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Queens actor looks for big break with indie film

By Jennifer Saavedra
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Howard Nash will never forget when he was 15 years old and held a summer job distributing circulars for the former Jackson Heights drugstore Rosenbaum's.

He would stand on the corner of 82nd Street and 37th Avenue pinching a circular with his hand extended for passers-by to grab. One, two, three — 12 people would pass by until finally someone would take a circular from his hand. A trickle would then occur where a series of people would consecutively snatch a circular from him. Then, one passer-by would decide not to take a circular from Nash.

This action would influence the rest of the passers-by and a pattern would develop, back and forth. Angered and frustrated, Nash didn't understand why people would merely follow the person in front without sincerely deciding if they wanted a circular or not.

He emerged from his summer job with a glimpse into human behavior that would foreshadow later experiences and a vow to never follow the herd.

"Don't abdicate your ability to think as a human being. It's always been important to me that we should think things out for ourselves, because when people follow a drumbeat without thinking, what are the repercussions of following that drum?" asks Fresh Meadows resident and actor Nash, now in his 40's, before telling the story from his teenage years.

Nash's question is explored in the independent film "PJ," where he stars as the protagonist Charles. The film follows Charles as he is diagnosed with multiple personality disorder after being involved in a car accident which appears to have left him with telepathic powers.

These telepathic powers (caused by the voices Charles hears in his head), Nash explains, may be a result of his direct communication with God or merely a by-product of his insanity.

Not wanting to give away the ending, Nash doesn't reveal which of these two circumstances leads to Charles' heightened awareness, but says the film's theme "comes

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down to the relationship with God being direct - and that people like clergy can guide us, but they should not do our thinking for us. That's the premise of 'PJ.'□"

Nash says he became interested in the role of Charles in 2005, when he read the award-winning play by Mark McQuown on which the film is based.

Soon after, Nash says, he acquired the rights to the play and prepared to make it into a film.

"What attracted me to the script was that the character was under great stress and I thought I could bring a sort of truth to that," says Nash.

Nash says he underwent a terrible divorce prior to reading McQuown's script, which led him to meet notable actor John Heard, who plays Charles's psychiatrist in the film, at a divorced parents' rights organization.

"I met John as a direct result of the experience and that gave it some meaning, because if you can't have meaning from a disastrous experience, then that's even worse," he says.

Finding a deeper meaning in another earlier experience, Nash also connects the story of his teenage youth with his search for investors for the film, which was ultimately made for less than \$1 million. The first investor, a technology entrepreneur, helped persuade others to invest.

"It's hard to raise money for film," Nash says, "but when you find that one person that will cut the check, the spell is broken and other people seem to step into line - and it's not easy, but it's easier once you can show that someone else went first. And you find that other people go second, not because they share your vision but because someone else went first."

A similar ripple effect occurred with the star-studded cast that followed John Heard to the project.

"I think it warmed them to the idea, because once John was on board it kind of gave them a fuzzy feeling to the idea because everybody wants to work with John," says Nash.

Some of the notable cast members include "Sopranos" star Vincent Pastore, who plays a wise-cracking orderly and horse gambler who gets winning hints from Charles, and female lead Patricia Rae, most recently remembered for her role as Carla in "Maria Full of Grace," who plays Charles' ex-girlfriend Shelly.

Nash says the film, shot in Brooklyn and Los Angeles, will enter the Toronto Film Festival in the fall. He hopes to grab the attention of some distributors there and secure a wider release.

Nash started acting when he was in high school and trained under famed acting teacher Lee Strasberg. He has also been actively producing films since 1991, though for "PJ" Nash's only credit is as actor.

Nash says that what he most enjoys about being an actor is "the ability to think and feel like a small child."

Echoing his sentiment, his "PJ" co-star Rae says, "It was a pleasure working with Howard because he was so sweet and excited that it was almost like watching a child playing."

To watch movie clips from "PJ" or get further information, visit www.pjthemovie.com.

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