

Mr Lonely
by
Richard Strange

As we boarded the flight from London to Inverness, it seemed perhaps the filming of Harmony Korine's new film, "*Mr Lonely*", had already begun. A 6'2" bristly-chinned, barrel-chested "stewardess" welcomed us aboard the aircraft and announced, in a booming baritone voice, "Good Morning, My name is Sarah. Welcome aboard."

As it transpired, Sarah was a wise-cracking testament to the flight company's equal opportunities programme. (S)he kept us amused for the whole 2-hour flight, even through the bumpiest of landings in a blustery Scots squall.

I had been a fan of Harmony Korine's since his 1997 directorial debut, the disturbingly quirky *Gummo*. However, I had no idea that the fidgety, punky livewire I spent two hours chatting with at a London party was Korine. I never thought to ask him what work he did- we were laughing too much, exchanging ever-more outrageous stories, and comparing near-death experiences. Only when I was leaving the party did we exchange phone numbers.

A week later, as I was about to fly to Los Angeles for a 3-month run of the Tom Waits/Robert Wilson/William Burroughs theatrical collaboration *The Black Rider*, Korine called me and announced, "*Hey. I want you to play Abe Lincoln in my new movie. We film in the Highlands of Scotland, June through August. Do the dates work?*" I told him they worked, and had "his people speak to my people".

And so in June I boarded the low-cost flight heading north. Among my fellow passengers, the actress Anita Pallenberg, Keith Richard's ex-wife, and a man who looked worryingly like Larry, the shock-headed klutz from The Three Stooges. At Inverness Airport we climbed into a minibus, and drove the increasingly dramatic roads across the Highlands. The rain ceased, the skies cleared, and by the time we reached our base at Duncraig Castle, in Ross-shire, the lush hills were suffused in a golden early-evening glow.

En route we had pieced together the bare bones of the story of *Mr Lonely*. We were all to be playing impersonators, living our dream in an isolated

commune for retired impersonators. A place where everyone is famous and no-one gets old. (I know, it sounds more like Hollywood than Hollyrood!) Hence I was Abe, Anita was The Queen of England and, on arrival, we were introduced by Korine to Michael Jackson (played by the talented Mexican actor Diego Luna), Marilyn Monroe (Samantha Morton) and Charlie Chaplin (Denis Lavant). Milling around trying on costumes I could swear I caught a glimpse of Sammy Davis Jnr., James Dean and Madonna, too.

The Castle, our commune, a solidly-built edifice, was constructed in the 1860's by retired business magnate Sir Alexander Matheson, co-founder of the Jardine Matheson Far East banking firm. While it is, in part, a fine example of the Scottish baronial style, it must be said it is more handsome than beautiful.

Since Sir Alexander's death in 1886, Duncraig has been put to a variety of uses. For some years it was rented to fashionable hosts for summer house parties. With the onset of World War Two, it became a naval hospital. From 1945 until 1989 the castle was run as a domestic science college for girls. The hideous 1969 school block extension, more Soviet functional than Scottish baronial, still stands as a grim reminder of this era.

Set in 40 acres of woodland and with a mile of shore line, the view from the castle tower is breathtaking. To the north across Loch Carron are the mountains of Applecross. To the west, on the shores of the loch, is the picturesque village of Plockton and beyond, the distant peaks of the Isle of Skye.

It was an idyllic location to make a film in every aspect except one- the midges. In the Highlands these vicious little pests, barely visible individually, swarm in vast clouds throughout the warm summer months, especially near water. In minutes they reduce their poor victim to an approximation of steak tartare. One evening, when they were especially voracious, Harmony thought it would be amusing to dress the entire company in mosquito suits in order to shoot a scene of an outdoor Tai Chi class.

The director's humour and his inspired ability to improvise were a continuous source of amusement. He relished the challenges set by the Highlands' rugged terrain, the Spartan resources, and the capricious weather. In this remote part of Scotland, *nothing* can be taken for granted. One

evening, having finished filming early, a dozen of us made our way to *The Seafood Restaurant*, a small family-owned establishment on Plockton railway Station. Relieved to see a table that would accommodate us all, we asked to be seated. “*Och, Nooo!*,” said the proprietor, aghast. “*The kitchen’s closed. Have you seen the time? It’s twenty to ten!*” “It’s twenty to ten” became a catch phrase of the rest of the shoot.

Although *Mr Lonely* is a traditionally-scripted movie, Harmony used the script as a sketch rather than the finished painting. One day, having spent an hour meticulously rehearsing a scene in which we are planning a barbecue for the newly-arrived Michael Jackson, Korine leaned towards me just before shooting to whisper conspiratorially, “*You are NOT going to do any of that. I want you to tell them about your experience of acid and napalm in Vietnam War*” and left the room chuckling.

His directorial style is akin to that of the solicitous hostess of a cocktail party who makes sure all her guests have their glasses charged, then leaves the room, lobs in a mace grenade, and locks the door. That is when Korine shouts “ACTION!”

When the actor James Fox arrived to play the Pope John Paul II, 10 days after the rest of us, he confessed that he felt like he had landed on another planet. For one sequence, Harmony told the 69-year-old actor “*Do a card trick with your ass sticking out, then dance like you’re in a swamp.*” Somehow when he demonstrated to the bemused Fox, it all made perfect, hilarious sense.

Forty years previously, Fox and Anita Pallenberg ended up in bed in the Nic Roeg film *Performance*. Korine was delighted at the idea of reprising the coupling in *Mr Lonely*, with His Holiness and Her Majesty sharing a post-prandial joint. He also found it hilarious to put me as pillion passenger on Michael Jackson’s motorcycle and send us into town. He handed me a megaphone and said, “*Advertise a gala concert we are doing tonight at the commune, like a fairground barker*”. He filmed the bewildered locals’ reaction to seeing Abe Lincoln and The King Of Pop sharing a motorbike from a following car, giggling maniacally the whole way into town and back.

Setting up confrontations is not new to him. When he made his movie *Fight Harm*, he walked the mean Manhattan streets verbally provoking passers-by,

trying to start a fist-fight, while his friend David Blaine filmed the resulting bloodbath. He said at the time *“It's very brutal -I've already broken a collar bone and been arrested. The punches and kicks are all real; it's one of the most disgusting things you'll ever see”*

He went around with a camera crew, and the only rules were that he couldn't throw the first punch and the person he was confronting had to be bigger than him. *“Because that's where the humour comes in.”* he told me, *“And no matter how bad I was getting beat up -- unless I was gonna die, that was the rule- they (the camera crew) couldn't break it up.”*

After each brawl, Korine would explain the points of the exercise to the unsuspecting participants who, remarkably, in most cases, agreed to sign a release.

The production was halted shortly after it began, with Korine having to serve a mandatory two-and-a-half-months prison sentence following three arrests. His girlfriend at the time, the actress Chloe Sevigny was, he admits, totally freaked out by it. *“My family tried to get me institutionalized. They thought I was trying to kill myself. But it was just something I had to put myself through”*. Not exactly Sir David Lean, then.

Harmony is now married to the actress Rachel Simon, who plays Little Red Ridinghood, and they live, perhaps surprisingly, in Nashville. He is cleaner and happier than he has been for many years. The Dark Night of the Soul, which tortured him in his twenties, has now passed. He neither drinks nor does narcotics, nor seems to hanker for either. This is a man who was once so physically overloaded that his body shut down, and he went temporarily blind AND deaf.

His lunchtime conversations with Anita Pallenberg, herself no stranger to over-indulgence, were candid and darkly amusing. *“Keith Richards is responsible for more deaths than Vietnam,”* he told her once. *“Kids think ‘if he can do it, so can I, and they try it, but they can't hack it. It's genetic. And the kids die’*. He continues, like a chemistry professor relishing a lecture to his students. *“Synthetic drugs stay in the system longer than opiates. Methadone, valium, tamazepam sit in the fat tissue and have a massive half-life”*

Harmony has seen two houses he has lived in burn down around him, due in part to his own substance abuse. His N(arcotics) A(nonymous) sponsor, was “Chicago Bob”, the founder of Texas Instruments. “*He didn’t go out for four years*” Harmony told me. “*He stayed in a room, and shat in pizza boxes. He felt bugs under the skin, and used a 100-watt light-bulb to burn them out. Then poured disinfectant on the burns. If you want to know what pain is, try that.*” Again, the maniacal giggle.

Despite his former appetite for life in the margins, Harmony has always had his supporters. The French fashion icon Agnès B is one of the producers of *Mr Lonely*, and threw a wonderful party at her home in Antibes after we premiered at Cannes last year. The film features performances from two of European Art House cinema’s leading directors- Leos Carax (*Les Amants de Pont-Neuf*) and Werner Herzog (*Fitzcarraldo*, *Grizzly Man*). The top fashion photographer Jurgen Teller was on hand to take stills on set. All were united in the view that Harmony was a very special talent.

Our communal life in Scotland was never far from incident. One night a fence to the horse corral blew down, and the horses escaped and we lost a day while the wranglers went looking for them, with the help of a 3-legged sheepdog. “*Don’t bring the peacocks until all the fences are fixed*” Harmony barked down the phone to someone. “*I can’t believe I just said that,*” he chuckled, hanging up. “*Film-making is such fun!*”

One morning there was no electricity anywhere on the estate. No lights, no heating, no hot water in the showers, no electricity for the kettle in the make-up room. The irate owners of the Castle, tired of the producers’ procrastination at paying some bills, had switched off all the power. There was a face-off until a runner arrived with £28,000 cash in a carrier bag from a bank in Glasgow.

Inevitably some members of the cast were more disposed to Harmony’s guerrilla style of film-making than others. Diego Luna, the dark-eyed heart-throb of *Y Tu Mama Tambien* was one of the most committed, co-operative and generous actors I have ever worked with. Everything was fun for him, everything a challenge. A competent dancer, he learned Whacko’s trademark *moonwalking* especially for the role, and never stood still for the entire shoot- always trying to improve his moves. Denis Lavant, who played Charlie Chaplin, spoke barely a word of English before commencing the film. Best known for his starring roles in *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* and *Beau*

Travail, the rock-faced Frenchman thought Lewis Carroll would be his best introduction to English. Barely a day passed without him asking “*Pardonnez-moi, Rich-ard. What eez a Jabberwocky?*” or “*What means “A walrus?”*”

When Harmony announced that we were to shoot “*the Mudbath scene*”, for which a hole had been freshly dug in a field, loosely lined with plastic and painstakingly filled with hot(tish) water, our sense of common-purpose was so developed that (almost) no-one batted an eyelid. We stood in the teeth of a Scottish gale, up to our waists in tepid mud, shooting and re-shooting, till Harmony felt he had it covered. It was only the feeling of group hysteria, and a bottle of single malt whiskey, that sustained us.

Shooting a scene from a helicopter in which The Queen of England inaugurates our new theatre by smashing a bottle of champagne against the door, Harmony was like a child in a sweet shop. On landing, he was all adrenalised enthusiasm. “*The pilot just told me he has just come down from a 3-day Ecstasy bender. THREE DAYS! Respect!!*”

On the occasional days when neither of us were filming, Anita and I would rent a car and drive off into the wilds to explore. The Isle of Skye, across the road bridge from our Bed and Breakfast in Kyle of Lochalsh, was a particularly rewarding destination. Sublime coastal views, towering hills, and the eerily humanoid shapes of some of the rock formations were constantly beguiling and thrilling.

A natural *raconteuse*, she entertained with stories of her wilder days, when Keith did this, or Mick said that, laugh her hoarse laugh, and light another cigarette. A veritable smoking machine, the fog inside the car much denser than any Scotch mist outside.

Nicotine is now her only addiction. Well, nicotine and yoga. And gardening. We are both insomniacs, and one morning, hearing her shuffling around her room, I went downstairs to make us some coffee. I took it to her in her room, and found her attempting a hellishly complicated yoga *asana*, arms and legs contorted, eyes screwed up in concentration, with a newly-lit cigarette clamped between her teeth.

After four weeks on set, our filming at Duncraig Castle finished on Midsummer’s Night, in appropriately dream-like circumstances. Harmony

wanted to shoot his final scene- a heart-breaking, elegiac *tableau vivant* featuring the entire cast processing through the night, singing *Cheek to Cheek*. So far north, we had to wait until 11.30 for the darkness to totally envelop the valley. By the time the shot was in the can, the night chorus of owls, frogs and dogs had given way to the dawn chorus of blackbirds, cuckoos and seagulls. The sun rose with a slash of crimson in the eastern sky. The cast and crew silently embraced, in the slightly embarrassing way that we do. By 5am we were in our beds and the adventure of shooting *Mr Lonely* was over.

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