

I'm all about story

STEVE ROSENBERG interviewed by Ileana Pietrobruno

Suburban kids, Jewish grandmothers, lonely immigrants, and seductive violinists - Rosenberg's emotional films resonate with authenticity. This local filmmaker has recently left dramatic realism to enter the surreal with his new dance film.

Ileana Pietrobruno: How do you find your stories?

Steve Rosenberg: I write about the world that I know. That's the safest. If you're fabricating a character from scratch you don't know how honest it's going to be, but if you base your fictional characters on real people then you know how they walk and talk. Because my characters are attached to actual fleshed-out people, I don't have to think about how to direct them. I already know what I'm doing because I know the characters intimately.

IP: Are you the little boy in *Watching Mrs. Pomerantz*?

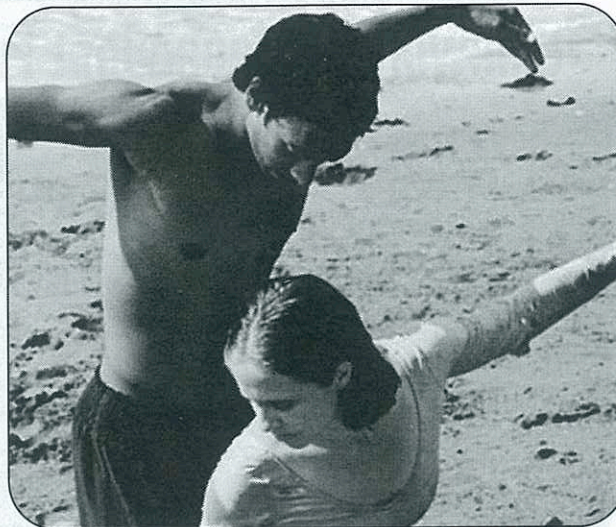
SR: I love the real Mrs. Pomerantz. She lived right across the street from me. They had a swimming pool and they were just so damn stylish. They were Jewish but they were the kind that don't have to go to the synagogue and they ate take-out Chinese food. I lived on a diet of cabbage rolls. I really really wanted to be like them.

IP: There's a lot that's left unsaid in your films.

SR: Dialogue in a film should be minimal - you just show what you need to and that's it. I could have written dialogue to tell us that Mrs. Pomerantz is divorced but I decided to give her a sparse 'character background' since she's not the main point of the story. I did, however, visually portray Mrs. Pomerantz as a sad woman who watches soaps in the middle of the day and dates elderly men for money. In film, images are your currency. They should be powerful, they should be meaningful, and they should be telling the story. I'm all about story.

IP: What's your secret to a making a good short?

SR: You have to seduce people from the very first frame. If you don't have that going for you, you're already advertising that you're not a strong filmmaker. My most recent film, *Corona Station*, starts with a close-up on a violin case. There's a tone of mystery and intrigue. Originally, I had even thought of having music similar to *Mission Impossible* music because maybe this violin case is going to blow-up the entire subway system. So, anyhow, the film opens by following the violin case that's being carried through the subway station and then the shot widens to reveal the violinist with the case going up an escalator as a beautiful woman on the descending escalator glides past him. As a gay man, I'll look at someone for 7 seconds, and then I'll turn around to check to see if they're looking back at me and if they are then there's always ... you know. I wanted to represent that sort of dynamic between two people meeting on an escalator and just having that 'look', that moment. That was the original idea for my opening image.



Still from Steve Rosenberg's latest film project *Divine Waters* which was shot on Cineworks' Arri BL IVS by Yves Bernadet. *Divine Waters* was also one of three 2006 Production Fund Award recipients - a yearly grant program for General Members, sponsored by Cineworks and Rainmaker. The next deadline for the Production Fund will be announced in late Spring, 2006.

IP: But the man and the woman passing each other on the escalator comes at the end of *Corona Station*?

SR: Just before I was about to shoot, the actress got a call that her mother was dying. We did the scene, but the actress was so sad.

IP: She didn't have the right expression for the opening shot.

SR: But I kept thinking that this is an interesting ending. You know, when people watch a performance they'll applaud but if they happen to see the performer later they might not notice him or think him special. He's forgotten. There's barely a look of recognition. So the image worked at the end of the film when the violinist has already performed for the beautiful woman. It also made the story a little bit more ambiguous. I wanted that.

IP: Your stories contain a lot of conflict and rivalry but there are no 'bad' characters. That's what I liked about *Vannica*.

SR: I'm glad you feel that way because a lot of people who saw *Vannica* really don't like the old lady. They think that she's a complete bitch. I didn't see it that way at all. She's my grandmother! It's about two lonely old women living in a tiny area and they both feel like they have nothing in common — nothing — and yet, they have everything in common. I mean, imagine living like that and imagine *Vannica*. She's boiling with passion, just smoldering with wanting to get fucked, but no one sees her because she's fifty, she wears

too much lipstick, she's an immigrant and she's invisible. People find *Vannica* depressing because it's about two old bags but I find these women completely fascinating. You know, I'm really crazy about women of all ages. I have four sisters and a father that was always working. I know that I'll always make women's stories.

IP: I thought it was excellent that the old lady didn't apologize to *Vannica* for falsely accusing her of stealing the pearl necklace.

SR: Totally. People kept saying to me, 'your character never changed' but she did change because at the end, the two women are playing cards together and I'm sure they'll be bitching together for years. That's a subtle shift in character but isn't that way more interesting than an ending with a huge kiss-up scene or a gun shot killing people because the director can't figure out how to wrap-up the film intelligently. Whatever happened to the simple character arc? I find subtlety and irony way more interesting, way more fulfilling, way more true, and way more satisfying.

IP: A 'simple' character arc is so hard to accomplish! How do you decide which story is going to become a film?

SR: It's like falling in love - it hits you. You become attracted to the seed of an idea that never leaves even if you put it away for a year or two. It's inside you.

It's like a chemical attraction. It's illogical. I got the seed of the idea for my present dance film while I was volunteering on a distress line in Toronto. One day, an amputee who'd lost both his legs in a car accident phoned-up and asked me, "When you see an amputee, do you look away?" I answered that I wasn't clear as to why he was asking, to which he responded, "You're not clear but I'm the one that's out on the street and the fact that you look away makes you an ableist." I'm like, "What the fuck! What's your beef here?" And he goes, "Don't you see? I go through life with people feeling like they don't want to make me feel uncomfortable by staring at me and so they look away." Then one day, I happened to be at a dance performance and I saw an amputee dance. She had one leg and she was dancing and it struck me that there was a room full of people staring at her but we were all staring at her on her own terms - for no other reason but that she's an artist who happens to be missing a leg. So I took that 'seed' and I thought, "What if she were a mermaid?" I wanted to create the feeling that she's from a different world and that we have to enter into her world.

IP: You shot at the beach?

SR: Yeah, I didn't want to do a dance film on a stage but shooting at the beach was really really hard. You know, you have to take a lot of crap as a filmmaker and maybe nobody will like my film but I'm at the point where I'm fine with that because the seed of the idea is still there. I wanted to make this film because everybody is afraid to look at an amputee and now there's a woman on the beach, dancing with a man, and she's exquisitely beautiful.

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