

FINDING BEAUTY IN IMPERMANENCE

By BOB LIDDYCOAT, DUNNVILLE CHRONICLE MANAGING EDITOR

An affinity for all things visual and a connection to his roots are two attributes Bret Culp considers integral to his success in the world of art.

The Dunnville native has racked up a number of honours and a very extensive list of credits including 40 feature films, mini-series, and television shows. His latest honour is a 2008 Gemini award bestowed upon him for creating the "Best Visual Effects" for an episode of The Tudors.

The series is co-produced in Ireland and Canada for the Showtime network and is about to enter its third season.

In an interview from his Toronto home, Culp told the Chronicle, "It was great to win the Gemini. It's nice to be so acknowledged and well-received by a wide range of the population." He added, "It's also very nice to be acknowledged by peers who really know what you're doing."

He explained that if a visual effects person is doing his job correctly, most of the viewing population will miss it because the idea is to create seamless transitions between live and virtual sets.

He noted the awards have further benefits. "It's very good for the company and very good for me."

Culp is head of visual effects at C. O. R. E. Digital Pictures based in Toronto. The team earning the Gemini also includes Bob Munroe, Terry Bradley, Lisa-Carr- Harris and Bo Mosley, and Culp says it was the team approach that played a big part in the success of the company.

Culp was born in Dunnville in 1970 and completed high school here before studying at Ryerson University.

"When I was in high school figuring out what to do, I initially thought that it would be interesting to do special effects in films. Movies like Star Wars had an impact on me. And, I thought, how many people are actually doing that kind of work? It must be a small group but someone has got to do it, so why not me?"

At Ryerson, he studied film and photography and has managed to amass an impressive body of work in both fields.

"Something must have worked because I manage to do both," said Culp, referring to his fine art photography and lengthy credits in the film industry.

"I was drawn to imagery whereas my brother Erik was drawn to sound," he said, adding that Erik is also involved in the business, doing sound for film.

Culp said he was fortunate in making some choices in the subjects he chose to study that later paid off.

"I am really into visual effects using computers. At an early age I became fixated on computer technology. While still in Dunnville, I taught myself programming," he said.

"I considered doing video games but was drawn more toward the graphic end of things."

Those early skills paved the way for his venture into visual effects in motion pictures.

After Ryerson, he worked in TV, doing commercials and creating visual effects at places like Much Music.

"I had programming knowledge and that was vital because there was very little software available at the time," he said.

"That provided the opportunity to do a broader range of work. One of the key efforts was doing the opening sequence to William Shatner's Tek War," he said.

Culp was nominated for the 1994 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Individual Achievement in Graphic Design and Title Sequences.

"I was 23 years old at the time and it got a lot of attention, even from Shatner," Culp explained.

"I met people who became life friends. When the Tek War thing took off, digital pictures took off. I became head of the visual effects department," Culp explained.

Shatner remains one of the principal partners in C. O. R. E.

His expertise as visual effects supervisor led to further duties as Culp now acts as a second unit director on the Tudors.

"It's been great," he said of the new experience. "Second unit direction usually means filling out sequences not involving the principal actors but my second day in, I was working with Jonathan Rhys Myers and Henry Cavill, (two of the lead actors)."

Filming for the series has taken place in Ireland and Culp has been thrilled with the location as well.

"It's been fantastic. I really have an affinity for Ireland as visual effects supervisor and second unit director," he said. "The Irish people are so welcoming. It's been a natural fit. I've come to know the crew and the people have been fantastic."

However, he said the Tudors will most likely end after a fourth season.

"We like the show and we like the work that we do on it. The clients in Toronto, in Ireland and at Showtime in Los Angeles are all happy with our work as well," he said.

"If there is a fourth season that will likely be the last one because it will wrap up the story line. It will be sad when it ends because it's been such a good relationship," he explained. He hopes the same team can be involved in future productions.

For most artists, the film work would be enough. But in addition to the Gemini and Emmy nomination, Culp has also won an International Fantasy Film Award for Best Visual Effects for 'Cypher,' a movie starring Jeremy Northam and Lucy Liu.

PLEASE SEE "PASSION" Culp has also managed to produce an impressive volume of outstanding photographic pieces. He explained the photography provides unique challenges and a different quest.

"Photography is a fine art pursuit. It's a personal expression," he said. "Film is satisfying but there I am part of a team. It doesn't allow the completely personal expression found in photography."

Most individuals would be happy with the body of work he has garnered in either field but Culp explained, " If you find you're passionate about it, you find the time."

His lengthy stays in Ireland have also been conducive to the creation of stunning photography.

"The Irish landscapes are so sympathetic to the kind of photography I like," he said. Even here Culp brings in a digital aspect combined with traditional photography.

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He owns a Nikon digital camera but quite often uses a 1952 Rolleiflex film camera and a high-end scanner to get the prints onto the computer. He explains the method actually maintains more visual information than straight film, which might be contrary to what one might expect. He does his "dark room" work in Photoshop, the industry standard of photo manipulation software.

His website, www.bretculp.com, is entitled "The Beauty of Impermanence." He writes within: "These are the photographs of matter governed by time chosen to illustrate the relentless determination of nature, the beauty in impermanence, and the eternal cycle of creation out of destruction. I came to realize the focus of what my photographic work is all about -that beauty of impermanence." He has also produced a book with the same title.

Clearly, Culp is a man who embraces change.

"I'm not a Buddhist, but its kind of a Buddhist angle," he suggests. "Most of my work contains an element where the presence of people can be felt."

As an example, there is a photo of castle ruins on the home page of his website. "I think in that castle you can feel the hopes and aspirations of all the people," he said.

"There's something very appealing in Buddhist philosophy. Impermanence is vital and to be embraced. Nothing can get better without change," he offered.

Bret is married to Julie McGregor, who is a painter and jazz singer.

"I first saw Julie when she was singing at the Liberty Street Café while out for dinner with my mother," said Culp. "I was drawn to her. There was an immediate connection and she gave me her card with an upcoming performance. It turned out we had a show at the same gallery on the same day."

He realizes how fortunate he is that he and Julie work in fields they love and noted, "Our whole lives are about creating."

His dad Sam, and his mom Diane, still live in Dunnville and he comes home at least four times a year.

And he says, even while shooting in Ireland, his photography still contains an element of home in them. "My photographs are best when they provide me with a connection to when I was a little kid playing on the pond on John Street in Dunnville," he said. "Those photographs take me back to specific moments."

His photography awards include: an International Black and White Spider award for Fine Art; a ProFoto's Excellence in Imaging and Design award; an Agfa International Photography award; and inclusion in volume one of The World's Greatest Black & White Photography.

He has a photo exhibition coming up when his work will be part of "Convergence," the 46th annual juried exhibition of fine art at the famed Tom Thomson Art Gallery in Owen Sound from January 23 to March 8. Shortly after that, he will be heading back to Ireland for the third season of The Tudors.

His success must also stem from a belief in creating one's own destiny. "The enjoyment you get from anything is directly related to the degree to which you embrace it," he wisely offers.

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