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# Weekly

## Weekend Edition

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# Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to music, theater, art, movies and more, edited by Robyn Israel



## Getting the *royal* treatment

**'Her Majesty' appears on-screen — thanks to a group of Silicon Valley investors**

by Robyn Israel

Mark Gordon recalls the advice given to so many writers: "Write what you know." He decided to do the opposite: write what he didn't know.

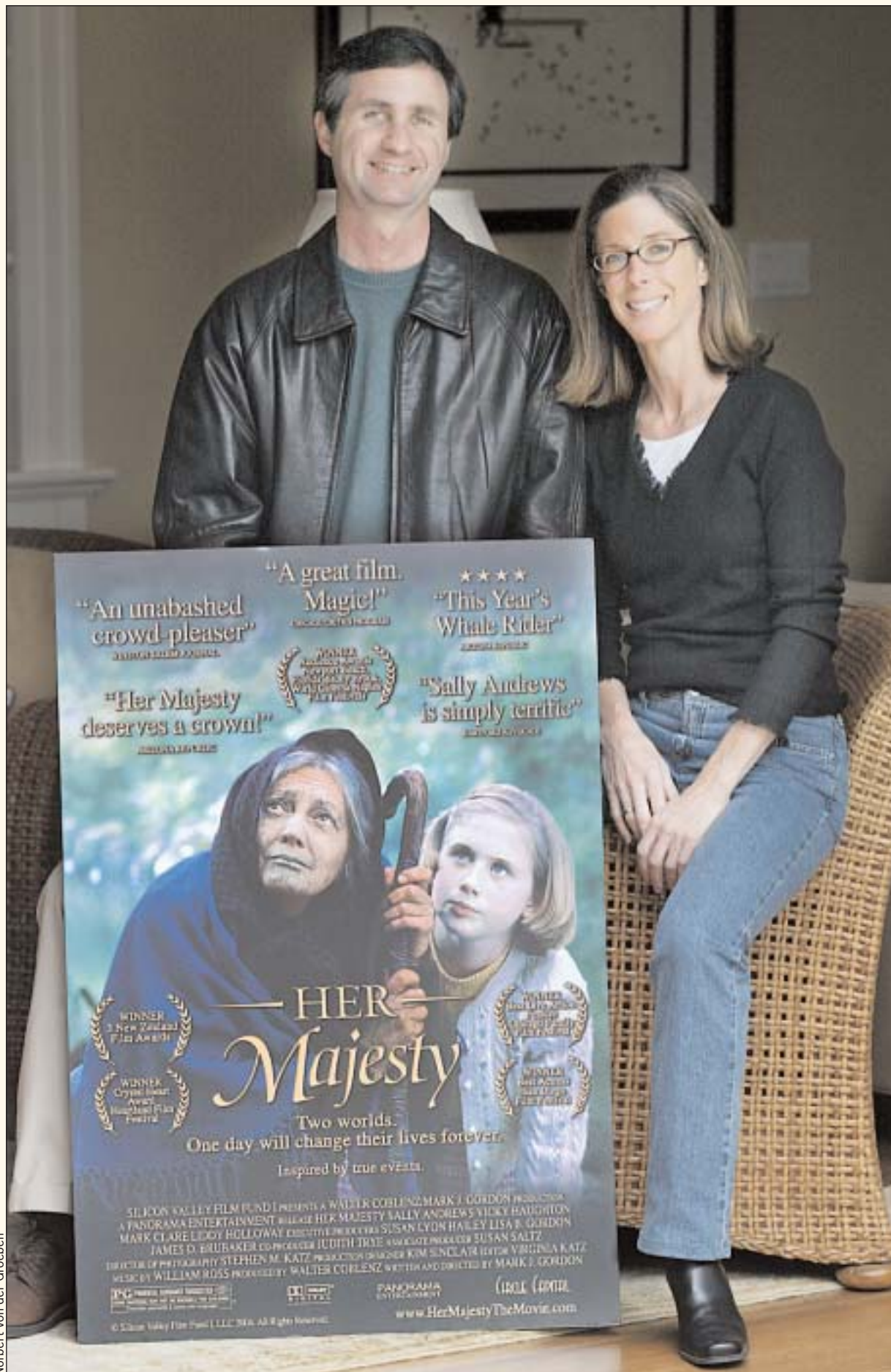
To give himself the "ultimate challenge," Gordon decided to write a screenplay from the point of view of a 13-year-old girl in New Zealand in 1953. He wrote it without even having set foot in the country, inspired by the dream of one day traveling there.

"I never wanted to write about being a white middle-class kid who had a happy childhood. I'm more interested in other cultures," said Gordon, a Mountain View native who now resides in Los Angeles. "The worst case was that I'd end up with a good writing sample that I could shop around to get work and not get pigeon-holed."

That coming-of-age story, centered on a young girl who realizes her lifelong dream when Queen Elizabeth comes to visit her small hometown, is the basis of "Her Majesty," a new independent film that will open at Century 16 Theatres in Mountain View this weekend.

The story behind the film is that of an independent, creative venture that took 17 years to come to fruition. According to Gordon, it languished in "development hell." The project was optioned several times (once by filmmaker Charles Matthau, Walter Matthau's son) but no one could figure out how to get the casting and financing. Miramax briefly toyed with the idea of buying it, but eventually passed on the project. Others tried to structure it as a co-production between Australia and New Zealand, to no avail.

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Norbert von der Groeben

It took 17 years for writer/director Mark Gordon to realize his dream of making "Her Majesty." He eventually succeeded, thanks to the help of his sister, Lisa Gordon, who served as the film's executive producer. (Top) The film centers on a 13-year-old girl who is fascinated with the young Queen Elizabeth II.

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## 'Her Majesty'

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It finally succeeded, against all odds, thanks to the support of his sister, Lisa Gordon, a Palo Alto resident who served as the film's executive producer. Along with Susan Hailey, Lisa established a venture capital fund designed to attract individual investors, predominantly from the Silicon Valley area.

It took just over eight months to raise the necessary capital — \$3 million — largely from investors with children and grandchildren attracted to a film that would appeal equally to kids and adults.

"Part of the reason I wanted to help him — besides his being a talented writer — is that I wanted a movie that I could take my kids to, something that we could all appreciate," Lisa said. "Something not too sophisticated, but also interesting to adults. Films like 'Mean Girls' and '13' — these are not the role models you want as a parent."

When she took on the project, Lisa was working as an attorney for a start-up company and had never taken on this sort of project before. She drew on her previous experience as a political media consultant, having developed campaign strategies and political television and radio commercials (including Vice President Gore's first Senate race).

"It was my 12 (a.m.) to 3 a.m. job," Gordon said of her work as executive producer and fund manager.

Karen Druker, one of the film's investors, said she was drawn to the project because she "wanted something of quality that multi-generational families could see," one that lacked violence and contained a wholesome role model for young women.

"There's a big need for films that have some meat, some meaning, some moral lessons. I'm an artist, and I think the best art improves us — morally and spiritually. This film does that," said Druker, a resident of Los Altos Hills. "I just recently saw 'Closer' and came back feeling really bummed. It's depressing to see a movie like that. The acting's great, but I don't want to see that. I want to be uplifted. And the characters here are so developed you really care about them. To me that's what a good movie is all about."

Though Gordon ultimately succeeded with a little help from his friends and family, it was a long journey from conception to realization. He wrote the "Her Majesty" script in 1988, after a dream trip to New Zealand never materialized. He later submitted it to get into the master of fine arts screenwriting program at the UCLA School of Film and Television.

A year later, he attended the Sundance Institute Screenwriters Workshop, where he worked with Australian screenwriter Robert Caswell ("A Cry in the Dark" and "The Doctor"). Caswell, he said, was instrumental in helping Gordon take his script to the next level.

"He raised issues about identity — what it's like to see someone else's flag in the corner of your flag. It got me thinking about the girl."

Thanks to Caswell, Gordon start-



New Zealand native Sally Andrews stars as the film's young heroine. "Her Majesty" marks her screen debut.

ed to think more deeply about the social and cultural context of the film. New Zealand, in the aftermath of World War II, was starting to emerge from a post-colonial slumber. And the Maori, New Zealand's indigenous people, who had been on the brink of extinction, were moving from the country to the cities, being hired by businesses who valued their cheap labor.

"Had a studio been making this film, I think the story would have been about a girl meeting the Queen. It would have been a one-note storyline," Gordon said. "What's interesting to me are the layers that deal with the history and culture (of New Zealand)."

"Her Majesty" also centers on the friendship between Elizabeth and Hira, a proud Maori woman and the daughter of a chief (played by Vicky Haughton, who was the kind grandmother in "Whale Rider"). As the residents of Middleton (a fictional town) eagerly prepare for the Queen's upcoming visit, the dilapidated old wooden shack where Hira lives stands out like a sore thumb. Hira, however, refuses to do anything about it. Soon, the special bond between the two women is put to the test.

"She begins to learn more herself by learning about this Maori woman," Gordon explained.

Gordon insisted on having an all-New Zealand cast.

"I wanted to be authentic, like 'Cinema Paradiso' or 'My Life as a Dog,' which transport you to a time and place," Gordon said. "It would have rung untrue had there been an American cast. I didn't want to compromise."

"It worked to our advantage ultimately, not having a distributor imposing conditions on casting."

In casting the lead role, Gordon perused the audition tapes of 400 girls before deciding to go with 11-year-old Sally Andrews, an unknown who had acted in community plays.

"There was an honesty about her, a believability," Gordon said. "I thought, 'This is a girl who could have these dreams, whose heart could be broken.' She didn't have the typical Disney look — not too much spit and polish. Perfectly imperfect."

"And she's very much like her character: very down-to-earth, intro-

spective, thoughtful. The kind of kid you want good things to happen to."

Gordon shot the film in late 2000, when the American dollar was at an all-time high, making New Zealand an economically feasible locale. He also used some of the crew that had been involved in the making of "The Lord of the Rings," including costume designer Leslie Burkes-Harding.

"As exciting as that was, it was a big assembly line and they were attracted to the intimate nature of our story. They wanted to work on something more personal," Gordon said. "And the crew really got behind it. It was a New Zealand story."

Though filming had finished by 2001, the Gordons spent the next three years seeking a distributor. Screenings at several film festivals — Tribeca, Seattle, Cleveland, San Diego, Newport Beach — followed, in the hopes of garnering more attention for the film.

They still knew the odds were against them.

"An independent, family-friendly film is an unusual combination that doesn't fit into the typical studio acquisitions box," Lisa said.

"Plus you're competing for the same shelf space as major studios but you have one-tenth the budget and you're doing 10 to 20 times more work," Gordon added.

Now that Panorama Entertainment has signed on to distribute "Her Majesty," the film will be seen in several cities this weekend, including Chicago, Indianapolis and Salt Lake City.

For his next project, Gordon hopes to develop a script that earned him the Eleanor Perry Women in Film Award at UCLA (the award honors an original screenplay that depicts women in a current or historical perspective). Gordon was the first male writer ever to win the award.

Entitled "Paper Son," it is rooted in the true story of Chinese immigrants who bought and sold kinship ties at the turn of the century (Chinese immigration was illegal at the time and a U.S. law stipulated that only offspring of American citizens could enter the country). The practice resulted in fake family histories for scores of newly transplanted immigrants.

Once again, Gordon will be immersing himself in the shoes of a female character.

"I do find that women and female heroines, from a story standpoint, tend to be more interesting to me," he said. "And I try to look at characters from a humanist standpoint, and search for potential stories that are engaging, entertaining and hopefully say something about the human condition." ■

For more information about "Her Majesty" visit [www.HerMajestyTheMovie.com](http://www.HerMajestyTheMovie.com).

### About the cover:

The creative and financial forces behind "Her Majesty:" writer/director Mark Gordon and executive producer Lisa Gordon. Photograph by Norbert von der Groeben.

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