

Chopper Bernet, “Diving into Water”

I called it the "Golden Summer of 1993" because I was ecstatic to be rehearsing with Chopper Bernet, and about twelve other actors, in a small North Beach basement theater, Bannam Place, in San Francisco. It was the first time Chopper and I worked together. The play he was in (there were two others) was called *Thieves*. I was the writer/director and Chopper was the lead actor opposite Gina Fields and Fontana Butterfield. I wanted and needed that summer to be "golden", wanted to create new possibilities for my life, and for others, out of thin air. Chopper was the perfect friend to help me.

On stage, on screen, or in real life, Chopper flashes with feverish, enthusiastic present-tense energy. In North Beach that Summer, he was always laughing and making jokes but, more than anything, he was completely intent on making his acting as honest as possible. Bannam Place was definitely not a well-known theater (although I think Francis Ford Coppola did some readings there). The audiences for our performances were often extremely small and it sometimes felt like an acting and writing workshop, a place where Chopper and I, with the other actors, explored new, hidden worlds. A few times we had solid audiences, including tourists from Europe who found the theater at random, but Chopper worked tirelessly whether the audience was full or there was only one person in the house (and that happened). Between rehearsals and performances, the actors and technicians bought pizza at Golden Boy, drank coffee at Mario's Cigar Store Cafe and Caffè Trieste, or drank beer at Savoy Tivoli. Chopper and I often sat in the tiny dark theater, after the other actors had left, and talked about books and dreams and other projects we might create. Chopper had so many ideas that they seemed to illuminate the darkness.

Seven years later, living in LA, Chopper was beginning to have success as a voice over actor. I contacted him, again a little out of the blue, with the script for our first independent feature film, *Coffee and Language*. He not only wanted to act in it but also agreed to come back to SF for a month to rehearse and perform in a workshop at the Phoenix Theater and then make the film. When we began filming in a real coffeehouse on Polk Street, we were only able to work at night, usually all night. Still, I don't remember a single moment when Chopper looked tired. If he wasn't in a scene, he was almost always watching intently, helping, eating a donut from Bob's Donuts (the best ever) or even filming with his own camera while KC Smith, our DP, set up the next shot. Later, half of *Coffee and Language* (shot on 16mm film) was destroyed, TWICE, by lab error and we had to re-shoot all of that footage twice during the months that followed. For me, that was a near catastrophe, but Chopper was absolutely supportive and, rather than seeing it as a problem, viewed it as an opportunity to perform his role with even greater depth.

In this small indie film, shot mostly in black and white, a man falls in love with a novelist after reading her work, approaches her in a coffeehouse and tries to begin a relationship. The acting interplay between Chopper and Janis DeLucia is, to me, subtle, complex and finally beautiful. I owe that to Chopper and Janis. Of course, we

rehearsed extensively but, if anything, they only wanted to rehearse further and find more and more elements to the relationship. The commitment shows in that they feel constantly connected on screen, and in fact, felt constantly connected and focused when we were filming. Many shots were done in a single take, almost all in two or three.

In 2002, I sent Chopper my novel *Gambling* that I was beginning to transform into a film. While he was interested in playing the lead, it didn't seem practical with his increasing voice over and family commitments. Soon, however, he offered to help finance the film and play a more limited role, the main character's antagonist. We shot most of his scenes in three days on the top floor of what was then the Argent Hotel in San Francisco. Again, we were forced to work all night every night. Again, he was tireless and focused. On the morning we finished his scenes, the staff and crew, except Rick Rosenberg, our producer, left exhausted. On the 32nd floor, Chopper, Rick and I looked out over San Francisco in the early morning sunlight. There wasn't a lot to say. The conference room where we filmed was in a shambles. I sipped yet another cup of coffee. Even Chopper was a little tired, but not much. Mainly, there was a fantastic feeling, one that I think the three of us shared – the feeling that comes after making an intense creative effort, after working as hard as you possibly can.

The next role Chopper performed in one of our films was a lead in *Belief* in 2007. At this point, he had so much voice over work that he had almost no available time. We decided to try an experiment, to literally shoot not just some scenes, but *an entire feature film in three days*, largely in a single room. Crazy perhaps, but together with Chris Pflueger, who played opposite Chopper in this two-person film, and with the help of KC Smith, Rick Rosenberg, David Driver, Dan Gomes, Silvia Perovsek and Janis, we put it together. In preparation, Chopper and Chris worked and mastered lines over the telephone, a huge challenge in itself because the script, like all of our films, has dense, complicated dialogue. We rehearsed for one weekend and Chopper returned the next weekend for filming.

The first shot in *Belief* is special to me. Chopper's character ("Dan") is a member of a fanatical group who tries to persuade Chris Pflueger's character ("Mr. Glenn") to radically alter his life. For years I had dreamed of a wide shot where "Dan," carrying a briefcase, walks up a huge hill alongside a road, as cars pass beside him, a shot that embodies his isolation and relentless, almost maniacal, determination. Rick Rosenberg found the perfect location near Richmond and Dan Gomes framed the shot just as the sun was setting. Chopper went to the bottom of the hill. We had time for two takes. The first take was essentially perfect and is the one used in the film. I remember shouting with joy when Chopper stepped out of frame as it finished. However, climbing the hill was no easy task and the shot was four or five minutes long. When we went for the second take, Chopper did an absurd run/walk down the hill zigzagging back and forth across the busy road. It was another moment filled with his coruscating personality, one instant seriously focused on the role, the next playing with childlike excitement.

What I didn't realize until after the second take was that Chopper was ill and had a fever. When we got back to the set, he was obviously suffering but insisted on moving forward. As planned, we worked through the entire script, without stopping, except maybe once in the middle. We used multiple cameras to capture the action. We had planned to film the entire script two or more times each night but Chopper's voice began to be affected by his cold. Over his protests, I decided to stop at about one in the morning and try again the next night. Privately, I assumed that the experiment was absurd and not going to work. We had footage from the single take, but it was inconsistent and Chopper was sick. However, the next night, Chopper had basically willed himself back to health. We went through the entire film twice, with pickup shots, and both performances were amazing. Probably because of its claustrophobic and experimental nature, this film has had very little exposure, but I continue to feel it contains some of the best acting work that Chopper and Chris have done. And I will always be moved by Chopper's delivery of the monologue urging "Mr. Glenn" to

"Remember, years ago, when you were young, maybe just a boy walking beside a lake in the summer . . . remember what you once felt that life could be? What you thought you could be? Remember the sense of having no limits, of absolute freedom, like diving into water?"

It seems to me that Chopper has never lost that feeling, that he is always young, always creating possibilities out of thin air, always "diving into water."

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