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## Her Majesty

A little girl dreams of meeting the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth in the new film *Her Majesty* (opening October 15 at Flower Hill, UA Horton Plaza, San Marcos Stadium and Poway Creekside, with the director and star in person at Ultrastar's Flower Hill for the opening weekend).

by Beth Accomando

In 1953, Queen Elizabeth is a young, glamorous monarch who captures the imagination of a thirteen-year-old girl living half a world away in New Zealand. Also named Elizabeth, this young girl dreams of some day meeting the Queen. Her bedroom walls are lined with photos of the Queen, and every day she practices her curtsies and the proper way to behave in front of royalty. Her parents find her behavior a bit eccentric but nothing to be concerned about. When Elizabeth finds out that the Queen is actually planning a trip to New Zealand, the young fan begins a determined letter-writing campaign to get the monarch to visit her small town of Middleton. Now some of the locals begin to gossip unfavorably about the child's ridiculous obsession. So imagine the town's surprise when Middleton actually turns up on the Queen's itinerary.

The story behind the new film, *Her Majesty*, reflects an obsession by its maker that rivals that of his young creation Elizabeth Wakefield. Filmmaker Mark J. Gordon, an American, began writing this story almost two decades ago—before Peter Jackson put New Zealand on the cinematic map with *The Lord of the Rings*. And Gordon shot his film before *Whale Rider*—another Kiwi film about a young girl—hit big at the U.S. box office. Gordon's personal obsession with the country came soon after college when he decided he wanted to travel there. He was a copywriter in the advertising business at the time and entered a contest to write an ad and win a trip to New Zealand. He thought it would be a "slam dunk" and was shocked when he never heard anything back. So Gordon came up with another plan: write a story set in New Zealand and get sent there to shoot the film.

Gordon was in San Diego to talk about his film and his obsession with New Zealand. He recalled that when he told people about his plan many responded by saying, "they wanted to quit their jobs and move to New Zealand, and the reason why they said that was because I think there's a perception that New Zealand is the last pure, unadulterated place on earth. And I thought that's an interesting vibe to tap into."

But sixteen years ago the story he was planning to write was a little different than what ends up on screen in *Her Majesty*. Since he knew nothing about the country, he began doing research. That's when he discovered something in the reading room of the New Zealand consulate's library in Los Angeles. "I found two little books or two little pamphlets," Gordon recalls, "One was about the day in the life of a marching girl, when you see the movie you'll understand how that's a component of the story, and I thought that was very curious, kind of like drill team or cheerleading is here. The other book that I took off the shelf was one that was a synopsis of the things that had happened during the decade, and I read that in 1953 Queen Elizabeth came to visit New Zealand after she was coroneted, and that sort of triggered the light bulb for me, I thought little girl, Queen, and that became my story and everything else fell away. And then I started reading more about the history and the culture because I didn't want to make it a one level or a one-note story. The interesting part for me was when I started learning about the history of the Maori culture."

The relationship between the early New Zealanders and the indigenous Maori people provided Gordon with the additional "layers" he wanted. In the film, Elizabeth meets an old woman that the kids think is a witch. The woman is Hira, a Maori who has witnessed some harsh realities in her life. She has seen her people abused, her relatives murdered and her land taken away. Elizabeth meets Hira when the young girl leaves money on Hira's doorstep to pay for a window that Elizabeth's brother broke. Hira and Elizabeth then begin a tentative relationship that eventually leads to a deep and close bond. This relationship is beautifully played out by Sally Andrews as Elizabeth and Vicky Haughton as Hira.

Gordon was concerned that as "an affectionate outsider," he would have to work especially hard to make sure the film was accurate and authentic. "Even though it was a fairy tale and a fictional story inspired by a true event," Gordon says, "I was very concerned about making it historically and culturally accurate for the time. So I did a lot of research and I did a lot of fine-tuning once we got to New Zealand. I had actually never stepped foot in the country before we shot the first frame of film. The reassuring thing was that after we got there and we sent the script to various crewmembers to read before they came in, almost to a person they thought they were coming in to meet a New Zealand director. So that was reassuring. Also some people said that they thought a New Zealander could not have made this film because race relations are such a sensitive issue in New Zealand even today, and things get held up a lot of time because of that. But because we were as I said affectionate outsiders, we came in sort of under the radar screen. We were able to get the film made without it becoming a sort of political football."

But when Gordon was shopping his script around, potential backers often asked him if he could change certain things. People said they loved the script but...Could he make Elizabeth older? Could Angela Lansbury play the old Maori woman? Could Elizabeth lose her virginity? Does it have to be set in New Zealand?

"You don't want to know the kind of things they suggested," Gordon states. But Gordon held to his ideas, especially about including the Maori culture and keeping Elizabeth 13. "I knew we were going to have to find a very special girl and this film wouldn't exist if it weren't for Sally Andrews. I did know that everything rested on her. But that had to be the age of the character in order to heighten all the elements of the story."

Gordon finally realized that there was only one way to make the film: "Really the only way for a first time director to make a film like this, that we wanted to shoot in New Zealand and cast an unknown girl in the lead, was to raise the money privately. It was difficult but we pulled it off with all U.S. investors, people who were tired that they couldn't find films to take their families to go see. Then I got a very experienced producer, Walter Coblenz, at the last minute to come with me. It was a client of my attorney's. We just had good karma."

Part of that good karma included finding Sally Andrews among the many hopefuls who auditioned for the role. Like Keisha Castle-Hughes in *Whale Rider*, much of the film rests on the shoulders of a young New Zealand newcomer. Andrews, who was in San Diego with Gordon, confesses that "I had never done anything in front of a camera before. So I didn't really know what to expect. It was hard but fun and I really enjoyed it."

When asked if Gordon had accurately captured a thirteen-year-old perspective, Andrews hesitated because the story was set fifty years ago and she felt far from that time period. But Gordon must have done something right because the actress says that one of the things she loved about doing the film was that "The way [Elizabeth] reacts is a lot like me in some ways. It was a fun part to play." But a period film about a young girl obsessed with a royal visit is not exactly the kind of film her classmates might rush off to see on the weekend. But Andrews feels that "if they saw it they would really enjoy it. Although I think girls would enjoy it more than boys."

And maybe that's because the girls come out better than the boys in the story. The character of Elizabeth's brother proves to be especially mean. He throws a brick through Hira's window, tries to burn the old woman's house down, and destroys his sister's beloved pictures of the Queen. In a family film like this, you expect there to be a point when the boy realizes the error of his ways. But it's to Gordon's credit that such a simplistic, feel-good gimmick isn't used.

"We really resisted doing the whole family hug at the end," says the director, "maybe I would have liked a moment or two where the boy showed a little more chance at redemption but the reality was he had some problems, he was insecure, he was jealous of his sister, he was misinterpreting his father's reactions to Hira because of that lack of communication in the family—so I think there are families that have problems and I think he really drives the story forward. I fought the idea of trying to change that, and it was brought up, but it's why we are going to care more about the girl."

Gordon has chosen San Diego as the place to launch the release of *Her Majesty*. The film played at the San Diego Film Festival where it garnered a Best Actress award for Andrews. Gordon said he chose San Diego because "It's a strong family market, a strong senior market, and I live in Los Angeles and have been able to come down to do grassroots marketing. We have a small distributor and these films make it based on word of mouth. So I meet with teachers and schools and kids, a lot of hand to hand combat to get the word out because there is so much competition from studio films with huge budgets."

*Her Majesty* (rated PG for thematic elements and some mild language) is described by Gordon as a "fairy tale" and the film possesses a sweet innocence without being cloying or condescending. Writer-director Mark J. Gordon hopes that "it's something lasting and that it moves audiences, that they feel that they discovered the film. The highest compliment you can get is to have someone come out of your movie and want to tell someone else about it." Gordon will be on hand with Sally Andrews at the Flower Hill Theaters October 15-17 to field questions from viewers.

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