross to bear but its also something wonderful that he'll find his niche.

Will this film maybe make a career difference for you?

I don't know. I'd *love* that. But you never know. We'llsee what

happens. You know what they say: Today's expectations are tomorrow's disappointments.

Maybe I'm a late bloomer. I once heard this phrase: I'm on a journey of a thousand miles, and I think that's true of my life. But right now, I have only maybe traveled just a mile or two.

Come on: Only a mile or two?

Well maybe thirty. I just told the love of my life, just today, that I am on this journey, and it's full of maybe pitfalls and darkness, and I can't help but see purpose and God, and I want you to come along with me because I love you.

Nice. You were married before, right? And you have kids.

Yes, I have two kids, four and seven.



And you are how old now...?

38. My mother is one of my closest friends – I'm a momma's boy -- and she always says, "It's an inside job." And I think that what this movie is about: At the end of the day, it is *always* an inside job. But the characters in the film are always looking outside. It's a daily struggle. That's why I connect to the film, because of the insecurities and neuroses of the characters.

Also, don't actors have double the struggle because if they are well known, there is always that added "fame" thing to deal with.

I don't know. But I had one experience that was very interesting. I had been on *Days of Our Lives* for three years and I got this call from South Africa, telling me how popular I was over there and asking me to go there. They told me *Days* was the number one show in the country – not just the #1 soap opera but the #1 show. The whole country would just shut down when it was on.

What?? No wonder South Africa has been such a troubled country! So did you end up going there?

This was all new to me, and my role had only been airing in South Africa for a few months back then, and I was a really bad actor -- but I think I am a little bit better now than I was then. I was excited by the whole idea, so I went to South Africa. My character's name and my actual name were one in the same. When I got off the plane people on the ground began calling my name: Austin! Austin! Austin!

And you know, I did not expect this in any way, shape or form. In L.A. when you are on a soap, it's no big deal. It's like being on the B or C -- or X list. You're not really that famous. But guards had to take me out the back entrance because there were so many fans waiting for me. This was crazy. But then they then told me that I really did have to say hi to these fans because they had waited all day and night there for me. Then I started thinking, wait a minute: I have not done *anything* to deserve this behavior. Nothing. So I look over the balcony and there are thousand of people screaming. I just thought, holy cow. I had armed bodyguards the whole time I was there – this was back in 1998 – and I felt totally freaked out. I'm thinking "I'm a bad actor on a soap opera — I have not done anything worthwhile, and yet they are acting like *this*?!"



Even if you were a good actor: What is that *about*?!

Exactly! If this were done for somebody who was really really famous and a great person who had done great things, it would be something else. But people were hanging on every word I said for ten days. It was too crazy.

Ah, fame....

Yes, and this is what some people experience every single day of their life. It is a bizarre experience. But still, this does not "fix" you. It does not make you whole.

*On that interesting and worthwhile note, we have to bid adieu to Mr. Peck (do see his very good performance in *The Blue Tooth Virgin*) and move on to the writer and director of the film, Russell Brown, whom we speak to the following day from his home in Southern California.*

This is your first film since Race You to the Bottom. I would not have guessed that the same man made both.

Well, actually, I see the movies as kind of similar. They both are really about people who are dealing with self-deception. Unconsciously or consciously, I'm not sure, but I seem to gravitate toward this theme: People who don't know themselves and are using devices to sort of make their lives easier and make themselves happy. Yet these devices prevent them from seeing themselves as they really are.

In *Race You to the Bottom*, the guy in the movie is in this relationship with this girl because he does not really want to accept himself as gay. And in *The Blue Tooth Virgin*, Sam, the writer, is struggling with who he really is and what he really wants to do. I think my own writing has taken a step forward with this movie in that this theme is explored in a deeper way.



I would agree. Where did this movie first come from?

It came from this same theme, but here I zeroed in on the writing aspect. I have been in this creative process many times, with friends who have evaluated my work and I theirs. I thought there was a lot of fertile territory here for a movie.

It's rare to encounter a movie about writing that actually works. [Adaptation](#) is one of the few, and for me, *Blue Tooth* works even better in some ways: particularly in addressing the themes of who we are and why we write. Has there been anything like this about writing that's been done previously?

Nothing I can think of, actually. I really like chamber movies than deal with small ensembles. I love [Erich Rohmer](#)'s films a lot and [My Dinner With Andre](#) and some of the [Bergman](#) chamber films like [Autumn Sonata](#). Not that my movie is in that same category in terms of overall quality, but that is what I was kind of riffing off, in terms of structure.

It's about why we write (or why we should write), as much

as anything else, right?

For me, the movie is about why we write and all the different reasons for this -- our motivations. Really, in any artistic field, the most important thing is to be honest with yourself about why you are doing what you are doing. Whatever field you're in, don't tell yourself lies about why you are doing what you're doing.

Given the human being's penchant for hypocrisy, this is hard.

Yeah and that is what this guy -- both of them, really -- are doing.

Your scene with Karen Black is spectacular. It's so good, and it is also so good to see her back in form and in an important role for a change.

I adore Karen and think she in some ways an under-utilized talent. She is so wonderful and she still has so much to give as an actress. She brought a depth to this scene that I don't think was on the page, and for that I will always be grateful.

In that scene, Austin Peck (who plays Sam) really does go through a process with Karen's character. He made some really great acting choices in that way.

How did you come up with that scene?



The movie was always sort of designed where Sam's script needed to take on a relevance to what was going on in his own life.

Somewhere along the way, I really latched onto the concept of morphing. While it is a sort of joke in the movie, it also becomes a kind of central theme. So that's the scene where Karen's character reveals to him how this script unknowingly reflects what is going on in his own life.

The idea of mainstream vs niche is also handled quite interestingly....

The audience's concept of who Sam is and what kind of a writer he may be, has also morphed and changed during the course of the movie. In a way, you start off the movie sympathizing with David, but by the end you're maybe thinking David is not such a great guy.

The movie is also about how you are getting information about things, and who is giving you this information. Who you are getting criticism from matters, and what they have invested in this is also important.

What was the budget and the length of filming time for both *Race You to the Bottom* and *The Blue Tooth Virgin*? The former looks much more expensive than the latter.

Yes – it was! *Race You to the Bottom* was a 21-day shoot and three times the budget of *Blue Tooth*, which was an eight-day shoot.

What are working on now?

I have a couple other projects – I'm working with different producers and setting up financing. There is nothing right around the corner, but hopefully we will get actors attached and raise some money for another movie.

When I spoke with Austin, he mentioned that your movie only has seven scenes in it. Is that really true? I realized, after watching, that every scene was quite important in getting across one point or another, but I didn't realize there were only seven.

I think there *are* essentially only seven scenes in the film. For exam-
ple, the golf course scene is split between and green and the post-
game dinner discussion – but I think of these as one scene. Also,
there are no scenes with more than two people -- other than
briefly at the very end -- and I think the film is pretty different in
this way.



Posted by James van Maanen, at [9:24 PM](#)



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