

# Ninjas, rockets and videotape

## Calgary International Film Festival screens *Young Rocket Samurai*, created by NUTV's Jonathan Joffe



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How far can a rocket pack take you? You'd be surprised.

Strap that rocket to the back of a young ninja for 16 minutes of a children's film, and it can take you all the way to the Calgary International Film Festival.

It worked for Jonathan Joffe. By combining his technical skill, his spare time, a \$10,000 grant and, well, ninjas, Joffe created his short, *Young Rocket Samurai*, featured in the Canadian Shorts category of this year's festival.

While his name may not be familiar, his work probably is. If you've ever sauntered or shoved your way through MacHall, you may have noticed TVs hanging from the ceiling—those are Joffe's doing. Currently the closed circuit coordinator for NUTV, Joffe learned the skills he needed to make his part-animated, part-live action children's adventure film from his work at the university television station—though, he nearly ended up on radio.

"I went to CJSW and wanted to find out how much effort it would take for me to volunteer, how much it would take for me to get on the air," explains Joffe. "I found out, so I went next door to NUTV, and that day I was out there shooting."

That was way back in 1993, when Joffe was a General Studies student at the University of Calgary. After four years of volunteering and two years of working in the real world, he returned to NUTV as the technical training director.

### Humble Beginnings

Only a year later, in 2000, he started production on *Young Rocket Samurai*, the story of a boy who discovers a monster in his grandfather's well. A skilled samurai steps up to battle it, but the boy argues that it would be better for him to learn to fight so he can kill any monsters that return. The samurai teaches the boy how to fight and he eventually becomes a young rocket samurai—a warrior who flies around via jetpack rescuing poor villagers from evil beasts.

A cool story, but not exactly straight from Asian lore. In fact, the entire tale is from the mind of Joffe. Born as a long fight scene, *Young Rocket Samurai* eventually earned a backstory and plot from Joffe as the production process wore on.

"It wasn't really based on anything. It was like, what's doable, what's fun, what has not many characters, not many locations—it was more practical considerations," he explains, adding there is nothing based on his personal life in the story. "I never lived on a farm. There was

never any monster on a farm."

Originally, the title was *The Swordsman and the Farm Boy*, which doesn't quite have the flair of rockets and samurai.

"When I was writing, I realized I didn't like the title so I came up with the mood, then figured out the title that would go with the mood," he says. That, of course, required the inclusion of flying samurai into the film's action. "If I said the movie was called *Young Rocket Samurai*, what promise am I making to people about what's going to be in it?"

### Kids vs. adults

As it's a promise made to children, expectations are slightly different than that of an adult audience. According to Joffe, kids are the best audience because they aren't concerned with having characters played by famous actors, about the technical side or about how much money was involved. Rather, if the film is entertaining, kids are happy.

"[Kids' movies] have more imagination in them than adult movies; they are more idealistic," he explains. "They spend less time worrying about the subtleties of character and their little flaws and motivations and more about big things."

While the character development may lack, the technical skills do not. Every single frame of the movie was digitally enhanced or had special effects added.

While that technical skill came from NUTV, and the title and story came from Joffe's mind, where did the ninjas come from?

In 1999, Joffe created a pilot for a documentary with an introduction featuring a collage of a variety of fighting styles.

"I called every martial arts group in the phone book and said 'are you interested, can you give an hour of your time to come down and play on camera?'"

One group—literally ninjas—who fight in the Ninjitsu style, didn't just come for an hour. They came for the entire day, brought food, and helped haul equipment.

"Amateur athletes of any kind are hardworking, honest, decent people who just want to help out," says Joffe.

Not only were they helpful, they really knew how to kick ass and managed to create some very interesting scenes.

"The head instructor would say 'we'll all just stand in the woods here, and everyone will just attack me and we'll see what happens.'"

While all martial artists throw punches and kick beautifully, this group also trained to react to hits. When sparring, they react as though they'd really been hit, to show their "opponent" where to move next.



Gary Milner/the Gauntlet

Everybody was kung-fu... filming? Jonathan Joffe's short film is being featured at the Calgary International Film Festival.

"So you've got these guys who, for the last ten years, have been studying stunt fighting, whether or not they called it that," Joffe explains. "I just decided that I wanted to work with these guys."

So when creating the project that was to become *Young Rocket Samurai*, he wrote parts in for the Ninjitsu group, creating his own opportunity to work with them.

### Next up, more ninjas

Even though the writing, financing and searching for equipment, actors and locations of pre-production, the technical difficulties of production, and the hours of work in front of a computer for post-production are finished, work for the short still continues. Joffe figures he still has another 18 months of marketing and networking for *Young Rocket Samurai*.

However, that hasn't stopped him from starting work on a new film featuring more ninjas.

"There'll be more ninja fighting, but this is more for grown ups—it's funkier, shorter and, well, easier," he laughs.

It's not only good for local audiences and the Calgary indie scene that Joffe continues his work, but it's good for his career in filmmaking as well. Every scene he makes, every film he cuts, is done in the hopes of opening up more doors and finding new directions for his career.

Having *Young Rocket Samurai* in the CIFF is but one step in that direction. While it must take some skill to have a film screened in a festival, Joffe insists it's easier in your home town.

"The farther you get from home, the harder it is to get in. There's no magic to it. If you make something they like, they'll put it in," he humbly explains. "The point of the festival is to get work shown, but there's always ten times more submitted than they can possibly show. You have to hope yours is in the ten per cent they want to show."

Getting *Young Rocket Samurai* into other film festivals is the next step.

"The trick is to get it into as many as possible, because you never know who's gonna be in the audience and who's gonna see it, and go 'that's a person I want to work with,'" Joffe says. "There was a lot of work put into it to make it high quality... and hopefully, y'know, there's always Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Chicago... there's film festivals everywhere."

And who thought a rocket pack couldn't take you anywhere?

*Young Rocket Samurai* plays at the Uptown Stage and Screen on Oct. 6 at noon with eight other Canadian films.

**Win** your very own copy of *Young Rocket Samurai*! Just come up to MacHall room 319 and show us your best ninja moves on Sept. 27 at noon. Coolest move wins.



photos courtesy Jon Joffe