

One Room, One Set, One Take: The latest Schwartz/Suher collab is about to hit the big screen

"I discovered several years ago that writing is not my strongest attribute, although bringing stories to life from the page to the screen is something that I have a strong passion for," Nathan Suher frankly admits. Suher is about to embark on directing his third film based on a Lenny Schwartz script, and *The Assassination of Western Civilization* once again proves this team's powerful dynamic. Suher continues, "I think the reason collaborations with Lenny have proven so successful is because I fully involve Lenny in many of the creative decisions on a project. We have very similar points of view on how to tackle issues that arise on a production. Also, Lenny isn't precious about his scripts. He is in full support of having me re-write scenes and change dialogue that improves the script."

As strong as a Lenny Schwartz script is, film is a visual medium. And the freedom of a blank page absorbing text quickly finds limitations when those stories meet the logistics of production. Suher relishes this challenge. "Perhaps my favorite part of the movie-making process is interpreting a script and discovering how to bring it to life visually. I'm inherently a very visual person to begin with. What is a bit unusual about adapting *The Assassination of Western Civilization* to a film is that the script was void of much stage direction. It makes sense when you consider that this used to be a live stage play, so it is left to me to imagine what the location would look like."

To achieve his vision of this former play, Suher will be filming in a single room, one set. "It allowed us to work extremely efficiently. With only one set to dress, light and block out for all departments, it allowed everyone to become extremely familiar with the space within the movie. Every chair, every piece of furniture, every prop becomes part of the story. However, there are limitations to this style of filmmaking."

The Assassination of Western Civilization is "about a tabloid magazine writer who believes he may have witnessed the assassination of a US senator. The story takes place in real time as coworkers, his wife and mistress all become players in a game of cat and mouse when the FBI comes knocking on his office door to question his involvement in the assassination." With this claustrophobic and tense situation, Suher decided to shoot the film as one long take, compounding the stress and reveals into one elongated moment.

That tension stimulated Suher's creativity, mixing the approach of Hitchcock's *Rope* with '70s classic political films. It's interesting because I had always thought of this story to be an homage to 1970s political dramas. Suher nods to the "paranoia films like *All the President's Men* or *The Manchurian Candidate* with serious, heavy-handed, message-driven scripts." Suher adds though, "Our cast found a lot of humor in the story, which was a pleasant surprise to me."

Contemplating the hindrances and advantages of filming a real-time, one-shot film is exciting to Suher. He had to sift through the efficiency and the propulsion of his cast and his camera. "The biggest challenge is figuring out ways to have emotional transitions and create tension without using the one tool that every film takes for granted: the cut. The entire film takes place in one room with nine actors

who rotate in and out of the room as the story unfolds. So, much of the dramatic tension is going to have to come from the actors' performances. Not being able to cut away to an alternate angle means each actor needs to approach the entire film as if they are performing for a small audience, as if they are performers in a live stage production."

The prior Schwartz-Suher collaboration, Higher Methods, will at last see a screen with its premiere on September 28 at the Orpheum Theater in Foxboro, Mass.