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### 'Her Majesty' caps writer's 16-year effort

By [Jolie Williamson](#)  
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

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After watching the film "Her Majesty," it's hard to believe writer-director Mark J. Gordon isn't a New Zealander himself.

The family-friendly movie is set in 1953 New Zealand, was filmed in that country and uses an entirely native cast.

"I've always had a fascination with New Zealand as a country and a culture," says Gordon, 43, who grew up in a small northern California town and now lives and works in Los Angeles. "I had always wanted to visit, but every time I planned it, for some reason or another, it got cut short."

"Her Majesty" is the story of a young girl named Elizabeth who idolizes the newly coronated Queen Elizabeth II, whose upcoming visit to the girl's small hometown causes fanfare and frenzy. The 13-year-old Elizabeth becomes conflicted over her feelings for the British Empire after befriending an elderly Maori woman who tells the kind of culture clash stories not included in history lessons.

Promotional materials for the film say it's "inspired by true events," but Gordon says the historical hook is simply Queen Elizabeth's actual visit in 1953. The rest of the story is populated with fictional characters and events.

Gordon began the project in 1988, launching a 16-year process to get it into a theatrical release. His screenplay was accepted into the Sundance Institute in 1989, where he was able to work with experienced screenwriters to refine and revise it. Afteward began the process of searching for the money to make the film -- with lots of false starts along the way.

"There was interest, but a lot of crazy suggestions accompanied the financial offers," he says. "They'd say, 'Instead of it being in New Zealand, can it be in America? Can the little girl be American? Does it have to be a Maori woman? Can it be Angela Lansbury?' The only way to do it the way I wanted was to raise the money privately and just keep putting it in the bank."

As Gordon was preparing to head to New Zealand in mid-2000, Walter

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Writer-director Mark J. Gordon  
[hermajestythemovie.com](http://hermajestythemovie.com)

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Coblentz came aboard as producer. Coblentz established himself in 1972 as producer of "The Candidate" and "All the President's Men." In a serendipitous turn, Coblentz and Gordon shared the same personal attorney. The attorney gave Coblentz Gordon's script, and Coblentz signed on.

"I needed somebody with me in New Zealand who knew how to spend the money, be the producer on site," Gordon says. "After that, everything fell into place. I had an unrealistically positive experience."

Location scouts, casting agents and the art department scoured New Zealand for the perfect spots, actors and props for the film. More than 300 girls auditioned for the part of Elizabeth, with first-time film actress Sally Andrews winning the part.

"Casting agents kept steering us towards a type that was a little more 'Disney,' more polished," Gordon says. "But with Sally there was more reality, more honesty. She understood the role and was amazing. She was perfectly imperfect."

During a second audition, playing an emotional scene with her on-screen father, Sally brought those at the audition to tears, Gordon says.

Finding realistic props wasn't a problem either -- original magazines, scrapbooks and signs from the 1950s were plentiful.

"The wonderful thing about New Zealand is that, because it's an island, once things are there, they tend to stay there," he says. "Even the cars we used were the original Bentleys and Land Rovers Queen Elizabeth rode in on her visit. They were still there, in storage."

"Her Majesty" is slowly rolling out its theatrical release after playing rounds of film festivals here and abroad.

The film's distributor is Panorama Entertainment, the same one that distributed Pittsburgh's favorite bittersweet romance "The Bread, My Sweet." Gordon has a fan and ardent supporter in Adrienne Wehr, "The Bread's" producer.

"Part of my passion for it has to do with the fact that films like 'Her Majesty' and 'The Bread' don't have these huge marketing budgets behind them," Wehr says. "We have to get the word out in creative ways. And I feel that this is a worthy film that deserves to be seen far and wide. This film has a big heart at its core. It's sentimental and it's filled with hope."

In addition to promoting "Her Majesty," Gordon is working on a screenplay set in 1913 China and Angel Island in the San Francisco Bay. It's a story of immigrants trying to come to the United States.

"It's a fictional story woven around things that could have happened," Gordon says. "I like to write screenplays based on a historical aspect, because they never get dated. And in the process, I get to learn about history and create my own world."

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