

## A Conversation with Justin Ambrosino

Chiara Montalto (June 08, 2009)



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Several years ago, in a writing group at the Calandra Institute, I got to know a young film director named Justin Ambrosino. Justin grew up in Staten Island, to an Italian American family, and has been writing plays and scripts for years. He was accepted to AFI's film program, and relocated to Los Angeles. His first film "The 8th Samurai" was recently completed and has won the Jury Prize at the Sonoma International Film Festival, The Audience Award at the Big Muddy Film Festival and Best



Director, Best Film and Best Actor Awards at the Show Off Your Short Festival. On June 5th, "The 8th Samurai" will screen at the Staten Island Film Festival. It will screen at 2 PM at the College of Staten Island Recital Hall - 2800 Victory Blvd. Staten Island, NY 10301. Below is a conversation that Justin and I recently had about his film, his career, and inspiration. You can view the trailer for "The 8th Samurai" below.



**Tell me a little bit about you.**

I was born in Brooklyn, New York and grew up on Staten Island. My father was born in Torre del Greco and my mother was born in New Jersey. Some highlights of my youth are: my cousin married Kirk Hammet of Metallica (they are now divorced) and I spent a lot of time backstage at their concerts. I was scouted to play for the U.S. Olympic Development Soccer Team but quit before tryouts. And I can say that that most important thing is that I spent most of my youth working at my father's restaurant, Ponte Vecchio, in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. I spent many long days and all nights there until closing. At the restaurant, I watched people, heard stories, made friends and enemies, and learned about life in all its glory and ugliness.

In 2000, I started making movies and I worked as a PA on films such as "The Departed," "Lord of War", "The Producers" and the television programs "The Jury", "The Sopranos" and "Unscripted". During that time, I made short 16mms films, became a film journalist and interviewed many filmmakers about the ups and downs of the business. Soon, I applied to American Film Institute, and was awarded the Patricia Hitchcock Scholarship and went on to make "The 8th Samurai" as my thesis film.

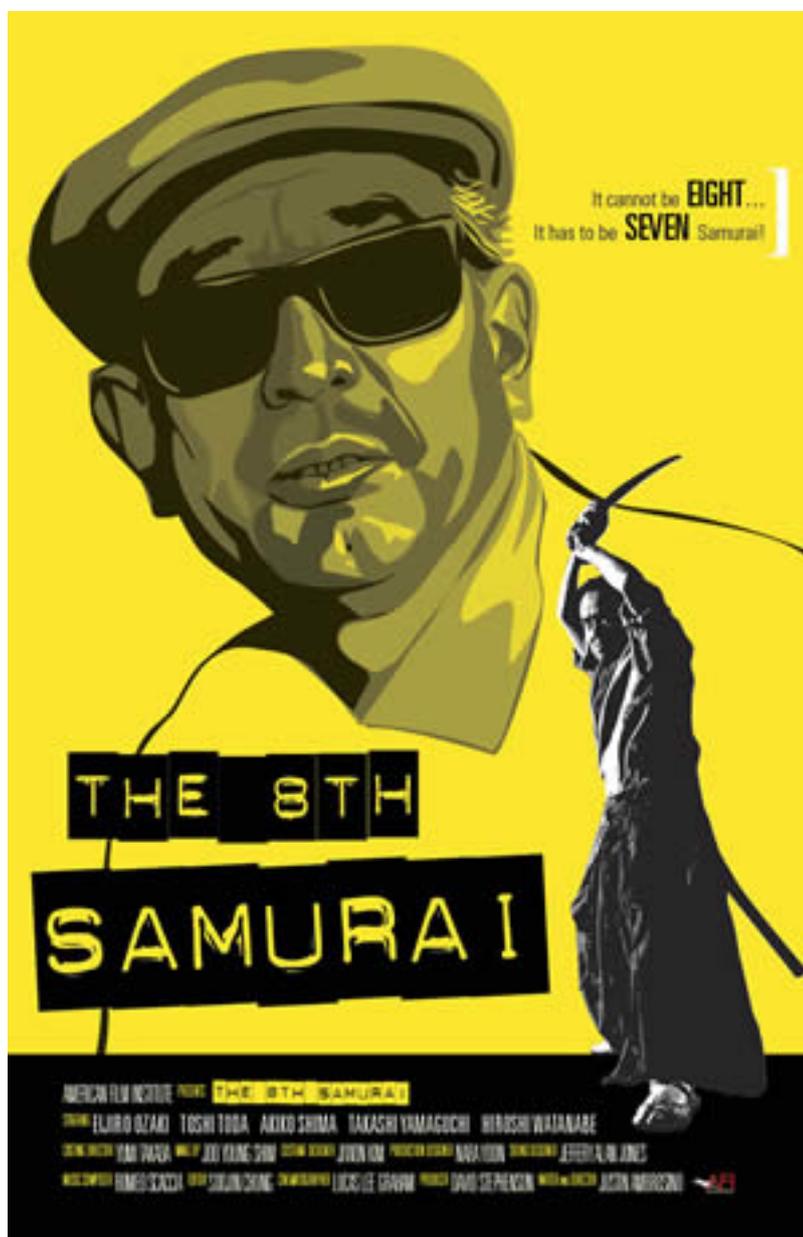
**What inspires you**

I don't think there is a day that goes by that I'm not inspired by something. It can be someone's face, a piece of music, a train ride, a bad memory, a foreign language, a good story, the thought of love,

an old friend, my family. I am afraid I will never be able to ever catch up on my inspirations.

### **What made you decide to tell a story in a foreign language and in black and white?**

I never set out to direct a Black and White Japanese film. I had always wanted to make films in foreign countries, but I had imagined that that would take me years to do. Then this opportunity came and the material required it. The story was set in 1950's Japan so... it just felt right. The very first images of the film in my head were black and white. My cinematographer and I talked about and explored the idea of shooting in color, but ultimately, the story rejected those ideas. In addition to the creative reasons, black and white was also practical because it helps to sell the period, and make the production design more real, and transport the audience immediately to the past. Having the actors speak Japanese was just natural. It was one way to make it more real, and more true to the material. Everything came from the story.



### **Did you encounter resistance when you were pitching “The 8th Samurai” because of that?**

I would say yes and no. The AFI faculty always loved the script. From the beginning they

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enthusiastically supported me and the story. But when I mentioned my vision of it, it seemed as though it had contrasted with their vision of what it should be. Some even thought it was going to be like a Saturday Night Live sketch, others thought that the black and white might make it look like a cheap independent film. Once, I heard at school, "Why make it in black and white and all in the Japanese language? Don't you want a job in Hollywood?" So there was always this mix of the school loving the story and then being scared that my ideas were too ambitious. But after the film was made and they saw it, they understood and complemented my vision. I always felt support but also some doubt which wound up being a challenge for me to prove myself.

### **How long did it take from start to finish?**

JA: It was a 2 year process. I had written a short synopsis of the idea when it first came to me in late 2006. Then, about 6 months later I wrote an outline, finally, the script. In the summer of 2007, the school green lit the script as my thesis film and we went into development. I wrote a number of drafts changing scenes and adding characters but ultimately, I'd always go back to the first draft because the structure of it was impenetrable. Then we moved out of development and into pre-production: casting and scheduling. I worked with the actors for about a month before shooting, which I know is a luxury, but we all felt that it had to be done to make it right. Then we shot the film in 5 principal shoot days and 2 days of reshoots. The reshoots were 4 months later because of scheduling conflicts. We edited the film on and off for about 6 months, creating the soundtrack during that time as well. We delivered the film in late 2008.

### **How did you direct the actors in the film? Was there an interpreter on set? Was anything lost in translation?**

All the actors were dedicated and passionate about the project. I included them in the whole process (costumes, tone, style, props, etc). Trust was ultimately the most important thing to me. This allowed me to let go more.

The script then went through numerous translations: first literal, then the actors translated the dialogue, then it was translated back to me, then on set, I allowed for some improvisation. My script supervisor spoken Japanese and English, but so did the actors so there wasn't much trouble to communicate.

And when you asked if there was anything "lost in translation" well I would say there were many things "found in translation". I think when we translated it into Japanese and went through that whole process, it sparked new ideas, truer ideas to the theme of the film. We found solutions instead of problems. I hope to have an amazing experience like that again.

### **What about the casting process? Did you cast out of LA?**

At AFI we can only work with SAG actors. Like most directors I like to work with the best actors available, but a film with an all Japanese cast who can speak fluent Japanese begins to limit the choices. Yumi Takada, the casting associate of Clint Eastwood's *Letters from Iwo Jima*, turned me down numerous times at first. I could not pay her and I could not pay the actors, so I understood, but she was the only one with the access to the actor's I needed. I just persisted, then one day, she just said, "Send me the character descriptions." In less than a day she returned with the actors from *Letters of Iwo Jima* for each role.



I decided to cast Nanshu first. Eijiro Ozaki was enthusiastic about it. We met, had a coffee, and talked no audition. He said yes, and then I cast the rest - Toshi Toda, Takashi Yamaguchi, Akiko Shima, Hiroshi Watanabe, Ikuma Ando. Even for the small roles, I was able to cast great actors like Yuki Matsuzaki. I was very fortunate to have Yumi. She helped throughout the whole process. She even came to set to see me direct. We are now friends.

### **Tell me a little bit about what you are currently working on and life in Korea for an Italian American kid from Staten Island!**

I'm in Seoul now writing my first feature that I will direct later this year about a Neapolitan chef who comes to South Korea to open a restaurant. We will begin shooting in November. Korean director Yongki Jeong is the producer under his Golden Page production company. The film will be spoken in three languages: English, Korean and Italian.

I feel very comfortable here. Life is not that much different here. When we go out in Seoul, we go out in big groups. We enjoy spending time around a diner table eating and drinking, talking all night. There is always music and singing going on somewhere. There are tiny, narrow streets and scooters everywhere. And it is easy to make friends. Everyone is warm and compassionate. Seoul is a very happening city, both ancient and modern. I'm having the time of my life.

### **Where do you see your career taking you next?**

I think it is easy to say right now that I do not know where my career will go next, that's the fun of just starting out. Right now my options are infinite. I am ready to make a film in Hollywood or a film in Italy, an independent film in New York or another foreign film in Asia, a big budget thriller or a slapstick comedy. Basically, I feel like my job is to be prepared for every possibility and whatever my next project is I have one goal - to make a good movie.

I am always working on various scripts, developing projects, but right now, as I said I am making my first feature this year in South Korea, a story about a Neapolitan chef who gets an offer to open up a restaurant in Seoul. That will require from me a significant amount of time in South Korea. During this next year I will learn so much and, by the end of the year, I know that I will be a different person, so I look forward to whatever experience will come next.

### **How has your Italian-ness/ Italian-American-ness influenced you as a filmmaker?**

When I decided to be a filmmaker I wanted to study the History of Cinema first until I found a film that really spoke to me. When I began studying the history of World Cinema I started with Italy. My education began with films like "Last Days of Pompei" and "Cabiria" and it continued until today with films like "Gomorra" and "Il Divo." I fell in love with Italian Cinema during this time. I fell in love with Ettore Scola's sense of humor, De Crescenzo's unique Neapolitan style, Rossellini's ability to change personality, De Sica's classic storytelling techniques, Fellini's free narrative, Pasolini's sacred and profane themes, Bava and Argento's adventures in genre, the comedy of Toto, Fillippo, Troisi and more recently Capuano's powerful images and Procacci's producing power.



There are also many other films and filmmakers that have become part of my subconscious when making a film. Throughout this whole journey I have to say that it was Pier Paolo Pasolini's "Accatone" that made me say that is the movie I wish I made. Once I found that film, I began my own path to becoming a filmmaker. I hope to one day have the opportunity to contribute to the History of Italian Cinema because it has already given me so much.

### **What advice do you have for any young artists out there?**

What I'm going to say is for filmmaking but I think it can translate to any art form. I think I am far, far away from being able to give good advice to anyone who wishes to have a long career because I do not know where my choices will lead me. But if there is someone out there who wishes to make films I believe that, yes, every film you make is important, but it is not as important as your next film or your film after that. And a personal film should not be more important than a film that you make only for money, because each film requires you give 100%, you should live and die for it and no matter what find a way to express yourself through it. So basically if you want to make more than one film in your lifetime, then make your first one and move on to the next, don't let the many choices you have to make stop you from moving on. Make a commitment and live with those choices. If you want to call yourself a filmmaker, then you must make films.

For those of you in the New York area, you can catch a screening of "The 8th Samurai" at 2 PM at the College of Staten Island Recital Hall - 2800 Victory Blvd. Staten Island, NY 10301.

**Source URL:** <http://www.iitaly.org/magazine/focus/art-culture/article/conversation-justin-ambrosino>

### **Links**

[1] <http://www.iitaly.org/files/8th-samurai-trailer>