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maybe their boyfriends should worry

cole williams

amber benson

# RACE YOU TO THE BOTTOM

A film by Russell Brown

Opens theatrically 2007

## ***Short Synopsis...***

Nathan and Maggie are in the throes of a passionate affair. They're young, good-looking, and both have boyfriends. When Nathan is assigned to write a travel article on romantic hot-spots in Napa Valley, these unconventional lovers test the limits of the sensuality and fantasy that bond them.

## ***Long Synopsis...***

Nathan (Cole Williams), 24, is a travel journalist from Los Angeles assigned to write about romantic hot-spots in California's Napa Valley. Maggie (Amber Benson), 24, is trying to figure out how to turn her political science degree into a career.

Although Nathan and Maggie both have boyfriends, they are in the throes of a passionate affair, and this will be their first weekend away together. En route to Napa, they visit Joe (Justin Hartley) and Carla (Danielle Thomas) – friends of Maggie's from college. A spontaneous seduction brings to light their hopes and fears, forcing Nathan and Maggie to confront the reality of their romance as they drive through a gold and green autumn in wine country.

Each turn is a test as these unconventional lovers try to rescue the sensuality and fantasy that bonds them.

## ***About the film subject matter...***

"Race You to the Bottom" centers around a beautifully complicated and heated love affair between a 20-something straight woman and her best friend, a 20-something gay man. Starring young actors Cole Williams and Amber Benson ("Buffy, The Vampire Slayer") in career-making lead roles, "Race You to the Bottom" is a vibrant, sexy artistic achievement and a cultural signpost in reflecting a fast-changing new world of fluid sexuality.

In the spirit of "Two for the Road" or "Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice," "Race You to the Bottom" is a window into the sexual mores of a new generation. From the pages of Myspace to the cover of New York Magazine, Generation Y is experimenting in a world without definitions.

Do the terms bisexual, gay and straight really no longer have a purpose? Can a more utopian view of sexuality replace what might have previously been a divisive system of categorizing love? The lead characters in the film, Nathan and Maggie, plunge into this dilemma as they try to define a relationship on their own terms: sensual, liberating, rebellious, but also fraught with complications that they might not have the maturity to overcome.

In this larger exploration of a social phenomenon, "Race You to the Bottom" is also a sharp examination of how two people use each other to hide from certain fears in their own coming-of-age.

Nathan and Maggie both have boyfriends, but they have been conducting a secret affair with each other for more than six months. Maggie is avoiding finding a career, finding a husband, or settling on any definition or restrictions for her own life. She sees the relationship with Nathan as a childhood fantasy -- as she says, "an endless stream of now." Because Nathan is gay, she's relieved from the normal expectations that might be placed on a young woman, and can indulge in this romantic fantasy because she intuits it will have an inevitable conclusion.

Nathan, also, is avoiding the expectations that come with being a gay man in America. Turned off by gay culture and values, and dreaming of the pleasures of a traditional, heterosexual relationship, Nathan is also playing out a fantasy. As he says, his "biological imperative" calls for certain needs to be fulfilled, but Maggie would be the woman he would settle down with if could be straight.

Stories of love between gay men and straight women have been told in the past, but generally it is the sexual component that gets in the way. However, in the context of a new world without definitions, the erotic element might actually be the strongest and simplest aspect of this love affair, while the real difficulty arises about how the future might work or what the expectations are on each side.

All of this is played out over the course of a wine-filled, bright and golden autumn in Napa Valley. Despite the tough questions and hard realizations, "Race You to the Bottom" is ultimately a warm, joy-filled celebration of the eccentricities of youth and the vigor of a hot-blooded, rebellious affair. As these two hedonists tear through Northern California, the film reminds us of the glorious moments when romance seems to have no boundaries.

### ***About the Production...***

*Race You to the Bottom* started as an exploration of how certain personal needs are played out in relationships. Initially the script consisted of a series of conversations -- meditations, during the course of a driving trip from Los Angeles to San Francisco, on what characterizes the dynamic between a straight woman and a gay man. The sensual and romantic interaction that my two characters seemed to be experiencing was one that is rarely explored in a "gay-themed" feature film. It was layered with the complexity of unfulfilled expectations and ulterior motives, and therein I saw the potential for a moving film. As the plot emerged, the themes of the film began to play themselves out more dramatically, as the characters faced situations and external pressures along the way. The process of workshoping many of the scenes with acting/directing coach Joan Scheckel helped bring the ideas of the film into sharper perspective. And although the script remained dialogue-driven, as we progressed it took on a more cinematic energy and form. It was perhaps not until editing was well underway, months later that the relationship between words and images would find its equilibrium.

The director of photography, Marco Fagnoli, was the first crewmember to become involved. While the script was still in its early stages, we were introduced over lunch by a mutual filmmaker friend. Marco's questions and thoughts on the aesthetics of the film helped the script come to its final form. One of the great pleasures of making this movie was working with him -- a "perfect collaboration," as I have told him many times.

Over the course of the next few months, I took a job as script supervisor on a low-budget feature called *Harry and Max*. The director, Christopher Munch, has always been an inspiration to me and the chance to work in this position was a good way to learn more about the super low-budget independent filmmaking process. This invaluable experience led me to Roni Deitz, who eventually agreed to produce the film. Roni is that rare producer who knows everything, and is “in the game” for all the right reasons: To do good work, have fun, and run a smooth production.

Meeting Amber Benson was perhaps the first moment when I felt the script would actually come to life. Strangely (or not-so-strangely), she was the first actress to read for the part. Before we launched into the audition, Amber told me that she loved the script but hated the ending. I was immediately smitten. Amber brought intelligence to her reading that I had hoped to find, but also a vulnerability that I was not expecting. To the horror of the casting director, I read the part of the male lead during Amber’s callback audition, and felt we had an immediate chemistry.

Casting Nathan was the opposite experience. We couldn’t find anyone. Cole Williams, who starred in *Harry and Max*, was staying in my spare room throughout the casting process. Cole always had a unique understanding of the script, but had played a much younger character in *Harry and Max*. To me, he was always the 15-year-old boy band singer of that film, and not the more mature-looking 25-year-old. A week before production began, we still hadn’t cast the male lead and it was looking like we might shut down. At the end of our final casting session, Cole appeared with a new haircut, facial hair, and demanded to read for the part. Turns out he was perfect and we had already become great friends, so I knew we could work together. Amber and I had been rehearsing for a few weeks, but the three of us worked intensely before production began -- blocking the scenes and getting Cole up to speed. These two actors had immediate chemistry and genuinely liked each other a great deal, so it ended up being a perfect match.

By most filmmaking standards, our 20-day shooting schedule was extremely tight. Split between Napa Valley and Los Angeles, we were constantly at odds with time. Adding to this, the majority of the film takes place outside, and many of our long dialogue scenes could’ve been ruined had the weather not cooperated, or had the schedule not been so perfectly planned by Roni Deitz. Our tiny, dedicated crew believed passionately in the project. Most notable were the super-human efforts of Fred Helm and Lee Ascher (production sound mixers), Doran Meyers (art director), and Kristen Anacker (costume designer). Roni and I have frequently joked that our production was blessed. When it was supposed to rain and be foggy on our San Francisco beach shoot day, we showed up to the warmest, clearest October day that San Francisco had seen in years. Every location in Napa was cooperative and the production is indebted to them for their generosity.

Editing began two weeks after we wrapped. I was lucky to enlist Annette Davey, a veteran film editor, to cut the project together. Annette had read the script before production, and given me tips on common mistakes of the first time director. (“Oftentimes they overshoot the actors from behind. We want to see their faces!”) Working with Annette was like attending a master-class in film editing. The structure of the story was constantly changing and evolving, and the greatest lesson -- you must try everything! -- proved fruitful as we chiseled the movie into its final form.

When we finally locked the film, Christopher Munch agreed to take on the thankless role of post-production supervisor. Having never made a film on 35mm, I am convinced we would still be working today had he not so courageously and generously taken on this position. Our first task after the film was "locked" was to find a composer. Annette introduced me to Ryan Beveridge whose score captured the "Berkeley" vibe of the movie, and brought an emotional element that had not been there. Two songs by M.C. Honky and Eric McKeown were part of the temp, and we were able to license them. Fred Helm oversaw the sound editing and Mark Rozett, another veteran, mixed the film on a meager budget and tight schedule. Ronna Wallace has since come on as our sales representative, and like many other members of the crew, I am grateful for her experience and wisdom.

## ***About the Cast....***

### **AMBER BENSON ("Maggie")**

Amber Benson was born in Birmingham, Alabama. She spent her childhood doing community theatre and studying dance. At the age of fourteen, her family moved to Los Angeles where Amber began her professional career as an actor and writer.

Since then she has made over a dozen films, including Steven Soderbergh's "King of the Hill" and "Imaginary Crimes" with Harvey Keitel, yet it wasn't until her three season stint as Tara Maclay on the hit show "Buffy The Vampire Slayer" that Amber came to wider acclaim.

This is a busy year for Amber as she stars in five upcoming feature films including; "Strictly Sexual," "Angst," "Simple Things," "Tripping Forward" and she makes her directing debut with "Lovers, Liars and Lunatics."

Amber is also the author (with Christopher Golden) of an animated science fiction series for the BBC called "The Ghosts of Albion" and three "Buffy"-related comic books for Dark Horse Comics.

### **COLE WILLIAMS ("Nathan")**

Cole Williams most recently starred in "Harry and Max" for director Christopher Munch, which premiered at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival. He recently completed starring in the upcoming feature "Spaced Out."

Exposed to acting all his life, Cole decided to attend boarding school in New Hampshire where he passionately and seriously studied theater. He later attended a conservatory for acting and was accepted at the age of 17 to SUNY Purchase College. While attending undergrad, Cole realized he wanted to be a working actor and returned immediately to Los Angeles where he landed supporting roles in such independent films and TV as "The Urban Chaos Theory", "Bittersweet", NBC's "Scrubs", "I Witness", "Ferris Jude" and finally a regular role on the series "8 Simple Rules."

Williams reunites with “Race You to the Bottom” co-star Amber Benson in her directing debut “Lovers, Liars and Lunatics” as well as “Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves” and was most recently seen in “North County” with Charlize Theron.

Being in the public eye is not new for Cole. Born on July 28, 1981 to accomplished singer/songwriter/ actor Paul Williams and his wife Katie, his acting career was almost instinctive and at the ripe age of six found himself on stage where he felt at home with the art.

### **JEREMY LELLIOTT (“Nicholas”)**

In addition to playing Mike Pierce, a recurring character on the popular drama "7th Heaven," Lelliott was a regular on the drama “Safe Harbor,” also for Brenda Hampton. Jeremy has had recurring and guest appearances on such series as “Smallville,” "The Practice," “Providence,” and "Melrose Place". On the big screen, he costarred with Robin Williams in the comedy “Jack.” His other feature credits include “Ambushed,” “Gacy,” “Kid Cop,” and “Diplomatic Siege.” Lelliott starred in the tele films “Disappearance,” alongside Harry Hamlin and Susan Dey, and “Journey of the Heart,” as Cybill Shepard's blind and autistic son as well as the upcoming feature “Driftwood.” Lelliott played “Chip” in the original Los Angeles cast of the Broadway production of “Beauty and the Beast,” and he earned a 1995 Dramalogue Award for his performance in “To Kill a Mockingbird.” Jeremy has his own production company, which often produces theater in the Los Angeles

### **DANIELLE HARRIS (“Carla”)**

Born in Queens, Danielle Harris had her first taste of fame as a child actor battling the menacing Michael Myers in the horror sequels "Halloween 4: The Return of Michael Myers" (1988) and "Halloween 5: The Revenge of Michael Myers" (1989), working consistently in juvenile roles and reemerging as a young adult in 1998's nouveau slasher pic "Urban Legend". Harris began acting at an early age, beginning her 1985-1987 role on the New York City-lensed ABC daytime drama "One Life to Live" at age eight. From 1992-1993, Harris played the neighbor of "Roseanne", the seemingly sweet reluctant best friend/fierce rival of Darlene (Sara Gilbert). 1998 marked her return to horror film with a supporting role as an irritating Goth girl in "Urban Legend", and that same year she turned up in similar garb on an episode of "Charmed" (The WB) playing a misguided and somewhat dangerous would-be witch named Aziza. In brighter fare, Harris lent her voice to the Nickelodeon animated series "The Wild Thornberrys" (1998-2000).

### **JUSTIN HARTLEY (“Joe”)**

Justin Hartley was born in Knoxville, Illinois. He attended Southern Illinois University and The University of Illinois in Chicago where he majored in History and Theater.

He was recently seen as Nicholas Foxworth ‘Fox’ Crane on daytime television show *Passions* and makes his biggest break this coming season as a series regular on the hit WB series “Smallville” as well as the new Ryan Shiraki film “Spring Breakdown” opposite Kristin Cavallari.

## *About the Filmmakers...*

### **RUSSELL BROWN (Writer, Director, Producer)**

Russell Brown's first feature film, *Race You to the Bottom*, will be released theatrically by Regent Releasing in December, 2006. It has played in and won awards at film festivals worldwide.

His first film, a half hour documentary about the oldest blues club in Los Angeles, premiered at the 2002 Tribeca Film Festival. It subsequently aired on PBS. Another short film, *Reality USA*, based on award-winning writer Mark Halliday's poem, premiered at the 2004 Tribeca Film Festival.

Russell also edits *The Simon*, a daily online culture and politics magazine. *The Simon* was recently named one of the top internet literary sites by *The Manchester Guardian*, and has been featured in other publications such as *The Utne Reader* and *Artjournal*. His film criticism has also appeared on *Nerve* and *Ironminds*.

A Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Southern California's Film program, he held creative executive positions with Laura Ziskin Productions at Columbia Pictures and Saturday Night Live Studios at Paramount Pictures.

Russell is a member of the board of the Los Angeles Zoo. He is a dedicated supporter of conservation and the environment, and is a member of the NRDC's President's Circle, the Henry Kendall Society of the Union of Concerned Scientists, the LA Conservancy's Cornerstone Group and the Friends of the Los Angeles River.

His second feature, *The Bluetooth Virgin*, will begin principal photography in November, 2006.

### **RONI DEITZ (Producer)**

Roni Deitz attended NYU studying literature before following her lifelong dream of producing films. She began work in the film industry as a production assistant on several studio films before discovering her passion for the independent world. She quickly moved on to being a production manager and then line producer on several projects before producing the feature film "*Big Monday*," directed by and starring Michael T. Rehfield, which has won awards throughout the festival circuit and is currently viewing on the Independent Film Channel. She then produced Christopher Munch's "*Sleepy Time Gal*," followed by "*Harry and Max*," which premiered at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival, and will be opening theatrically in February.

### **MARCO FARGNOLI (Director of Photography)**

Marco Fagnoli began his career in Chicago’s independent film community, shooting low-budget features and music videos. He relocated to Los Angeles seven years ago, and enjoys being busier than he ever has in his life. He provided additional photography for the recent Sundance film “The Sleepytime Gal”, and his TV Documentary work includes projects for NBC, FOX, the History Channel, and the Sundance Institute. The features and short films he’s shot have picked up awards at Aspen Independent, Houston Worldfest, BACA, Cinequest, and HBO’s Short Film Award. In addition to “Held Together”, Marco’s latest projects are the indy feature "Time of Fear" and the short film “1465 Westerly”.

## *Cast & Crew...*

Writer/Director	Russell Brown
Producers	Roni Deitz, Russell Brown
Director of Photography	Marco Fagnoli
Editor	Annette Davey
Art Director	Doran Meyers
Costume Designer	Kristen Anacker
Original Music	Ryan Beveridge
Supervising Sound Editor	Fredrick Helm
Casting	Shannon Makhanian
Production Manager	Mindy Strauss
First Assistant Director	Barbara Rothenborg
Script Supervisor	Krista Bean
First Assistant Camera	Dean Gunderson
Second Assistant Camera	Jed Seus
Make-Up Artist	Ashley Fox
Gaffers	Owen Foye, Eric Messerschmidt
Key Grip	John Mays
Swings	Yavir “Kiwi” Ramawtar, Erik Gonzales, Dan “Gumbo” Kanes
Mixer/Boom Operator	Lee Ascher
Additional Boom Operator	Chris “Catfish” Walmer
Location Manager	Jon Manzo
Property Master	Paul Grillo
Set Dresser	Sandy Summer
Production Assistants	Maggie Cohn, Ben Chaves, Harley Coffey
Craft Service	Lore Wilhelm, Joanne “Trixie” Sullivan
Re-Recording Sound Mixer	Mark Rozett C.A.S.
Re-Recorded at	Chace Productions
Effects Editor	Anne Pop
Assistant Sound Editor	Brian O’Hara
Foley Artist	Michael Lyle
Foley Recorded at	Widget Post
ADR Recorded at	Canyon Drive ADR
Laboratory Services	Ascent Media

Title Photography by  
Opticals by  
Color Timer

Ken Rudolph  
The Image Resolution  
Joe Weber