

Susan Hero

A Long and Winding Road



Director Jason Rosette on location scout near Mountainaire, New Mexico

By Jason Rosette

The movie you set out to make isn't always the one you end up making — for a lot of reasons.

In the case of my narrative feature, *Susan Hero*, the idea first came to me years earlier in the form of a novella I'd written called *Fast Growing Leghair Susan*. That was the story of a female gangster who embarks on a crime spree, robbing movie theaters and multiplexes with her illegal immigrant Mexican sidekick.

At the time, I was basically interested in making a contemporary, semi-reflexive variation on a Bonnie-and-Clyde type theme. In the novella, the couple is finally apprehended because of Susan's single cosmetic flaw — her fast growing leghair — which betrays her identity to the various agents who are in hot pursuit.

As now completed, more than five years later, *Susan Hero* the movie is a very different story than had been envisioned in that earlier novella. There is no fast growing leghair, for instance, though Susan's illegal immigrant companion, Javier Appollinaire, remains, as does the robbery of the movie theaters.

And the significant cloning themes and references to the Native American experience are also new. The cloning themes in particular were introduced as an armature upon which the movie could hinge, as it is the desire to regain her recently deceased daughter which launches Susan on her quest.

The process of making my second feature from script to screen, was a brutal, five-plus year haul. Despite a pretty suc-

cessful first feature, the underground New York City streetside doc *Bookwars* (2000), I found myself starting from scratch again to obtain financing.

Capturing Susan

Because of its strange and edgy nature, *Susan Hero* was not fundable according to traditional risk models. Initially, we went the standard development route for a couple years, seeking to attach talent, shoot on 35 or Super 16, and make a "bigger" movie. Ultimately, since we shot the movie ourselves (or it wouldn't get made), we produced it on digital video, using a variety of cameras.

Smaller "expedient" cameras [Sony single chip] were used for hood mounted and externally mounted shots, since we were relying on medium weight suction mounted car rigs. For more controlled environments and dialogue scenes we used our "A" camera setup, based around a Panasonic with Sennheiser shotgun and soundman doubling as boom operator, all in all our crew was very lean but workable.

With a very limited budget, I decided to go back to my onetime home state of New Mexico, where I hoped the stunning landscape and Native American element would help to set the picture apart from numerous other low budget features.

I sought to cast local talent as much as possible, but there was no single dedicated resource for finding actors in the region, so I set up a group at Yahoo, the New Mexico Tal-

ent Group. Initially, the group was intended for outreach in finding talent to cast *Susan Hero*, but it has since grown a lot, and the NM Talent Group now numbers some 380+ actors.

In the end, I played the part of green federal agent Carl Wisconsin. Though I tried to cast the role several times, I couldn't find anyone to play him with the right combination of dorkiness, doubt, and likeability that his character required. Since I was a SAG actor, however, I would have had to pay myself my own workers comp insurance, which at the time would have broken our razor thin budget.

Graciously, the Guild allowed me to exit on good terms to become instead a dues paying financial core non-member, and this allowed me to play the part. I intend to return to SAG when I can (and when I need to), as I've maintained good relations with them.

Ready or not

The making of *Bookwars* was a long, grueling process that was completely self-financed, and that toughened me up a bit for sure.

I had graduated from NYU Film School after transferring from the liberal arts school studying Psychology and Anthropology, but my film school experience was mixed. I have to say that, for me at least, I learned more through doing things independently, rather than studying filmmaking in school. (And I wish I hadn't racked up those student loans!)

I had also made several fiction shorts, a comedy pilot, and several medium length projects in the meantime as well. Not to mention that I'd been making films since I was a kid — you know, backyard Super 8 movies with neighborhood friends, a little gasoline, some firecrackers.

Regarding acting in my own movie,



Rosette and crew on location in Old Laguna, New Mexico

well, I'd done some solid stints off-off Broadway in New York, a fair number of indie projects, and some pro voice-over work for radio and TV.

I trained formally in acting at NYU during film school, and studied again at City College in San Francisco when I was living out West. All in all, nothing earth shattering, but in sum, a solid enough acting background to prepare me technically to play decently on camera and to develop a character.

Filmmaking facts of life

Of course, the biggest downside in doing things yourself is that you alone must bear the risk, and you are responsible for all the financing. Even with the success of *Bookwars* — which was sold internationally and domestically and actually made a profit — I had to start from scratch again with *Susan Hero*.

It seems the people who finance fiction, well, they want to see that you've made a fiction feature, no matter how good your doc was.

And when you go into production, you have a wolf by the ears and you can't let it go. You have to keep feeding the project cash to at least get it in the can, or you're sunk. In my case, out in New Mexico where cash was thin, it meant going broke after production, selling off my editing system, my car mounts, my furniture, and sleeping in my car for a while in the National Forest.

So I suppose the biggest realization for me is that there appears to be no linear, upward curve or ascent in terms of a moviemaking career. Until you become a name — an inarguable talent or phenomenon — then each movie, each project might have to be clawed from the ether, atom by atom. And if there is no pre-sale, nothing up front, then you must operate on spec, and that can be very trying psychologically.

But then again, no one owes you a filmmaking career, and no one's (generally) asking you to make movies. So, basically, if you don't like the package, the variables and uncertainties that go with the way of life, then you're free to walk, free to take it or leave it.

Of popes, kings and other blessings

Anyone who contributed some financ-



Actors Jaime Estrada (Javier) & Drea Pressley (Susan)

ing to the making of *Susan Hero* is formally recognized by my company, Camerado, as a "Pope of Camerado." They're listed on my website at www.camerado.com, and they appear in the final credits of the movie.

In particular, one supporter who saw my *Bookwars* on TV in Germany goes by the handle, Rolando Dubioso. We've never actually met but he has sent unsolicited, lifesaving infusions of cash via PayPal uncannily, just in the nick of time, and so frequently that he's known as the "King of the Popes" in Camerado Land.

Also, critically, I enjoyed the assistance of a Los Angeles-based consulting producer, Judy Henry at Gold'N Hen Productions. She very patiently and generously helped develop the script during the days when we were still trying to go the standard development route, get talent attached, etc.

Finally, the co-editor of the project, Giacomo Ambrosini, should be noted for his enthusiasm and willingness to work under a very unusual collaborative arrangement: he being based in New York City, and I, now for the past year and a half, out here in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

At break point and beyond

After that long, meandering, tough haul of developing and shooting *Susan Hero*, I was burnt out and disillusioned. I had no money left, no job, and no home except for

a rented room with a strange, elderly, orange-haired cat lady in Santa Fe.

My car ran only in first gear. I was in my mid-thirties. And a major, supposedly indie-friendly movie channel had just reneged on a desperately needed deal to broadcast *Bookwars*.

And the "with us or against us" mentality was just reaching its feverish pitch in the U.S. I decided to take a break.

I shelved *Susan* for a while — besides, I had no way now to edit it. I left the U.S. and I came to Asia to build up my teaching experience and take a breather, get some perspective on things back home.

I've now been living and working in Cambodia for the past year and a half-plus, where I managed to do the bulk of the editing on *Susan*

Hero with various systems I built up to edit some social issue video projects for NGOs and other organizations.

I taught video production at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, was hired to make a few documentaries, assisted a new orphanage as a communications consultant, and in general have gained some much needed perspective on things.

This past summer, I went back to the U.S. for a couple of months to work with co-editor Ambrosini in finalizing the cut at the company where he works at the Tribeca Film Center. I brought back a new Intel iMac to continue doing final tweaks and polishes while preparing PR and festival materials for the current fest and distribution push.

And that's where we are now: the movie is done, and I'm submitting to fests handily from afar, though slowly sometimes, as Khmer Post sometimes likes to deliver packages the long way.

When some heat starts to build on the movie and it gets into a decent fest, or otherwise gains significant momentum, I'll head back for a while to push *Susan Hero* and to set things rolling for the next movie — which will again be a fiction feature whose script is now complete.

See the *Susan Hero* trailer and contact Jason Rosette via www.camerado.com.