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**[Q & A: BLAST!](#)**

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Hot Docs programmer Myrocia Watamaniuk interviews [BLAST!](#) filmmaker Paul Devlin

Myrocia Watamaniuk: The risky work of hardcore Big Bang scientists. [BLAST!](#) is very different from your previous films like the spoken word poetry [SlamNation](#), and Hot Docs award winner [Power Trip](#) about privatized electricity. What attracted you to a scientific adventure story?

Paul Devlin: I guess I have many varied interests and when I discover something that excites me, I'm compelled to tell the world about it.

But more importantly, I'm attracted to a strong story. I believe you can make a great movie about any subject if you've got the right story elements. I am informed by Hollywood-style narrative structure and I look for that in non-fiction material. [BLAST!](#) has a classic story arc: initial failure, followed by tenacious drive to come back, with a near death moment just prior to

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redemption.

It doesn't hurt that BLAST! also travels to five continents with gorgeous shots from Antarctica and incorporates amazing, revelatory images of our mind-boggling universe. But I believe even the most mundane-seeming topics become fascinating if you've got strong characters, a coherent narrative through line and a powerful, climactic third act.

Of course, you can't plan these at the outset with non-fiction material. So when my brother Mark first invited me join him in Arctic Sweden to document BLAST! there was the requisite leap of faith initially that remote travel to follow an exotic experiment would lead to something worthwhile.

MW: Without giving too much away, you follow a revolutionary telescope attached to a NASA high-altitude balloon to the Arctic and to the Antarctic with rather dramatic, shall we say "challenges," along the way. That doesn't sound like a pleasure shoot. What were some of the filmmaking obstacles?

PD: BLAST! was hard to make. Definitely, my most challenging film so far.

Initially I arrived in Arctic Sweden a few days before the scheduled launch of the telescope. I wound up staying there a month because of technical and weather delays. That is one of the reasons these balloon launches are so hard to document - camera crews are generally not willing to wait out the delays.

So when they finally did launch, I was on my own. This was a nearly impossible situation, because this huge three-story telescope is attached to 300 meters of flight train including the balloon, which is being inflated at the opposite side of the launch field. There is action happening at both ends, so I was running back and forth all the time, listening in on my wireless microphones to keep up with what was going on. Exhausting! Luckily I had some extra cameras that I gave to the scientists for pickup shots. That shoot lasted over 30 hours, again because of delays and then follow-up after launch.

The telescope flies from Arctic Sweden to Arctic Canada on the winds so they don't know in advance where it will land. In order to document the recovery, I had to rush back from Arctic Sweden to.... where? Nobody knows yet. I wound up hanging out in LaGuardia Airport, just waiting for the word on where to fly. When I got it, I took the next flight bound for Cambridge Bay, way up in Arctic Canada.

When they discovered that the first flight did not work, everyone was crestfallen, especially my brother Mark who heads the experiment. But it also seemed bad for me. Will anyone watch a movie about a failure? It was my father who pointed out that Mark won't quit; the next launch will be in Antarctica, which means this disaster could actually be good for the movie!

But getting to Antarctica's McMurdo Station for a filmmaker can be outrageously difficult. You can't just book a flight and hotel; they don't exist. By this time we had the BBC on board, but I knew if I didn't make it to Antarctica there would be no movie. I spent months working that bureaucracy. (It was) very stressful.

When I finally got the OK, I still had to pass an intensive physical exam, since there are very limited medical facilities on the ice. I'm very healthy, but I had this one problem tooth and they insisted that I pull it before they would allow me to go.

Needless to say, I made it to Antarctica.

MW: What was it like having your brother Dr. Mark Devlin as a subject of one

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of your films?

PD: That was another challenge, certainly. There were many stressful moments both for the experiment and for the filmmaking, and that can be a dangerous spot in a relationship with any documentary subject. It's even more so when it's your brother.

I don't think we ever discussed it, but when we were in situations that had the potential to get very bad, I think we both had the tacit understanding that our relationship was much bigger than this project and would extend way beyond it. In stressful times we managed to show restraint and respect and I believe our relationship is stronger as a result.

Also, it was fascinating to see up close what he does. I had a vague idea, but how many of us really understand what the people close to us do day-to-day for a living? It was a privilege to watch my little brother being the hot shot Principal Investigator on a prestigious NASA experiment.

And finally, the access was unbeatable.

MW: You don't need a degree in astrophysics to understand BLAST!, so what do you want audiences to come away with from seeing the film?

I grew up in a family of scientists, so the idea that pursuing science is adventurous and exciting has always been second nature to me. Since it had been part of my upbringing, I just assumed that everyone understood how the universe worked, that you could look back in time if you looked far enough away, that our sun is a star, and all those fascinating facts.

But when I started talking to people about BLAST! I was flabbergasted at how little people knew about what astrophysicists do and their discoveries of the universe. On the other hand, I was also encouraged by how interested they were in learning more.

So part of my goal with BLAST! became to inspire people with the reminder that the Universe is an amazing place. It is not separate from us, something "out there." We are part of it, living it, and our discoveries of the universe represent its self-awareness.

With that goal in mind we made the science elements as accessible and entertaining as possible. My hope is that BLAST! will inspire some young people to become scientists, and for others, I hope it allows them occasionally to take a "galactic perspective" in their lives, something I often do now, after making this movie.

*BLAST! receives its world premiere at Hot Docs tonight, Tuesday, April 22, at 9:15 PM at the ROW Theatre. The film screens again on Saturday, April 26 at 4:30 PM at the Royal Cinema.*