

## On the Trail of "Umneys Last Case" with Director Rob Bowman

Contributed by  
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From the creators of TNT's *Salem's Lot* comes NIGHTMARES & DREAMSCAPES: FROM THE STORIES OF STEPHEN KING. This anthology series of eight one-hour episodes adapted from King's short stories begins airing on July 12th. On July 19th, at 9:00 pm the show *Umneys Last Case* airs. Directed by master genre director Rob Bowman, the episode stars Emmy winner and Oscar nominee William H. Macy and Jacqueline McKenzie.

After the death of his son, writer Sam Landry (Macy) is so desperate to lead another life, he writes himself into his own book, forcing his long-time character (also played by Macy) to change places with him and live in the modern day. But things get deadly when Landry realizes Umney is trapped and cannot write himself out of his new reality.

Rob Bowman's extensive credits as a director include the features *Reign of Fire*, *Elektra* and *Reign of Fire* he also produced. He is an award-winning director who has worked on some of the most critically successful TV series of the past two decades, including the recent *Night Stalker*, *The Lone Gunmen*, *The X-Files*, *M.A.N.T.I.S.*, *The Adventures of Brisco County Jr.*, *Parker Lewis Can't Lose*, *Star Trek: Voyager*, *21 Jump Street* and *MacGyver* to name just a few. His producing work on *The X-Files* earned him Globes and four Emmy nominations.

FEARS: Did you find the project or did the project find you?

Rob Bowman: The project found me. Initially, there was a phone call from a friend of mine at CAA, an agent there, who had a piece of material that he thought was quite special and felt it would be a good marriage for me. The funny thing was CAA didn't represent me at the time. He still held faith in me, which I greatly appreciated, and that I would like it. It was a funny introduction because he said something like, "Do you want to go shoot this hour of television in Australia?" I said, "No, it's too far away!" He went on to explain that it was three weeks of prep and three weeks of shooting. I thought that was interesting but I told him that before we do all that to let me read the script.

He sent it to me that afternoon and I read it right away. That was the end of my doubt. The adaptation by April Smith of Stephen King's short story was so remarkably well written that I just wanted to tell the story. So I agreed to go to Australia. I had a supportive phone call from Bill Haber, the executive producer, who told me that this was Stephen King's favorite short story and they would love for me to do this. I was flattered, ready to get on the plane, and that's how it all started.

FEARS: April Smith is not just an outstanding television writer, but an accomplished mystery writer as well. Does it add a level to the confidence you have in a project when you have a well-known writer scripting your teleplay?

Rob Bowman: Let me answer that in terms of her writing on "Umneys Last Case." It's a very complicated story that she tackled. I love movies like that, but only if they're well told so that the audience can stay with you and understand it. It's one thing to have a complicated story and not know how to tell it, because then it becomes confusing. I thought April had a handle on it and did a gorgeous job of making it clear.

Overall, I knew that this was going to be tricky and challenging to illustrate what's happening in the story on film. When it works that is exactly the stuff I like because it keeps me interested. The thoroughness, dialogue, and the distinction of characters and the way they speak, her screenplay was just so inspiring. No doubt that it comes from such an accomplished writer. She was definitely on her game in scripting "Umneys Last Case."

FEARS: When you think about what would be required of the lead actor to pull this off, I'm sure there was a very short list of names that came to mind. Then comes an amazingly actor like William H. Macy to the project. How was it working with him and did he live up to the expectations you had of the character when you first read the teleplay?

Rob Bowman: I was so excited about directing this story that I knew it was going to be good. I knew what it was going to look like and I knew how I was going to shoot it. I think it was about week later that I found out that Bill Macy had come onboard. The whole project just leaped up to another level. Not only in trying to figure out who is this person is going to be, who is going to play this Philip Marlow kind of character, but when it becomes Bill Macy you realize your choices are so much broader now because I have so much talent to work with, and also the professionalism.

We rehearsed every single scene in prep for the shoot. We had every single actor, from supporting cast to leads, and we blocked every single scene down to what line to stand up on, turn their heads, and that's the way Bill wanted to do it. So when we got to the set we already knew what we were going to be doing in terms of where he's moving. That level of craftsmanship, professionalism, and artistry is so rare. You're lucky when you get those magic moments and this show is going to be one of those that you will never forget.

FEARS: You shot this in Australia. When you worked on "The X-Files," you shot that in Los Angeles and Canada. What were some of the pros and cons of shooting this project in Australia?

Rob Bowman: I'm trying to think of cons, and the only real one I can come up with is being so far from home. In general, the Australians are just so friendly and the crew is very experienced and extremely keen. I think sometimes you can have one or the other - inexperienced and a lot of enthusiasm or lots of experience and no enthusiasm. Down there you got this nice hybrid of both. There are a lot skilled people who've worked on tons of movies and television shows, and they're passionate about it.

The producing team, the stewardship of the show, was supreme. Before I even got on the plane we had already gone through set design, costume design, the look of it, and by the time I got down there I was just about ready to shoot. So this was a very well produced shoot.

FEARS: You shooting this Stephen King short story, with a wonderful script by April Smith, are the beats needed to hold the audience's interest different from traditional episodic television?

Rob Bowman: Yes! It evolved in several ways. There was a while there where we thought this would be the first episode to run and it would air without commercials. The reason why I liked that was because of the complexity of the story, and the emotional value, I thought it would be nice to not let the audience think about anything else for the 52 or 53 minutes. We were able to find natural commercial breaks, but TNT allowed us to find them organically within the story. This way we didn't have to come up with artificial stops. I don't believe the story was written for commercial breaks; forgive me wrong. Let me just say this, I didn't actually like where the breaks were in the script and felt we should carry through to a different moments because the story just flows so nicely as a complete piece. We did have to go back and provide a commercial broken version of it.

I'm working with ABC now on another project and we have six acts. That's really tough because it's hard to get momentum. I think we only have four or five acts in "Umney's. The audience stays more with the show than the commercials.

FEARS: We were lucky enough to have a special screening of "Umney" and "Battleground" on a big New York. Not only does it play well on a big screen, it's a movie! The way you talk about the project is that you were

making a short film for television.

Rob Bowman: Thank you and that's cool you saw it on the big screen, I haven't had the pleasure. I was shooting this I was framing for the big screen, which means you can shoot a little wider at times and let the production values come through. Nobody was thinking we were knocking off an episode of something. We were making a very special and unique piece, and we wanted to think as big as we could.

FEARS: When you're working on a piece that is written by such a well known, well read author, are you the least bit intimidated by that and are you able to instill those elements you might consider your directing signature?

Rob Bowman: Very good question, and particularly with "Umney's, as I opened the conversation during prep, they telling me that this was Stephen King's favorite short story. I told them to stop it because they were making me nervous! I'd come to do my best, I wouldn't do anything less, and I tried to squeeze a bit harder for just that little extra more! My obligations were to go back and get a thorough understanding of the short story and what Stephen was trying to do with it. The short story is different than the screenplay. So am I still transferring those values and the entertainment value that Stephen wrote into the original short story? April did 95% of my work for me because her adaptation was so fun, so smart, and so clever that all I had to do was deliver that, along with my long time love of film noir, and how that is shot and lit. There was nothing but excited people standing around on set. I think if you are going to take the time to do an adaptation and bring a novelist's work to screen the important thing is not to change it so you alter what the original point was, even if you say it in a different way. I knew that there was quite a range of emotionality in the piece from whimsical to fantastic, wonderful to tragedy and sorrow. The spectrum was quite broad. It was important to get all that in there and I think we did. I was inspired the whole time and I was also thinking that one day before it airs Stephen is going to see this and I certainly hope he likes it.

FEARS: So have you heard from Stephen?

Rob Bowman: I heard indirectly through Bill Haber that, and I'm not quoting exactly, but Stephen said he felt it was the best adaptation of anything he had ever written. I took that as a compliment to April and me for getting all that on screen.

Joseph Mauceri: You're a producer and director with your hands in bunch of different things, what are you working on next?

Rob Bowman: Last spring a friend of mine sent a script to me called "Day Break." I wasn't thinking about directing a television pilot, I was reading a variety of scripts, and he sent me this script out of the blue. I thought it was quite remarkable. It stars Taye Diggs, Adam Baldwin, Moon Bloodgood, Mitch Pileggi, and several others. It's a real interesting and multi-cultural cast. The story is about a cop who finds himself stuck in the same day. You could say it's a "Groundhog" kind of effect, but it's not a comedy. He wakes up and has the worst day imaginable. He is arrested murdering the D.A., who he has never even met. His girlfriend is carjacked and murdered. He is told to take the wrap for everything. He goes to bed and wakes up the next morning in bed and next to his girlfriend, the one murdered the day before. It's a very realistic setting. We shoot it in L.A., for L.A. It's Taye Diggs as Detective Brett Hopper trying to figure out how in the world could I be stuck in the same day. That's impossible! Why is he being framed and why are they trying to kill his girlfriend. It's a really fun, inventive, cop show, but it's not really a cop show. It's not about police work toward the supernatural, but I'd say more scientific plausibility to how he could be stuck in the same day. In the course of the first 13 episodes he will make inroads into why he is being framed particularly because he's just a narcotics cop. At the end of 13 episodes his mission is to end this nightmare and roll into the next day. We'll see if he does. It's very cool.

FEARS: Will that air in the fall?

Rob Bowman: That will air starting in November. They're going to run six episodes of "Lost." Then "Lost" will air that's the current plan you know things can change then we'll go 13 straight in the Wednesday slot. Then "Lost" will come back on after us. So we have a great time slot.

FEARS: "Umney" is so cinematic, but you have so many television credits. Do you work primarily in television or is this where you are the most comfortable and your head is tuned into working and adapting things for the medium?

Rob Bowman: I'd love to do more work on the big screen. I hadn't done any television for seven years. I was involved in quite a few pictures, three of which I got made: "The X-Files," "Reign of Fire," and "Elektra." Feature film is a different medium. I have to say that in those seven years of my absence, television has evolved into much more of a filmmaker's medium. It's not just about the writing, you've got to have some visual chops because television is a lot more visual now than it used to be. My humble opinion was that I left after I worked on the only interesting television show on TV back in "The X-Files" days and I just didn't want to be working on shows I felt were cousins of "the X-Files." So I went off in the world.

In general, it's not about what size the screen is for me it's about where the best material is. When "Umney" came around it did so out of the blue. I believe I was reading a feature script the day I got the call. When it's material that is that good it just excites me. To be energized, enthusiastic, or inspired by a piece makes my job a lot more fun. I love directing, and there is nothing better than directing a good story. So I just chase good material now. If the next one is going to be a feature it will be, as it always should be, something that I really love and I feel should be made into a two-hour piece of entertainment for the big screen. In the end what I love to do is direct, be it a television screen or a feature screen, it doesn't matter to me.