



“Hot Dogs for Gauguin” (1972)

Essay by Daniel Eagan

Few student films of the 1970’s could boast as star-studded a cast as “Hot Dogs for Gauguin.” Made under the auspices of NYU’s Film School, it featured performances by Danny DeVito, at the time a stage and screen veteran, and his future wife Rhea Perlman. They agreed to work on a student film for a number of reasons, not the least being the strength of Martin Brest’s script.

Brest was born in the Bronx in 1951. He attended Stuyvesant High School and studied film under Haig Manoogian at New York University’s School of the Arts. At NYU, students started out by rotating positions on films, from cinematographer to editor to director, for example. During the course of the semester cliques would form which a director might capitalize on in order to form a crew. Students got access to 16mm cameras and editing equipment and some rudimentary lighting, but not much else. They had to pay for film stock, performers, locations, and props themselves.

These limitations had a heavy impact on the kinds of films students could make. Action scenes and chases were complicated and time-consuming. Road movies soaked up money. So did special effects. Most students focused on small-scale, low-key character sketches, generally set in locations like student housing because filming there was free. Most films ended up being dramas because comedy has its own difficulties. The films also tended to be autobiographical because students generally had little to draw on when writing other than themselves.

“Hot Dogs for Gauguin” operates on an entirely different level from most student films. For one thing, it’s an extremely well-written comedy with engaging characters. For another, it creates a believable world far removed from the personal concerns of typical student films. Third, it moves beyond production and acting problems that plague beginner filmmakers to develop a specific style of comedy.

Some student directors see their first films as an opportunity to explore cinematic devices, or to make statements about their taste and talent. Brest, on the other hand, is remarkably assured and confident in “Hot Dogs for Gauguin.” There are no bravura passages, no long tricky takes or demanding soliloquies, no gasp-inducing sets, nothing in fact that calls attention to himself. Instead, there is a meticulous attention to detail, in props, camera movement, and editing. Brest also displays an almost preternatural understanding of the filmgoing audience. He knows what viewers want to see, and just as important, when they want to see it. “Hot Dogs” has pauses, digressions, moments for viewers to catch their breath, but it also has the pacing and momentum of professional Hollywood product.

Brest accomplishes all this with technique that seems anonymous. In “Hot Dogs” the camera moves not for effort but because it has to - to keep action in frame, to draw attention to a character and detail, to punctuate a scene. Brest edits in the same manner, not to call attention to his visuals or to make viewers aware of his aesthetics, but to advance the story. Brest’s material is so strong, and his vision so precise, that it almost doesn’t matter whether his shots look pretty or not. He doesn’t have to rely on lighting or extraordinary camerawork to make his points.

What Brest does rely on is his attention to detail. “Hot Dogs” is filled with grace notes that viewers may or may not appreciate, like the accordion-tinged version of “I Surrender, Dear” that provides a backdrop to one character’s lowest emotional point. Brest’s range of references, from Bing Crosby to Giovanni Ruffini, are as impressive, and as accurate, as the enlarger in the background of a photographer’s studio or the bystanders hanging around outside a Lower East Side bodega or the glare from a boyfriend watching his date flirt with another man. These ideas build a world that viewers can accept without question. Instead of worrying about what sets are supposed to represent or why the camera is moving the way that it is, they can concentrate on the characters and their stories.

Anchored by solid performances, “Hot Dogs” is structured in a three-act style with scenes that modulate from euphoric comedy to cleverly staged suspense to despair. The premise finds starving photographer Adrian (DeVito) trying to stage an incident that will draw the world’s attention, much like the Hindenburg disaster did in 1937, in order to cash in on a picture only he will be able to take. It’s not hard to see DeVito and Brest in the same boat as Adrian, with perhaps only one chance to establish themselves as viable filmmakers.

The plot to “Hot Dogs” is so audacious that it’s hard to imagine the film being made today, it’s also so clever that it would be unfair to reveal. Unfortunately, “Hot Dogs for Gauguin” is not an especially easy film to screen, although New York University has copies.

“Hot Dogs for Gauguin” often hints to subsequent work by DeVito and Brest. DeVito, for example, would make a career playing smart, sour curmudgeons who hover on the edge of sanity – in “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” (1975, a Registry title), for example, where he played a sexually obsessed mental patient; or in the long-running television series, “Taxi,” where his misanthropic, amoral dispatcher Louis DePalma became the most popular character on the show. DeVito parlayed his experience on “Hot Dogs” into producing and cowriting his own short, “The Sound Sleeper” (1973), which in turn led to a stint at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles.

While still pursuing acting, DeVito started directing professionally. Episodes of “Taxi” led to TV movies and then features. “Throw Momma from the Train” (1987) was the first of more than a half-dozen features that DeVito has directed. Through Jersey Films, DeVito has helped produce features as varied as “Pulp Fiction” (1994) and “Erin Brockovich” (2000).

Rhea Perlman has continued acting, both with and without her husband. She is also the author of a best-selling series of books for children based on the “Otto Undercover” character.

Brest also participated in the AFI directing program, where he wrote, produced, directed, and edited the comedy “Hot Tomorrows” (1977). This in turn led to a contract with Warner Bros. to direct the comedy/drama “Going in Style” (1979). Brest began directing “WarGames” (1983) but became so insistent on his vision that its producers fired him. The shooting of “Beverly Hills Cop” (1984) was

equally troubled, but the film was an unqualified hit at the box office, establishing a new franchise for Warner Bros. and cementing Eddie Murphy's career as a movie star.

In some ways, Brest's "Midnight Run" (1988), an action/buddy blockbuster starring Robert De Niro and Charles Grodin, played off the dynamic between Adrian and Fletcher (William Duff-Griffin) in "Hot Dogs." Brest's next film, "Scent of a Woman" (1992), earned an Oscar for its star, Al Pacino. The director's last feature to date, "Gigli" (2003), received some of the harshest reviews of the decade; the production was marked by disputes between Brest and studio executives, but also by intense media coverage of its stars, Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez.

"Hot Dogs for Gauguin" was added to the National Film Registry in 2009.

The views expressed in the essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

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