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The 26-year movie (and counting)

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- Award-winning Valencia writer has learned that it's more about the journey than the finish.

By Jim Walker

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"In 1981 I thought, 'I'm going to write a play,'" said Mark McQuown. "I wrote 'P.J.' in 18 straight hours."

This past January - a mere 26 years later - the movie that resulted from that play won the Bronze Medal in the Feature Films Category for Artistic Excellence at the Park City Film and Music Festival. Among others, the cast included John Heard in the lead, plus Howard Nash, Vincent Pastore, Patricia Rae, Hallie Kate Eisenberg, Glynnis O'Connor, Eddie Malavarca and Robert Picardo.

Sounds like it's finally the "Big Time," right?

Time will tell.

The film was produced under a Screen Actors Guild Experimental Contract, and, at this point, needs someone to purchase the rights and re-release it before the money rolls in.

"If that doesn't happen, it could go to DVD," McQuown said.

But achieving what it has already puts "P.J." and McQuown in rarefied air. "More than 100,000 spec scripts are written every year," he said.

"Only 10,000 or so are submitted to an agency or producer or director.

Only about 600 are made in the U.S. every year. What are the chances of me having a film made?"

But, obviously, you have to live a life outside of your movie, and McQuown has had a busy one in the theater arts.

Local ties

McQuown has lived in Valencia since 1991 with his wife, Lynn (a theater costumer). Their son Ian, 17, will be graduating from Hart High School this year and is making his own inroads into music and drama. Their daughter Erin, 12, is already listed on [imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) for her role in an independent feature. McQuown also has an adult daughter, Megan, and adult son, Gaylen, from his first marriage.

McQuown was a staff member for The School of Theatre at Cal Arts for four years, and a faculty member for three years between 1991 - 1997.

In 1997 he went a bit farther a field, and taught production management and stage management for the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts.

He said his wife was a costumer at the Canyon Theatre Guild for many years and - "It might be interesting to note that myself and another man built the Repertory East Theatre in Newhall from the old Dusey Dudes Laundromat. It took one year out of our lives when David Stears was the artistic director."

A scenic carpenter, art director, actor, production designer, writer and producer, McQuown is currently directing Neil Simon's "Jake's Women" at Saddleback College in Mission Viejo (with an April opening) - and also directing a professional production of David Mamet's "American Buffalo" in Hollywood. He is a faculty member for the theater departments at both Saddleback College and Santiago Canyon College in Orange.

And. ves. he said that's a lot of commutina.

Bridegroom," in which his son played the lead and his daughter played a towns person. His wife was the costumer and McQuown even designed the set.

Before and after "P.J."

The evolution of "P.J." is intimately involved with McQuown's life over the last decades. But, before, and since its creation, there was the theater.

He said he became involved in theater in junior high school in Arcadia and continued this through high school and later at Cal Poly Pomona.

From 1967 - 1969 he was in the U.S. Army, stationed in Germany, but he kept his hand in theater even there.

"We built a functioning theater, The Gallery Playhouse, out of an old inn in Kaiserslautern. We introduced American theater to the German people with a 16th century play, 'Tartuffe,' by Moliere," he said. "A group of men, women and children created this out of nothing."

After the army, McQuown attended UCLA from 1971-1974, where he received a master of fine arts degree in directing. "The program only accepts two applicants a year," he said. "It's one of the best theater schools in the western United States."

After pursuing theater in San Francisco and, later, Boulder, he moved to New York City, trying to be a professional actor/director. He said he spent 10 years there "not really making any headway." In 1981 he was living across the street from the famous Studio 54 discotheque and "couldn't sleep because of the noise" - that's when the motivation to write a play finally took over.

"P.J." is the story of a man (P.J.) who wakes up in the psychiatric ward of a New York hospital with second and third-degree burns on his hands and lower arms. He can't remember who he is or how he was hurt.

As the play progresses, more and more bandages are removed as more and more of his past life is revealed. As it turns out he had saved a girl from a fiery car accident and the girl is in the same hospital, dying from her burns. Eventually, she survives, and P.J. believes he was sent by God to save her. The issue of whether he was really sent by God, or is just deluded, is in play.

"It's a very intense, spiritual journey," McQuown said.

Playwright's Festival in Denver in 1984 and went on to win the Denver Theatre Critics Association's Best New Play for all of Colorado that same year. In 1988 McQuown's own company in Boulder, The Sirius Theatre Company, produced the play again.

The story of how the play became a movie is the story of decades passing, and is almost painful to hear - as is often the case in the movie business. Progressing by fits and starts, and re-written many times by McQuown and others (not always to McQuown's liking), it had different directors attached to it at different times.

"It's so much about the money," McQuown said. "Film is a director's medium. Once you pass it onto someone else, you have to hold your breath and cross your fingers."

In the end, with Heard and the others aboard and Russ Emanuel directing, the film was shot in New York City in December of 2006 on an \$87,000 budget. After post production, it made the festival circuit, including winning the award at Park City.

It's a success more than a quarter of a century in the making.

It's a journey

Regarding the struggle to get the movie made, and the years that have passed in the process, McQuown said it was fortunate he could earn a living by teaching. Currently he's looking for more work as an art director, stage director, screenwriter and playwright.

"Something for me has to happen very soon. But it could all change tomorrow," he said.

And what about the frustrations of the movie-making business?

"I scream a lot at the universe," he said.

But he added that you have to take the time to enjoy life and "see the incredible theater that goes on around us."

"P.J." will be screened at the Lamelle Theater in Pasadena on July 25. Mark McQuown can be reached at MarkMcQuown@ForeverMail.com.

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