



*On location in Salt Lake for
Peroxide Passion, actor James
Tupper (right) discusses a scene with
director Monty Diamond.*

Monty Diamond

by David Geffner

You've heard this story before. Ambitious first-time director, who cut his teeth in the theatre and seat-of-your-pants documentary filmmaking, spends many lonely years trying to fuel his independent vision by raising money for a feature film. Forced to deal with the constraints of time and lack of money, the budding auteur stocks his cast with eager and talented young actors, albeit unknowns, then strikes a deal to use a slew of DGA members to round out his production team.

"Wait a second, did he just say DGA? On a micro-budgeted, self-financed indie feature?"

You betcha. But then Monty Diamond, the director of *Peroxide Passion* and a long-standing DGA member, having line produced or production managed over 20 films, is not your typical film school grad. Shooting guerrilla-style with an inexperienced skeleton crew (skating down two or three jobs while they squeeze your shoot in) does not hold much allure for this first-time director. To make *Peroxide Passion* on a small budget and still use a DGA crew, Diamond took advantage of

the DGA's low-budget agreement. The production budget on *Peroxide Passion* was a scant \$200,000.

For Diamond, having a DGA crew was crucial to making the film. "I can't stress enough how essential it was to have people around me who spoke my language," he said. "Guys like John Gallagher (1st AD) and co-executive producers Bob Colesberry and Michael Peyser were invaluable because, having worked their ways up the DGA ranks on a number of excellent films, they have great technical skills. I believe it's because these guys understand the technical so well that they were free to apply

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On location in New York, from left, 1st AD John Gallagher, director Monty Diamond and executive producer Bob Colesberry.

their tremendous creativity and inventiveness to enhance the filming of even my small story. Anyone who has worked with them on pictures of any size will tell you how much Bob, John and Mike contribute to the storytelling. I think the same applies to many DGA members I've worked with over the years. Simply put, there can be no invention without technique and the greater the technique the greater the possibility for invention."

The language Diamond has spent years learning and which he speaks so eloquently himself is production — slaying those potential on-set dragons which plague so many indie shoots. Scattered within the filmmakers extensive résumé are his UPM duties for John Schlesinger's *The Believers*, Bertrand Tavernier's *Round Midnight*, Gillian Armstrong's *Mrs. Soffel* and Luc Besson's *The Big Blue*. These directors are not exactly associated with working on tight budgets, but according to Diamond, the same rules apply.

"I don't care if the movie costs \$20,000 or \$20,000,000, the more preparation you do with your UPM, AD and DP before each day's shoot, the more time you will have to work with actors on the set and not stress over the technical stuff," Diamond said. "The low-budget contract allowed me to get the kind of people I'm used to working with on larger budgeted films. And

frankly, that made a huge difference.

"The Guild let us hire whomever we needed to fit our budget," Diamond explained. "We were able to bring Guild experience on board and only pay pension and welfare on a tiny portion of salary. It wasn't a budget buster. I had a DGA second, first and Colesberry as executive producer. Once the film had distribution and monies had come in, then we could make that whole, up to a certain level.

"This was Gallagher's debut as a first AD after a very distinguished career as a key 2nd on *Evita* and *The Scarlet Letter*, big movies. I think, the notion of the Guild is that their members will get something from the experience. That is they'll be able to cut their teeth on a job where in the past they might have been disqualified because the production couldn't afford Directors Guild personnel at the lowest budget. Now, Directors Guild personnel are available to 'All Features Great and Small,' as I like to say."

On the surface, *Peroxide Passion* would seem to present more of a challenge than even the DGA's best talent could measure up to. As if traversing 23 locations in three different states for a 22-day shoot were not enough, David Atkins' puzzle-box of a script relied on tight comedic timing with lots of physical gags. According to Diamond, the

script traces its inspiration from the *Well-Made Play* of 19th-century French farce by way of Hollywood's Depression-era screwball comedies.

"David's script was insanely funny and smart in the tradition of the great French playwrights like Scribe and Labiche who I was already familiar with from my work in theatre," Diamond explained. "It demanded enormous preparation because of all the intricate comedy and multiple locations."

Did the tension of stuffing too many set-ups into a single day's shoot ever get to Diamond and his crew?

"There were one or two moments where John Gallagher and I disagreed, but they were immediately diffused so as not to pollute the day's work," Diamond said. "On a low-budget film, you really have to be in sync with your crew because even minor disagreements can filter down to the actors and inhibit them from doing the best work."

Diamond is a bit of a rare breed in the indie world — shifting between the right-brain creative demands of working actors and the left-side technical process of fulfilling a tight shoot. Setting out to master the nuts and bolts of making movies early on in his career, Diamond began in late-'60s New York City with NBC News on a *60 Minutes* type-format show called *First Tuesday*.

He then went *continued on page 97*

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to the University of North Carolina where he worked on documentaries and met such future heavyweights as Richard Pearce and Michael Hausman on Pearce's first feature. Eventually, Diamond built up a solid résumé as a unit production manager, occasionally taking up the producing reins himself in his work with JoAnne Akalaitis and the Mabou Mines (*Dead End Kids: A History of Nuclear Power*) and a short film he directed written by Tom Fontana (*First Thing Monday*). The French in particular took a liking for Diamond's production skills. He worked with such stand-out directors as Besson, Claude Lelouch, Daniel Vigne and Jean Jacques Annaud.

Colesberry, whose producing credits include *Mississippi Burning*, *Come See the Paradise*, *Billy Batgate* and the recent *The Devil's Own*, feels that Diamond was the best choice to direct the material because he has "an incredibly warped sense of humor. It's very dark and matched the material."

"Obviously, Monty's years of production experience helped him on *Peroxide Passion*, but not necessarily in ways you'd think," Colesberry said. "It was more his sense of pacing on the set — when to give these young actors room and when to rein them in — which is the result of his production gifts. Monty knew where he needed to be during the shoot on any given day and that maximized the time and patience he needed for his cast."

On his own abilities and love for actors, Diamond is fairly humble. "I've had some great teachers — Frank Daniel, Nikos Psacharopolis, Stella Adler. They always stressed the importance of actors; how essential it is to create an environment where they do their best work."

"In the end, nothing else matters but helping the actors with their performance," Diamond added. "And if the actors and me can get there through our combined passion and ingenuity, and not go over budget, then I think I've done my job."

David Geffner is an L.A.-based filmmaker and journalist specializing in independent film.

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