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When I first moved to New York City as a freshly minted associate editor at Circus Magazine, I quickly immersed myself in the downtown scene where conceptual art events, outlandish fashion statements, and cutting-edge rock performances flourished in various clubs, galleries and loft spaces.

As the scene developed at the end of '70s and flowed into the early '80s, places like the Mudd Club, Club 57, The Pyramid and Danceteria provided the environment where punk rock merged with electro new wave, sexual identities alternated, and new kinds of art got invented.

For a moment there, just hanging out was something of a statement -- of rebellion against the encroaching conformity and cultural backsliding suggested by the Reagan era and a celebration of an artistic world where money and marketing weren't all that mattered.

To some, that seems like a long time ago, but in many ways there is still a continuity, a continuum that flows from that era's bohemianism (which embraced and was inspired by the bohos of before) to now and to over-arching events like the 2010 Tribeca Film Festival. The 9th edition kicks off this week, running from April 21st to May 2nd, 2010, with the premiere screening of *Shrek Forever After*.

Just as TFF's new Chief Creative Officer Geoff Gilmore (the former Sundance Film Festival head) hails this year's festival as harkening back to the days when indie film emerged and embraced so many new ideas and business models, films like *Arias With A Twist: The Docufantasy* (which premieres at TFF, Friday, April 23, at 6 pm in the Village East Cinema 1), connect such fests to the era it celebrates.

Through the life of pop-punk performance artist Joey Arias -- part sex symbol and artistic chameleon -- and his collaboration with rock puppeteer Basil Twist, the film chronicles a unique persona set in motion (on the West Coast), but propelled into action through the catalytic energy of the Big Apple. I met Joey when he worked in the funky-but-chic midtown clothing store Fiorucci's and saw him perform many times.

Still, it takes a director like photographer Bobby Sheehan, who not only lived through such times, but gets reborn as a filmmaker with a new agenda to re-connect his subjects to the larger cultural phenomena -- much like this film festival purports to do, as an incubator for indie talent and ideas. To a degree, both succeed, and suggest the many other ways they can further succeed in the future.

**Q:** When you got into making this project, what were your expectations?

**BS:** My first instinct was, after seeing the play, was, "We have to document this thing, [Arias with a Twist, the 2008 live show/collaboration between Joey and master puppeteer Twist staged at Manhattan's Here Arts Center], because there's nothing like it. If this thing goes away and people can't see it even in a projected form or on a television set, it's shame. There's far too much in this thing to just to let it go away forever so let's document it."

Simultaneously I thought, "We've been talking about touching on your [Joey's] history and your influences so let's do that."

Basil has this great, interesting past too, so we have to do that. He's kind of like the Mick Jagger of the puppetry world.

[This film] started out as what I thought was going to be a much smaller project which would be largely be about the play, and as it evolved I think we interviewed close to 50 people.

We had a much longer cut, but had to take out a lot of interviews because it was very talking head-y, yet everything in there was interesting.

There are all these interesting people saying great stuff, so the film became more of this kind of hybrid where you have all these elements of fantasy and you have this historical stuff and all these interesting people talking about interesting things. It became a much bigger thing but I hope it's still intimate.

It's an intimate glimpse into these worlds that you wouldn't necessarily know about unless you look for it or this film finds you or if Basil Twist or Joey Arias finds you.

So it became much bigger than what I thought; I didn't really anticipate traveling to Nashville to interview Katy Kay and Christie Rose, to go to Los Angeles to interview Cassandra Peterson and Gary Austin, and then going to Seattle, and to Berlin.

We shot at the Christopher Street Gay Pride Parade in Berlin in 2009 where Joey performed to over 500,000 people. Last year, we shot at the Puppet Festival in Charleville, France that happens every three years - Basil studied puppetry there and it's like the Harvard for puppetry - very few Americans have ever been accepted. We went to France twice.

Actually, we went to France three times because I had to go back to interview [the legendary fashion designer/icon] Thierry Mugler, who's now Manford, by the way. So it became a much bigger production.

**Q:** Was it hard to find the money for this?

**BS:** I have a commercial career and do other documentaries. Last year I did an AmEx and a couple Pfizer campaigns. It was just out-of-pocket, self-financed. So it's truly a labor of love because on paper if I went to investors and said, "Let's do this documentary, Arias with a Twist," they probably would have looked at me cross-eyed like, "Are you out of your mind?"

**Q:** And so it's self-financed?

**BS:** It's still self-financed, which we feel good about because we only answer to ourselves. I show cuts to Basil and Joey and we have creative chats. There isn't a money person saying, "Is this too gay or is that too weird" None of that.

We just look at the content of the film and we have meetings about it and we edit for what's going to make it the most creative film.

**Q:** And where did you go between this movie and back in the day; where have you been?

**BS:** I've been making little films, doing lots of commercials. The '80s started out exactly like what you remember.

So by the time the '80s ended I had to sort of pull myself together or else I was going to be another bad statistic. I had to thaw out from the '80s and just get myself together.

I've been trying to make a living doing commercials, and you get preoccupied and addicted to making money, so I kind of drifted a bit. Now I'm trying to get back to what I originally wanted to do, which is to [make] film. And Joey's like a brother to me. I've done a number of projects with him, and through the years we've always spoken about doing some sort of a documentary thing because he's obviously a fascinating person.

Then, [like I said,] when I saw the play he did with Basil I was like "That's it, we've got to do this thing now because this play is going to come and go."

It might be happening again. It happened in a really small theater and ran for like six months. They were only supposed to run it for like eight weeks or something like that and then I think they extended it to six months.

It was hugely popular and I think this film might regenerate the [interest] in having the play remounted again back in New York. So it's possible.

There's talk of bringing it to Berlin in June; it travels. I've traveled with it to France, and then it was in Stockholm, and then it was in the REDCAT Theater in Los Angeles at the Disney/CalArts Center.

I wouldn't be surprised if it ended up back in New York sometime in the future because a lot of Basil's shows, he does one show, then pack it up and put it away. And then he'll unpack a prior show. So I wouldn't be surprised if you get to see it.

**Q:** One great thing about the '80s was that there weren't dichotomies like between rich and poor, art and commerce, pop/low art and high/intellectual art. I'm glad you used that Bowie clip from the Tonight Show because that was a big deal when it was shown.

**BS:** It was a huge deal. "One of our own hit the big time -- Joey Arias and Klaus Nomi on TV with David Bowie [as backing singers performing "Boys Keep Swinging" on Saturday Night Live in April 1979, (during which NBC censors muted the "other boys check you out" line)].

**Q:** That's what the big deal was. It wasn't about straight or gay. At different times that became contentious. "Are you part of the community, you're not part of the community," and people were worried about being associated or not associated with it. Joey went beyond that, he transcended gender-bending, switching back and forth all the time.

**BS:** You're saying something very interesting and I've never heard anyone else say it. I was a straight kid in a very aggressively gay environment. Do you remember that store Parachute?

**Q:** I still have some stuff I bought from Parachute sitting somewhere. I went there all the time, especially when there were events or parties there.

**BS:** Do you remember the video installations that played there in the bleachers? Those were mine. That's what I did. So in that environment, everyone thought I was gay.

When I was doing interviews [for this film] this topic came up because Joey would never not include me or whoever else was straight and make that demarcation of, “He’s not part of the club.”

So everyone thought I was gay and Joey, in some ways, would protect me. I vaguely remember some of those times where it was like, “Joey, this guy’s really on me. You’ve got to get him off of me.”

Joey was like my big brother in a lot of ways. He would make sure that I felt comfortable and never felt out of place if Joey was there. Remember there was a bar called Blue Boy or Blue Bar or something on St. Mark’s Place?

**Q:** I knew the bar.

**BS:** In the course of running around in an evening, if you were Joey you might end up at like Boy Bar or something like that, and I would have absolutely no problem going in there if I was with Joey and whoever else was around, but I probably would not have gone in there without Joey. I don’t even know why I say that, but I know that that’s true. I would have felt less comfortable if I wasn’t with someone like Joey who I could hang out with just about anywhere.

You could walk into a Republican Convention party and be with Joey, and at first they’d be put-off by him but eventually they’d be fascinated by him and he’d win them over.

**Q:** Joey moved through a lot of different crowds. What made him decide to move from New York? I never figured that out.

**BS:** He was in Las Vegas for six years. He came back about two years ago. He was in Vegas because he was in a Cirque du Soleil show, [Zumanity, at the New York-New York Hotel & Casino on the Strip]. I think that was a very positive thing for him because it really forced him to become very disciplined.

There were nights when he would show up and would just suck because he was drunk or whatever, and you can’t be the front person of a Cirque du Soleil [production] and not show up every night 100% there. So he really evolved.

Now when he performs he just so much more focused and disciplined and it’s nice to see. When he first came out I was blown away; it was Joey Arias times 100. He was just so “on,” and Basil’s world is perfectly suited for someone like Joey because there are no boundaries. Basil’s imagination can take you anywhere he wants to take you, and it’s just a fun place to go. So [Joey’s] singing has really gotten pretty solid.

**Q:** One thing that Joey was about was surviving. For a lot of us in the downtown scene, Klaus was the first person everybody knew that was identified as having died of AIDS. And of course Joey knew everybody.

**BS:** I know where you’re going, and I agree.

**Q:** There was a self-destructive quality to so many creative people in the crowd at that time, so they didn’t go on to succeed. Yet some finally pulled their shit together and have succeeded -- Joey being one of them. He’s succeeding on his own terms; he may not be doing Leno, but he’s doing what he does on his own terms and is recognized and appreciated for it -- to the point where you make this film of him and Basil.

**BS:** To be honest with you, Joey loves it; he just loves being Joey Arias. Any human being who can find that kind of contentment in being themselves, it's one of the reasons are so attracted to him, because he loves what he does. He's very compassionate and I think that that is one of his survival instincts.

The other thing is: It's a miracle that he's alive. He was so right smack in the middle of all that stuff; that was like the danger zone. When so many people all started to get AIDS and when they all started dying, everyone who knew Joey was just completely panic-stricken that [it would happen to him]. It wasn't just Klaus, though Klaus was definitely the first person.

**Q:** He was the first person to have had AIDS that everybody knew.

**BS:** It was so tragic because he had just gone to France; he had a record contract with RCA. I went up there once to photograph him and it just seemed like this record will hit big.

They were trying to model him to be someone like a spaced-age, disco kind of guy. He'd have a hit single and he was all jacked up about that. And it just seemed like someone just popped the bubble.

I was up at RCA first in August [of that year] and I think by that October he went from knowing that he had anything to being dead. It was so quick. Then Joey's boyfriend [at the time], who he lived with for years and years - Chuck - died a couple of years later from AIDS. [In the film, photographer] Michael Halsband touches on how Joey had his partner in crime, Klaus, and then his boyfriend, both dying of AIDS.

**Q:** Joey and everybody else from the Danceteria scene, knew the doorman, Haoui Montag, who also died of AIDS. He was another person that we all became aware of, and it really was affecting this community; we didn't at all expect it to have such an impact.

**BS:** It was sad and dark, and just seemed like what was this very free, open society... people, all of sudden, became very scared. You weren't worried about getting gonorrhea or herpes or something like that, you were now worried about dying after having sex with people.

It just changed the whole complexion of the Lower East Side. New York started changing because the whole MTV thing happened, and you had all these people who maybe weren't that talented, becoming hugely famous. The television just seemed to change the town, of what New York was, at least for me, and then it pumped into my own personal noise.

The '80s started out really gloriously and then for me ended really dark. It was a whirlwind decade for me. I wonder, when we see each other, if we say, "Oh. That's who you are."

**Q:** At that time, in no uncertain terms, we were doing some of the most important, creative, cultural work on the planet.

**BS:** Ann [Magnuson, the lead in Susan Siedelman's Making Mr. Right] even says in the film, New York was poor so it was easy for people to migrate here who had no money [and make art]. I don't think [the late artist] Keith Haring had any money, I know [painter] Kenny Scharf didn't have any money [at the time].

I used to run around with various other young, crazy people, and we all had friends in bands and stuff like that, so you would hang out with some guy named SAMO who would graffiti stuff everywhere he went, including your friends' houses.

Literally, at a party once he took spray paint in a friend's apartment while their parents were away, and he spray painting on their living room "SAMO is god" and he just left.

Then you blink your eyes and all of a sudden he's [Jean-Michel] Basquiat and he's this world-renowned artist. There were no rules; you could do something really interesting and something extraordinary could happen for a reason that wasn't motivated necessarily by ambition.

It just seemed like Basquiat was meant to happen in the '80s because Warhol was still around, and Klaus Nomi was meant to happen in the '80s because he needed to be one of the figures in the downtown scene, and Joey Arias absolutely needed to exist in the '80s as part of Klaus' thing.

He had Strange Party, one of Joey's bands in the early 80's, and did Mermaids on Heroin, a surreal theater ensemble - including Fred Schneider from the B-52's - he was Key Largo, mad scientist extraordinaire. Joey played the devil, he played [Salvador] Dali, he played [Andy] Warhol. Joey needed to be the chameleon to connect a whole bunch of people, and I think that's one of the things that makes Joey very interesting.

Everyone loves Joey, he has no enemies, and mutual friends always want them to get to know Joey almost as a favor. Like I would want to introduce Joey to anyone I met because in a way he qualified me.

The only thing I was capable of contributing to that era was that I took photos and made videos and film. In essence it really wasn't a contribution to what was going on because I wasn't a performance artist or in a band.

So my way of making me feel more secure in a new creative environment would be like, "Oh, you've got to come meet my friend Joey."

It was just automatic. It also felt like I was doing them a favor because if they didn't know Joey yet I knew that they were going to want to know him.

It was a very free community where people weren't competitive with one another, except for me and my stupid rivalry thing with Michael Halsband. It wasn't like a mad thing; I just wanted to be able to take pictures all the time. I love the '80s.

I was like this ghetto rat crawling out of a tenement building and crawling into a nightclub. Once I found that nightclub, there were all these fabulous and interesting people and it was like okay to just be anybody.

It was a really pleasant experience. It was people who haven't seen each other for a while for no good reason back in touch with one another. Obviously Joey's really close with Ann, and there are certain people that I'm really close with.

**Q:** Joey's preferences are gay but in terms of his image and presence in the world, and that's an underlying quality of the film that is very interesting.

**BS:** Yeah, he calls himself "The Z chromosome" because he's not male, he's not female, he's Joey. The idea is something that I hope is there [in the film] because what was really eye-opening for me, and made me feel great, was that Joey's still Joey, yet he's evolving.

The film deals with the past tense but it's also a present tense film because Joey's still creating art. And then there's this other new artist -- Basil Twist -- who's like a generation and half later in a way.

There's a gap in there between the '80s and now and Basil hopefully [reflects] what happens next. Basil's definitely part of a younger generation, but if he were around then he would have fit in perfectly.

**Q:** Puppetry was one creative form not done enough in those Downtown/New Wave days. He would have added to those times.

**BS:** I think Klaus Nomi would have gone crazy. He would have been like, "There has to be a Klaus Nomi puppet, and this is what we're going to do with it." And Basil would have been like, "Yeah. We have to have an entire Nomi scene where we have Klaus, Adrian, and Joey, and their puppet selves are going to do this."

Of course [the late performer/actor] John Sex would have been a great puppet. Basil doesn't necessarily need personas or real people to make into puppets, I think he would have done what he does with Joey, he's going to add his own world into the mix.

It would have been awesome to have Basil Twist in the '80s. Just look at the potential combination of imaginations like having Ann Magnuson in the mix with Basil. Ann was highly imaginative with everything she did.

**Q:** Ann's story is another one that could be told; she has been hiding in the wings as well lately.

**BS:** I love Ann. Ann and I were dancing around the idea of doing something. The other thing I'd like to do with this, because there are so many stories in this, a lot of these personas I'd like to do sub-chapters with. They're all certainly decent sized short documentaries.

**Q:** Maybe movies like this one that not only document the times but show it as a living thing will revive such interest; what do you think?

**BS:** I hope so. That's one of the things that I hope people take away from the movie. That sort of community intimacy led to a cross-pollination that can't happen on the internet.

People need to get together, and I think seeing films like this together or seeing theater pieces like this together, there's really nothing like it, you can't replace it by watching a video screen, you just can't. I hope so.