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Q & A with Filmmaker James Cotten

Los Angeles Film School graduate, James Cotten directed *Sugar Creek* a sleepy hollow award-winning fairytale that will be released on video by Vanguard Cinema on July 24.

Cotten, who got his start when Roger Corman selected him to direct *Demon Slayer*, sat down with The LA Film School to talk about *Sugar Creek* and his career as a filmmaker.

LAFS: Tell me about *Sugar Creek* and why you made it.

COTTEN: Amedeo D'Adamo, the former dean at The LA Film School, told me that I should do a western. I thought it was dumb idea, since I'm really into other types of films, but it got me thinking, because I do like westerns. He said it was in my sensibilities. I started writing this script and fell in love with it.

Sugar Creek is anything but a typical western. After *Demon Slayer* I was ready to do my kind of movie. It may not have as much action as I would like, but it does have all the themes and character. It's a great story... and different. Because of the budget, we went more fairytale than suspense/western. I like to think of it as my "Disney movie" from hell.

LAFS: Are you glad you chose this type of film to make?

COTTEN: I probably should have chosen something different considering our budget. I mean we did everything you're not supposed to do on the budget I had... everything - horses, kids, stunts, and guns. But, I like a challenge and believe that the only way to prove yourself is by pulling off the impossible.

LAFS: What was the biggest challenge in filming *Sugar Creek*?

COTTEN: Raising money...other than that...everything else. *Sugar Creek* was built on the backs of a bunch of people who wanted to make the best movie possible. This crew, while not experienced, made up for it by working butts off, and for very little financial gain.

Also I tried to get this film done in California, but it just wasn't happening. At the



Dubbing Stage

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time, I thought everything would be easy. I had just directed *Demon Slayer*. It was on the shelves. I had great connections... and I was sitting. That's frustrating. I made the only choice you have to make, that I would tell any filmmaker... if you want to make it happen, just do it... whatever it takes.

LAFS: How did you raise the money to make *Sugar Creek*?

COTTEN: First off, I have to thank the school and Roger Corman, because *Demon Slayer* educated me on how to make a movie on very little. It was also the proof I needed to talk with investors. I have to thank those investors...and my Dad for helping me while I drove all over the state for meetings. These people all believed in me... and that's how a movie gets made

LAFS: Why do you make films?

COTTEN: I like a good story. I like to tell a good story. Someone once told me that a good story, or movie, is a mirror for its audience... for us to look at ourselves. I like that. Maybe that's it... I want to leave a mark.

I like the practical things of the business too. Filmmaking is challenging. You have to be a little bit of everything, an artist, an entrepreneur, a manager, an entertainer. Everyday is different. It might be A.D.D., but I like constant change.

LAFS: What opportunities did The Los Angeles Film School provide you with?

COTTEN: What didn't it provide me? I learned from so many people, "working in the industry" experienced people. That's huge. You're already networking before you get out of the doors. The faculty always went out of their way to be supportive, and share. When that wasn't enough, they brought in the megastars, like Paul Verhoven or Donald Petrie, as guest speakers. It was an overload of information, plus I got to meet the guy who made *Robocop*.

Even after graduation, the school continued to support me. Both Amadeo and Daniele Suissa called me when Roger Corman asked the school for a co-venture. They told me to enter my stuff, because Roger was going to choose the keys from the alumni. The CEO, Diana Kessler, called one Christmas and said Roger wanted me to direct. You can only imagine how that felt, that's support. I still have the Steven Spielberg book Diana gave me that Christmas.

LAFS: Who is your favorite filmmaker?

COTTEN: There are so many, for different reasons. I can still watch an Alfred Hitchcock film after the hundredth time and not get bored. I'm not a snob. I like big budget the same as quirky independents. Ridley Scott is the best at dark and kinetic. He's a "big budget god." I might not agree with everything, but M. Night can shoot a movie. The shots and performance are intricate and beautiful. I admire Peter Jackson for creating an empire from nothing, and I'm a "Ring Geek." I'd say the same for Spielberg and Lucas. *Star Wars* was the birth of my imagination... I'm just more twisted.

LAFS: What other projects are you working on?

COTTEN: Right now, I'm in pre-production on *Resurrection County* a script I wrote last year. It's a straight edged horror movie, "Deliverance 2007" style, with a touch of *Hostel*. Instead of Europe, we're in Arkansas. It should be a raw and intense ride, with lots of suspense and torture.

After that, I've been contracted by Project One Films to direct *La Linea*. It's an excellent script, in the vein of Michael Mann films. The story is about a broken down hitman, Shields, who travels south of the border to fulfill a contract on a cartel leader. The story is full of double crosses, and backstabbing, a real character piece. I'm excited about both.

LAFS: What is your ultimate goal?

COTTEN: You can probably see by the filmmakers I selected, I really want to make Studio Pictures. I don't want to be limited by budgets, but make whatever it is my mind can come up with. I want to make a franchise. I want to create worlds.

I also want the option of going home, to the South, when I can and making quirky

smaller films to help build a Southern filmmaking community that can support itself.

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