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Sunny Side-Up

How Christopher Coppola became the godfather of independent films and may turn heads with his upcoming anti-racist monster movie

By Christa Martin

Christopher Coppola can do the best Nicolas Cage impression—without even trying. It's a testimony to the wonders of DNA, being that the two are brothers. Even so, the vocal similarities are a little uncanny. The familiar deep drawl, an emphasis on certain syllables. Anyone walking by would do a double take as Cage's distinctive rumblings are widely recognized. Yet the onlooker would likely glance then keep moving. No case of mistaken identity, for that's where the two siblings diverge. Both are offspring of the severely talented Coppola pool, but they hardly look alike. Christopher is a bear of a man, but his powerful presence is nothing to fear. While Cage's career is mainstream, his brother has chosen the independent route. Cage is a household name. His brother remains relatively unnoticed by the public radar.

Recently Christopher was in town to do press for his upcoming Santa Cruz Film Festival indie digital movie, *The Creature of the Sunny Side-Up Trailer Park*. Christopher chatted with GT about being a Coppola (he's the nephew of Francis Ford and the cousin of Sophia) and being a filmmaker. His upcoming picture is his eighth feature film, a throwback story to the 1970s; a campy flick that unites two unknown brothers, one black, one white, as they discover what their mother willed to them upon her death. They encounter racism (toward each other) and a lurking secret in a creepy, desolate, little town.

Good Times: How do you describe your new film, *The Creature of the Sunny Side-Up Trailer Park*?

Christopher Coppola: It's an anti-racist monster movie. I wanted to do something about racism and what it meant to me. I don't judge racists. I consider a racist an ignorant person who hasn't been fully educated or brought up properly. There's something inside there that is unique, valuable, which is the human spirit. About three years ago I said, 'How do I want to tell this?' I like simplicity and not being too preachy. I want people to know it's campy. You have permission to laugh and have a good time.

GT: Where was it filmed and what was your budget?

CC: It was filmed in Twenty Nine Palms in the desert. It's probably the most over-budget film of all time because even though it was meant to be made in 24 days, for under \$1 million, it took 72 days. (The budget went over and the guy in the rubber monster suit had to take frequent and necessary breaks.)

GT: How did you get into filmmaking?

CC: My background (as a child) was in Super 8 films with my brother Nic. He was the actor, I was the director.

GT: How much does your family influence you and what have you learned from them?

CC: Not much. I've learned that we all have a very interesting pool of talent that is inherited. It's borderline insane but it's definitely there. It's something to tap into which I think is why there are so many talented people in the family. We all share this blood and we tap into it. What I don't like about it is it's very intense and very competitive. I prefer to get away from that. I've learned some little things along the way that are helpful. I think most of what I've learned I learned on my own.

GT: Is your family pretty close?

CC: Yeah, we're close and we love one another. I was less goal-oriented and I wanted to finish school and I wanted to develop my own voice and have more experiences in life. I didn't want to go right to Hollywood. My whole mission creatively is to create an alternative Hollywood with the digital revolution to help my fellow independent artists and filmmakers and give them other venues to show their work.

GT: Does the Coppola name help you or hinder you?

CC: It's both. You're obviously judged harder. I remember when Sophia's film came out, the first one, *The Virgin Suicides*. I went to see it. I came out and heard these college professors just bad mouthing the film and bad mouthing her. Why'd they have to be so mean? It's envy and that definitely exists. It can be very bitter and brutal. At the same time if I call somebody, my call is returned because they don't want to offend.

GT: What tips, wisdom and advice can you give to people who are participating in the Santa Cruz Film Festival?

CC: Give 100 percent no matter what they do. A lot of young filmmakers will make a short to get something bigger. It's like a calling card to Hollywood. Or they'll write the perfect script thinking it'll get them the big career. I believe that people need to develop their voice and do as many little films and treat those little films as if they were big films with just as much energy and respect as you would on a bigger movie. Whatever you're doing, it's a venue; it's a vehicle. By doing it you hone your craft and you develop more importantly your voice of whom you are as a human being.

GT: What do you think about selling out (as an independent filmmaker to the Hollywood vehicle)?

CC: I'm not into it. I have questions about selling out. There's nothing wrong with having a bigger house and nothing wrong with having success. I have no problems with that. The problem is when you change your voice to get the success. Most of our artists in pop culture today are sellouts and that's not their fault. It's a vicious cycle. If all they give you is a certain kind of film, they spoon feed you. That's what sells. It keeps snuffing out the independent world because they can't get their movies shown. [Hollywood] is scared

to hell of this whole digital revolution and they're scared of me. And I'm going to do whatever I have to do to make it happen.

GT: What's your style of directing?

CC: My style is to capture those spontaneous moments. I often have actors tell me jokes because whether they can or can't you see something true about who they are as people. I'm kind of like a circus ringleader. I will never give them an example. To me that's bad. I'm considered a taskmaster. My crew is my army and my cast are my kids and I separate them and I don't let the crew talk to the talent. If they do they have to call them by their character names. Then again, I'm really protective of my crew.

GT: What's one of the best lessons you've learned over the last 20 years?

CC: Persistence. Also, finish everything. Be honest. Take the punches and stick with it and be true about it.

GT: What are your plans for this movie, *The Creature of the Sunny Side-Up Trailer Park*?

CC: We [his production company Plaster City Productions] own it. We'll hold onto it and do our own thing. It may go to little drive-ins. We might sell directly to DVD. The main reason why it was made was to really talk about this whole digital revolution. It's not trying to be anything other than that [a campy rubber suit monster movie], which is what we need now. We need people to stick to their voices.

Christopher Coppola's film, The Creature of the Sunny Side-Up Trailer Park will play at this year's Santa Cruz Film Festival on Thursday, May 20 at the Skyview Drive-in. The festival runs May 13-21. For more info, visit www.santacruzfilmfestival.com.