Film Freak

Tom E. Brown’s shorts are long on laughs

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The screenplay was written during a five-hour plane ride. The film was shot in a day and a half. Now, Tom E. Brown’s seven-minute black-and-white comedy, *Don’t Run, Johnny*, is a must-see on the festival circuit, with nearly 30 appearances to date -- including at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival, an annual celebration of the hottest indie filmmakers. Critics have hailed Brown as “the Jerry Lewis of AIDS movies,” so it’s no surprise that when promoting *Johnny*, the Chicago International Film Festival said simply, "*Philadelphia* it ain’t."

Inspired by the B-movies of legendary schlockmeister Ed Wood, *Johnny* follows the story of your average gay guy’s panic-stricken run through abandoned city streets and back alleys after testing positive for HIV. Feeling like a freak, *Johnny* (played by Brown) races through the anxiety, confusion, loneliness and denial that often follow on the heels of a new diagnosis. He stops his mad dash only when he hits this metaphysical wall: "Maybe I *am* a freak, but in a way...aren’t we all?"

“I always wrote wacky stuff in a weird way,” says Brown, who was diagnosed with HIV 12 years ago. Although the writer-director-producer-actor has made several other comedic shorts, what finally led Brown to address his serostatus in his work was a desire to rid himself of his gnawing need to compare his problems with others’. “When I stopped competing with everyone else’s ’freakness,’ I began to accept my own. Like when I used to hear someone complain about their tumor or something, I’d think, ’My AIDS beats that.’”

With this irreverent perspective, is it any wonder that Brown found a soulmate in Ed Wood, a Hollywood outsider who unapologetically imposed his idiosyncratic views on cross-dressing and superior intelligence through such camp cult classics as *Glen or Glenda* and *Plan 9 From Outer Space*? Though Brown describes Wood’s films as “incredibly bad, but entertaining because of that,” the main reason that he modeled *Johnny*’s look and logic after Wood’s was budgetary: He had $200 to get *Johnny* in the can. “I figured if we made any mistakes, it could look like ’genius,’” Brown says, referring to Wood’s notoriously cheap production values.

Industry peers haven’t quite deemed Brown a genius, but they’ve greeted him with open arms. “Everyone else at Sundance was, like, from Columbia film school,” says the 31-year-old self-taught filmmaker, “and when I announced that I was a high school dropout, I got a tremendous round of applause.” Though the outpouring amused him, this acceptance has been gratifying for Brown,

who’s been making independent shorts since 1990, when he formed his own production company, Bugsby Pictures. Under his direction, the cash-strapped San Francisco-based operation has produced a number of music videos for Blues Traveler (whose lead singer, John Popper, was *Johnny*’s executive producer) and the Who Whos.

Since *Johnny*’s success, Brown has devoted his energy to projects that focus on HIV, including *Filmstrip*, a 35-mm short in garish color that, according to Brown, presents the disease as “a demonic clown doll that comes to life.” Another film, *Rubber Gloves* -- promoted with the tag line “Nothing you need to know about AIDS” -- returns to the high-contrast black-and-white that made *Johnny* such a stylish gem. In seven meditative minutes, *Rubber Gloves* juxtaposes a slow-moving series of nature-vs.-urban images as Brown narrates hilariously in classic beat-poetry riffs. The climax of this arresting mix of quirky humor and spirituality? Brown professes love for the virus coursing through his veins.

If through his short films Brown has been highlighting the emotional complexities that come from living with AIDS, the process has enabled him to envision the big picture: A feature-length film (working title: *Pushing Dead*) about a security guard who comes out as HIV positive by performing his poetry in smoky nightclubs. The expanded length will give Brown plenty of room in which to fit together all of his viral-related experiences -- in his usual droll manner, of course. “I’m all about laughs,” he says. "*Pushing Dead* is kind of a love story, but in place of the love interest, there’s the guy’s relationship with AIDS."

That’s one relationship Brown can handle. “I have no medical complaints,” he says. “I’m happier now than I’ve ever been because I’m doing what I want to do: Making movies. And because I’m not in a relationship.” He isn’t looking, either -- with one possible exception. “I would totally welcome a stalker,” says Brown. “You’re nobody until you’ve got a stalker.”

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