

Bred in Brooklyn

No, It Ain't 'The Natural,' But 'Brooklyn Trilogy' Is Funnier

By Robert E. Murphy
The PHOENIX

PARK SLOPE — All of us old-time Brooklynites know that it ain't like years ago around here. Just ask Jason Cusato, 26, who grew up on 11th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues when things were different.

"On a Saturday morning," he remembers, "my block would be packed with kids playing games. We all played whiffle-ball. We played football on the sidewalk when we were too young to go in the street. And block parties — there used to be a million people on the block. One year we rented backboards and hoops to play basketball. There'd be barbecues and buckets of beer. Now it's so sad. We had a block party last year. My house and our neighbors were the only people out, and at night another neighbor came out and complained that we were making too much noise."

Kids today, Jason points out, don't know from playing in the street. They're too busy with Nintendo and other computer games. But Jason played the same games his father played — stickball, for example, and skellzies.

"Our generation was in-between," says Jason's old friend, Ricardo Pantoja, a 16th-Streeter.

Jason and Ricardo, who were classmates at St. Thomas Aquinas Grammar School, Fourth Avenue and Eighth Street, are mates now in the art of making movies, joined in an enterprise called "Park Slope Productions." Last week they went back to St. Thomas to host the premiere of three "shorts" about games of Brooklyn past. "Brooklyn Trilogy," as they call it, was partly written and directed and by Jason, with the help of Ricardo, who is assistant-director and cinematographer.

An old stickballer and off-the-pointer myself, I went to see it. It isn't exactly what I expected.

It was not such a surprise that the films are technically rather primitive — they were made for as little as \$300. The main surprise was their tone. Rather than being the standard nostalgic retrospectives of Brooklyn's golden age, these are all comic send-ups of the sporting life of decades past, with, at least in one case, some nostalgia woven in.

The opener is "When Broomsticks Were King," for which Jason sat down, one by one, a group of middle-aged guys in their living-rooms, gave them fake names, as well as fake nicknames, and asked them to recount their stickball memories and make up what they didn't remember. Between their talking heads he inserted black-and-white shots of Jason and Ricardo and friends pretending to be the old guys in their salad days, batting and catching to the clicking sound of an eight-millimeter movie-projector. The interviews, meanwhile, are edited so that they evolve from straight recollection to absurd exaggeration. The viewer isn't quite sure what's going on until someone recalls that 11th Street (the archival of 10th Street in quest of the annual championship) was the first block to integrate its team, bringing in a player whose name no one can get straight: "Juan Valdez, Don Juan — I don't know — his nickname was 'The Spanish Guy.'" Then there's a cut to "The Spanish Guy," speaking Spanish.

The role is played by Ricardo's Peruvian step-

father. Jason's father, Vinny, who was in fact, Jason points out, a legendary stickball-player, is in there, too, in the part of Rich "Straight Shootin'" Capezio. All performances are by local amateurs, and they're good. The irony is so well brought off that I was willing to accept that the character of Mike Brennan, who obviously grew up in Ireland, had been a Brooklyn stickballer. (The vainest of all the memoirists, he claims, dubiously, that he was a regular "three-sewer" clouter, and is the only one who names himself as the best player of his time.)

The second part of the trilogy, amusing, but not as successful as the others, is a narrated "news-reel" of the 1979 handball match between the Brooklyn and Manhattan champion teams. The final film has better ironic substance. This is "The Story of Joe Higgins," subtitled "The Greatest Skellzies Player Who Ever Lived." The very conceit of an annual international skellzies championship — a game played by flicking bottle-caps from square to square on the pavement — is enough to induce a giggle. But add to the story an Australian narrator, an absurdly bewigged hero, a devastating household accident, and a Soviet officer as a perennial challenger, and some good laughs will follow.

Jason and Ricardo started working up skits on audio tape when they were 12 or 13, then moved on to doing, in Jason's words, "real goofball stuff" on video. Jason's cousins, Adam and Scott Nawrocki, got involved, and in the more mature productions Adam is a featured performer and Scott the sound technician. At Bishop Ford High School and LIU, Ricardo studied art and became a painter. After LaSalle High School in Manhattan, Jason, urged by his mother, aimed at becoming a fireman. But to do that he needed 35 college credits.

"I figured I should take some courses I was interested in, because if I took math and history, I'd flunk and I wouldn't get the credits. So, since I always loved movies, I went to the School of Visual Arts and took an acting class and some film classes. I wound up failing the fireman's test anyway."

Before finishing at LIU, Ricardo went off to the Navy for four years. When he came home, there was Jason, trained and ready for projects and needing a collaborator with an artist's eye. Without quitting their regular jobs — Jason works at Leopoldi's Hardware on Fifth Avenue; Ricardo is a sous-chef and waiter for a caterer — they went into production, activating the hidden talents of their friends and relations.

In February, "When Broomsticks Were King" won the prize for best documentary among more than 100 films presented at the Rutgers University Film Festival. An honor like that could give these guys the idea that there's a career in this.

"It's an odd industry to break into," says Jason. "The route we're trying to take right now is to do shorts and enter film festivals. Maybe someone will see your talent and say, 'I'm interested in you directing something.' We'd like to get on BCAT"

That's Brooklyn Cable Access Television. Yo, BCAT, air this "Brooklyn Trilogy." It'd be a three-sewer home-run for ya.