

Curtain Going Up On 'York Street'

Slope Filmmaker Blazes New Territory

By Joe Maniscalco

Before the camera rolls, Park Slope filmmaker Jason Cusato, 27, steps into the shot blocked out on the breezy Coney Island boardwalk between actors Frederick Gunsch and Annika Sundin.

"You're telling your girl you got fired from your job and you're scared she's going to leave you," he tells Gunsch, and slips back out of the shot again.

"Action," Cusato yells.

In another scene, hired gun "Mr. Felix" stonily receives instructions about his next assignment when Cusato leans in and tells the icy "hit man" to do it again, "but this time you're psychotic," the director says, and withdraws.

"York Street," the tale of a frustrated young writer's search for inspiration among the ranks of Brooklyn's underworld, is Cusato's fourth independent film, and at 2/12 hours, his most ambitious thus far.

The script has absolutely no dialogue — each scene was totally improvised.

"York Street" will have its premiere screening at a private showing at BAM Rose Cinemas on May 12. A public showing of "York Street" will be held at the Fortway Theater, located at 68th Street and Fort Hamilton Pkwy, on May 22.

"It was such a great way to do it," says Cusato. "We wanted it to be more realistic. It's actually coming from the actors. It's not them reading off a piece of paper and trying to become the character. They already are the character."

Cusato and co-writer Asa Davis, an old classmate at the School of Visual Arts, began holding auditions for "York Street" last July.

Many of the actors who answered the casting call were neighborhood residents who had done extra work in movies like "A Bronx Tale" and television series like "The Sopranos."

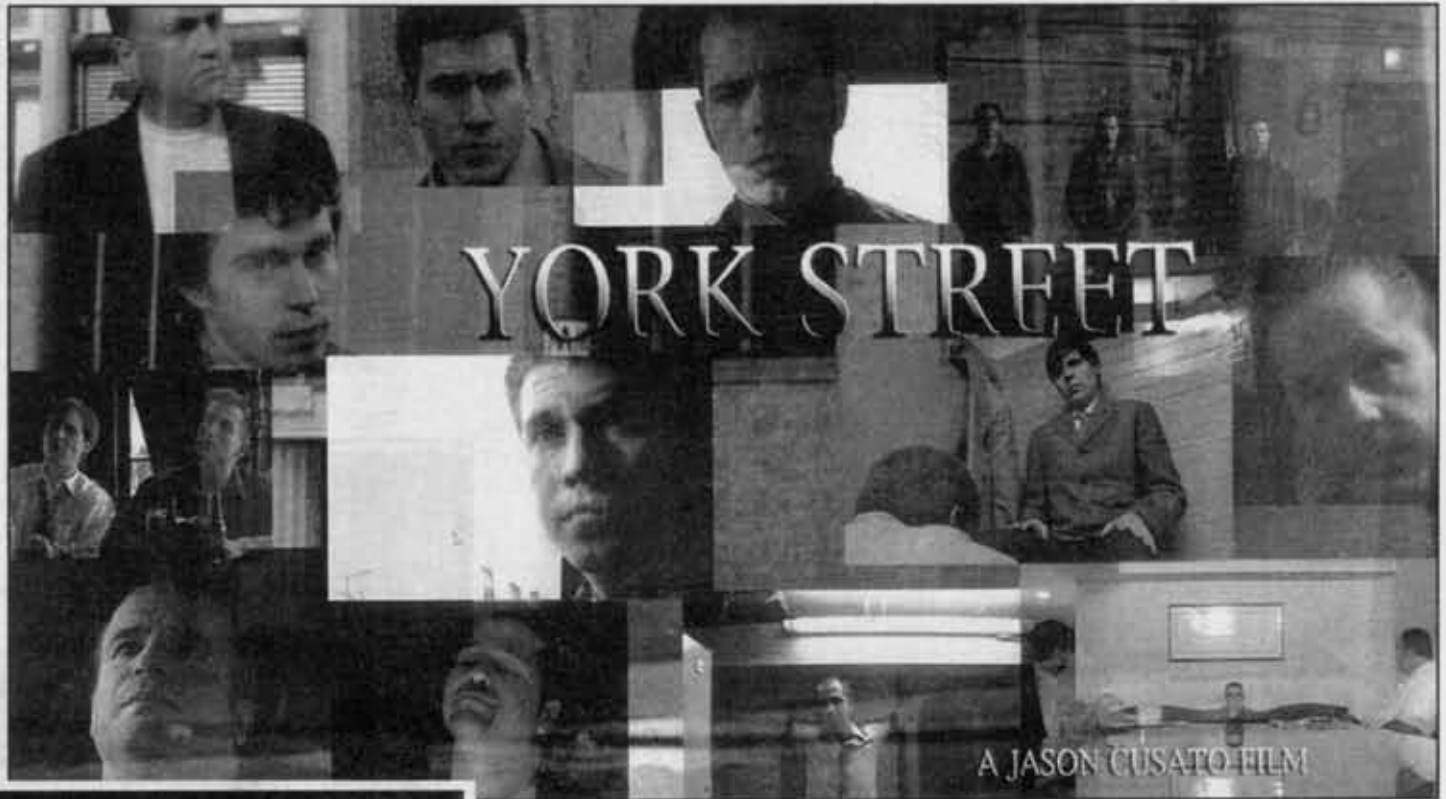
They came in and just really nailed it," says Cusato.

According to the writer/director, improvising on-the-spot dialogue actually made the actors' job easier.

"If the shooting was supposed to be on a Friday and things got switched and we had to move it up to a Wednesday, we found if the actors didn't get a chance to go over their scripts, because it's their actual dialogue, it would only take one look over and they would be in the scene," Cusato explains. "It didn't take seven or eight takes. They only had to know the cues."

Cusato began employing the same scripting technique in "When Broomsticks Were King," his earlier documentary film that won the Rutgers University Film Festival.

"It's also easier on us as writers," Cusato says. "When you sit down and watch the same scene ten times, you can pick the dialogue that you want."



Some of the dialogue that the actors came up with was so good, that Cusato allowed it to reshape his script to a certain degree.

But when things went too far astray, Cusato was there to rein his actors back in.

"I would give them an in an out," says Cusato. "If it went too far during rehearsal, I would pull them back. I always made sure that it didn't go further than we wanted it to."

Other noted Indy filmmakers like Richard Linklater have hit it big with improvised scripts and Cusato is hoping for the same kind of success.

"It's easier and a lot more fun," says

Cusato. "It's more enjoyable for the actors because it's much more personal. It's definitely something that I'm going to stick with for now."

Still, Cusato did experience some trepidation during pre-production work on "York Street."

"When they [actors] came to the first rehearsal, we gave them so little it was unbelievable," says Cusato. "I was a little nervous thinking that some of these people weren't going to be able to take this anywhere. But then as we moved on, I realized that the actors that were coming in were a lot stronger than I could have ever imagined."

It didn't take the young filmmaker long to recognize the talent.

"The ones that took the scene — this little, tiny bit that I would give them — and just broadened it so much, those were the guys that we picked. We were looking for people that could really improv well, and that's what we ended up getting."

Cusato calls "York Street," a title that refers to the first stop in Brooklyn on F line, by far his best film.

"I worked hard on every one of my films, but I used every single resource I could possibly use," says Cusato. "If I put 200 percent into my other films, I put 500 percent into this film."

The idea for "York Street" had been kicking around Cusato's head for years.

"I just had to be at the right stage to actually make a movie like this," says Cusato. "I needed the right cinematographer. I needed the right actors. I needed to have my equipment at a certain level."

Shot on both DV and 8mm film, Cusato, as

he has done for all of his previous projects, also edited the entire movie in his basement studio.

Many local merchants from places like Johnny Macks and Rhythm & Blues helped too by providing Cusato with locations to shoot. Former Councilman Steve DiBrienza also helped Cusato secure other locations around the borough.

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- John Cusato

"A lot of people from the neighborhood were extremely helpful with the making of this movie," Cusato says.

With "York Street" Cusato says he not only trying to create a "buzz" around his name, but also his talented cast and crew.

"There are a lot of good actors in the movie," says Cusato. And even behind the camera, the sound crew and the cinematography is great. I really feel this movie could be the one."

Tickets for "York Street" are available at the Fortway Theater box office and Johnny Macks, located at 1114 8th Avenue. For show times and more information, call Park Slope Films at 718-369-0873.