

after hours

Sundance filmmakers who have ever ventured out for a midnight fright treat (usually accompanied by nachos-in-a-tray and buttered popcorn) in anticipation of being scared silly, know that staking out fresh turf in the low-budget horror genre is no easy task. This makes the fiercely independent vision of two Local 600-shot features, *Onyx the Fortuitous and the Talisman of Souls* and *Birth/Rebirth*, that much more impressive – both films push the boundaries of indie horror with enough creative integrity and audience appeal to get a nod from the tough gatekeepers at Sundance’s Midnight selections. Both come from unexpected beginnings, with *Onyx* derived from a YouTube character’s fan base who supported a Kickstarter effort to launch the project, and *Birth/Rebirth* taking Mary Shelley’s classic *Frankenstein* trope on a ride to reveal the darkest (and goriest) sides of a mother’s love.

Onyx the Fortuitous and the Talisman of Souls

The movie’s titular lead character (played by the film’s writer/director Andrew Bowser) is a dissatisfied burger-flipper with a penchant for the dark side of the occult. He’s summoned, along with a few other like-minded would-be’s, to help his occultist idol execute a sinister plan that Onyx eventually discovers won’t go so well for them personally.

Director of Photography Dan Adlerstein reports that he watched the lead character and story grow over an extended period online. “Onyx is this very eccentric character that [Writer/Director/Actor] Andrew [Bowser] created years ago. He would seamlessly edit interviews of Onyx into otherwise straight news stories,” Dan shares. “When I first saw the clips on YouTube, I completely thought the character was a real person. It was only when I saw him in subsequent videos that I realized it was an actor. The thing that hooked me about the script is that it gives Onyx a backstory, discovering why he is the way he is. Even though it’s a film with a lot of plot, I found myself thinking more about character. Sometimes plot can get in the way of character, but I think this film holds the balance.”

Adlerstein says the Kickstarter campaign that got the movie going, included thousands of people making donations. “That wasn’t enough,” he continues. “But it was a seed, and we realized that this thing could happen if we could pull together more money – and we did! It’s so rewarding to have this kind of small Internet character build a fanbase and then see that fanbase have such a large part in getting the movie made.”

Film crews often tell stories about the fine line they typically walk on feature debut by an auteur-type filmmaker who’s been wedded to the project for years. But this was not the case with *Onyx*. “Andrew created this character, and lives and breathes this genre of movies,” Adlerstein adds. “This movie is completely an expression of the type of cinema he loves. And he wasn’t just the lead actor and director; he co-produced, wrote, and edited it. Yet even though it’s something that is so his, he was so open

to collaboration and input that working with him was truly a joy. The entire crew felt his love and passion and was rooting for Andrew because we knew how much it meant to him. It’s incredibly rewarding helping someone make a long-standing dream into reality.”

Watching *Onyx* in its Park City debut, it’s clear the film was shaped by the visual sensibilities of classic 1980s and 90s horror films without exactly emulating them. Indeed, right after Bowser sent Adlerstein the script, he sent a list of 15 movies for the DP to reference. That list included *Gremlins*, *Fright Night*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Child’s Play*, and *Pumpkin Head*. “These are fun titles that make Andrew’s sensibilities crystal clear,” Adlerstein recalls. “We wanted to make our movie feel like those, but we weren’t trying to make a movie that looked like it came from the 1980s. We wanted modern aesthetics, sensibilities, and a lighting style that would feel to contemporary audiences how those films felt to their audiences when they first came out. For us it was about becoming immersed in a certain type of filmic space and just letting that come out on set. We weren’t making direct references, but instead making decisions about lens choices, camera placement and lighting styles that came from a place of ‘this just feels right.’”

Although the crew wasn’t as large as Adlerstein would have liked, he says, “sometimes you need to make those compromises so the money can go to the elements the audience is actually going to see on-screen.” This ethos drove many budgetary choices, like working with just a single camera style – the ALEXA Mini – even for large ensemble scenes including a seven-character dinner with upwards of six pages of dialogue. They also chose to use practical puppets instead of relying exclusively on VFX.

“The puppet design team, Kreature Kid, created these incredible puppets that were fun to shoot,” Adlerstein describes. “The only challenge was that they didn’t have legs. So, how do you move them from point A to B without seeing them move in a wide shot?” The answer is through an extraordinary

attention to detail from all of the film’s department. “Everything in the movie, from the puppets, to props to costumes, to wigs, were so well made that I did have to light them in a particular way to avoid a shortcoming,” he adds. “They could take the light; take the angles while still holding up to the camera. That opened up choices and made a big difference.”

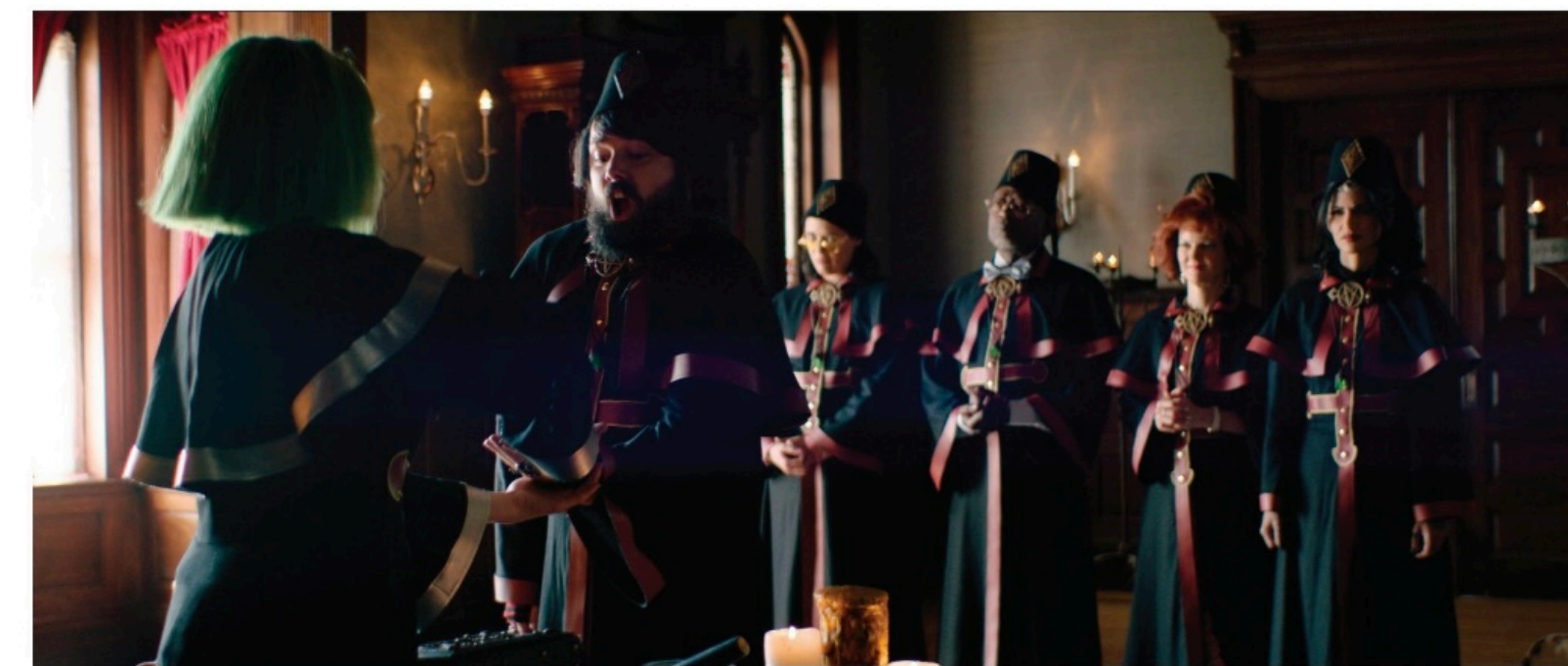
With the exception of a week’s worth of work in Los Angeles, the majority of the film was shot over four weeks at a Gilded Age estate in Lenox MA, named Ventfort Hall. Adlerstein, who has an extensive resume in television and commercials in addition to his work on indies, says that believing locations are vital to low-budget movies, “and production designer, Teresa Strebler, and her team worked miracles. They turned a large empty doorway into an exquisite bookcase/secret door. They brought in perfectly matched walls to unrestored parts of the mansion to create corridors and secret passageways. They even created an entire cemetery on the ground from scratch, including a ten-foot statue that plays an important role in the story.”

With the support of a technical team that included Local 600 1st AC Samuel Lusted, 2nd Danielle Bryant, Steadicam Operator Tom Dean, 1st Grip John Lauterbach, and Chief Lighting Technician Rowan Lupton, Adlerstein was able to deliver close to final look images to editorial. “Our light package was modest without any big units, so we had to be inventive,” he states. “But I went in with a comprehensive look-book and strong ideas about how to approach lighting, and everyone got it.”

“I’m a big believer in trying to nail the look on set, and being as close to the finished product as possible. I think it’s important to give the editor an accurate depiction of the mood and tone of the images, so that their emotional weight can accurately inform the edit,” he concludes. “I’m also a believer that the vibe on set translates to the end product. And for *Onyx*, it felt like everybody was truly in it together. The crew grew to become kind of a family and that shows on the screen.”



DP DAN ADLERSTEIN SAYS ONYX WAS ABOUT “BECOMING IMMERSIVE IN A CERTAIN TYPE OF FILMIC SPACE AND JUST LETTING THAT COME OUT ON SET. WE WEREN’T MAKING DIRECT REFERENCES [TO THE MANY 1980S/90S HORROR FILMS WRITER/DIRECTOR ANDREW BOWSER BROUGHT FORTH], BUT INSTEAD MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT LENS CHOICES, CAMERA PLACEMENT AND LIGHTING STYLES THAT CAME FROM A PLACE OF ‘THIS JUST FEELS RIGHT.’” TOP/BOTTOM: FRAMEGRABS COURTESY OF SUNDANCE INSTITUTE



IndieWire

Sundance 2023 Cinematography Survey: The Cameras and Lenses Behind 40 Narrative Films at the Fest



Behind the scenes of “Onyx the Fortuitous and the Talisman of Souls”

Adlerstein: There was a fine balance to strike in shooting a character-based throwback horror-comedy meant to be fun, spooky, and emotional all at once. And one of the first decisions director Andrew Bowser and I made about the look and feel of “Onyx” was for it to be shot anamorphic. Yes, we wanted that grand and epic feel that anamorphic can help provide. But also: “Onyx” is an ensemble piece, and the 2.39 aspect ratio would allow for more natural framing of group shots. We wanted to get creative with negative space. We wanted the shallow depth of field to give a sense of mystery to the surroundings. And knowing we’d have many candles in the background of shots, we thought the anamorphic bokeh would help reinforce the gothic mood and atmosphere of the location. What surprised me on set was how much I wound up reaching for the wider focal lengths for close-ups and mediums. I can’t say that was the original plan, but especially with the main character of Onyx himself, we found ourselves loving the feel of the 40mm and even 32mm just a few feet away. Not only did it feel intimate by bringing the viewer into Onyx’s subjective experience, but we found these shots to be fun and dynamic as well — a big part of that balance we were

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FILMMAKER

“We Wanted To Get Creative With Negative Space”: DP Dan Adlerstein on Onyx the Fortuitous and the Talisman of Souls



Director Andrew Bowser brings one of his most well-known comedy characters to the big screen in *Onyx the Fortuitous and the Talisman of Souls*. Onyx the Fortuitous (Bowser) is a struggling amateur occultist who believes he's made it to the big leagues when he's invited to a demonic seance by his idol Bartok the Great. When they manage to rouse the ancient spirit, however, he must fight to save his life—and his soul. DP Dan Adlerstein discusses his longtime collaboration with Bowser, bringing the film's specific brand of horror-comedy to life and more.

Filmmaker: How and why did you wind up being the cinematographer of your film? What were the factors and attributes that led to your being hired for this job?

Adlerstein: I've worked with writer/director Andrew Bowser for years on various projects including branded content, commercials, and short films. Collaborating with Andrew is always such a pleasure and we've developed a really great working relationship. When he told me he was writing a film centered on his Onyx character I could not have been more excited to be a part of it.

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Onyx the Fortuitous and the Talisman of Souls Courtesy of Sundance Institute.



Park City's indie playground welcomes Local 600 members (and ICG Magazine staffers!) in person for the first time in three years.



Onyx the Fortuitous and the Talisman of Souls – Amateur occultist Marcus J. Trillbury, aka Onyx the Fortuitous, is struggling. He's misunderstood at home and work, but his dreams for a new life seem to be answered when he lands a coveted invitation to the mansion of his idol, Bartok the Great, for a ritual to raise the spirit of an ancient demon. He excitedly joins Bartok and his fellow eclectic group of devotees as they prepare for the ceremony, but pretty quickly it becomes apparent everything is not as it seems. Director of Photography Dan Adlerstein says Onyx was conceived by writer/director Andrew Bowser "as a throwback to 80's adventure/horror/comedy films like Ghostbusters, Fright Night and Gremlins. These movies are fully embedded in Andrew's DNA as a filmmaker, and the first thing he did was give me a list of about 15 of them to watch. But early on in our discussions, we agreed that while Onyx should feel like a throwback, it shouldn't exactly look like one. When those films came out, to those audiences they felt modern. So instead of copying 80's movie aesthetics and tropes, we set out to shoot a modern-looking movie, with modern sensibilities, that would evoke the same emotions and sense of wonder."

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The Biggest Challenges Sundance Filmmakers Faced (And How They Tackled Them)



Dan Adlerstein, DP, *Onyx the Fortuitous* and *the Talisman of Souls*
"We knew that striking the right balance between horror, adventure, and comedy would be tricky to say the least. In some ways, horror and comedy visuals can seem diametrically opposed. In comedy, it's about seeing the joke while in horror it can often be about what you don't see."

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For These DP's Connecting with Story and Storytellers Prevents Burnout



In today's episode, we host a roundtable discussion with cinematographers of four different Sundance films. We chat about problem solving on set, collaborating with directors, creative lighting solutions, protecting your energy for the stories you love, and finding the silver lining in the less than ideal projects.

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