

Flying suspender clip among challenges shooting 'P.S.'

By Martin A. Grove

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"P.S." production: Although writer-directors benefit from being able to shape their movies from Day One, they also face some special challenges as a result of wearing two filmmaking hats.

When directors go from writing mode to directing mode they find themselves having to make decisions about how to treat or even cut material they've written and feel close to. Moreover, while they're writing they must consider the difficulties they could face during production when they must bring to life things that are easy to put on the page but aren't so easy to film.

With those thoughts in mind, I was happy to be able to talk recently about writing and directing to Richard LaGravenese, whose writing credits include such films as "The Bridges of Madison County," "The Horse Whisperer" and "The Fisher King," for which he received an Oscar nomination. His directing credits include "Freedom Writers," which he also wrote, and "Living Out Loud." When we spoke LaGravenese had just finished postproduction on his new drama "P.S. I Love You," whose screenplay by LaGravenese and Steven Rogers is based on the novel by Cecelia Ahern.

"P.S." stars Hilary Swank, Gerard Butler, Lisa Kudrow, Harry Connick Jr., Gina Gershon, Jeffrey Dean Morgan, James Marsters, Nellie McKay and Kathy Bates. It was produced by Wendy Finerman, Broderick Johnson, Andrew A. Kosove and Molly Smith and executive produced by John H. Starke, Lisa Zupan, Donald A. Starr, Daniel J.B. Taylor and James Hollond. The Alcon Entertainment production opens wide Dec. 21 via Warner Bros.

"The book by Cecelia Ahern was a property of Wendy Finerman's over at Warner Bros.," LaGravenese said, referring to the producer of such films as the Oscar best picture winner and boxoffice blockbuster "Forrest Gump" and the hit comedy "The Devil Wears Prada." "There was a script on it by Steven Rogers. I was brought in to do a rewrite and to direct. I read the script and read the book. First of all, I love Ireland (the film is set in Ireland and New York). Several years ago my wife and I discovered Ireland and absolutely fell in love with it. We go more than once a year.

"The book was an Irish-based story. Cecelia Ahern is the daughter of the prime minister of Ireland. She wrote the book in her early 20s. (I was attracted to it) between the book and the story, which was all about love and loss and losing someone you love, and (which had) a lot of humor."

In the film Swank plays a woman whose husband (Butler) dies, but who's written a series of letters to be delivered to her after he's gone to help guide her through her grief and

rediscover herself. Each of the letters is signed "P.S. I Love You."

"It's a story of a young woman who married the love of her life when she was 19," LaGravenese replied when asked about the story. "They've been married 10 years and he's kind of an anxious type, worried about their future, their finances, etc. Right before he turns 30, the worst happens -- he dies. The story is about how he guides her to a new life after his death. And it's also about marriage and it's also about friendship and it's about a woman growing into maturity with the help of a man who adores her. Gerry said in an interview once, and I thought he said it really well, that his (character's) whole thing is just about loving this woman. And so even after death there's a love story that goes on between the two of them.

"A couple of years earlier I had lost a dear friend of mine and so it felt like a personal story I could use to tell (the film's story). Many of the things I had wanted to express about having lost my friend I was able to use 'P.S. I Love You' to express. So between those two things it was something I really wanted to do and it was during the period when 'Freedom Writers,' which took six years to get made, was in one of its low periods where there wasn't a lot happening so I was looking for something else to focus on. And it was a love story, which I like doing."

When LaGravenese came on board to direct no one was attached to star in the film. "Absolutely no

one," he said. "It was really just out of a personal love of Ireland and wanting to tell the story about a friend of mine that I had lost. Those are just the two motivating factors (in his coming on board). During 'Freedom Writers' I was working with Hilary Swank and we became very close. She had read it and loved it. I was in production on 'Freedom Writers' and I had to give up the idea of directing 'P.S. I Love You.' And then between that period and being in post on 'Freedom Writers,' it left Warner Bros. Molly Smith, a producer, took it out of Warner Bros. and brought it to Alcon Entertainment. They decided to make it and got the financing for it. In April of 2006 while I was in postproduction on 'Freedom Writers' they said, 'We have the financing for this, but we have to go right away.'

"So I said yes and while I was doing post on 'Freedom Writers,' I was prepping 'P.S. I Love You.' So both of them kind of overlapped. Hilary and I went straight from one to the other. Right before we started in September of last year, several months before (that) '300' came out and I met Gerry Butler and cast him. And then we took it from there. We found Lisa Kudrow and Kathy Bates and Harry Connick Jr. It's a wonderful cast and the performances are great."

Asked how he worked with his actors, LaGravenese replied, "I had a lot of personal meetings with the actors to go over the script. We didn't do any rehearsing. We didn't have time. There was a very rough schedule. Our first week was in Ireland and was a six-day week. So we didn't have rehearsal time. What I did do though -- because the core of the movie is the marriage and the love story between Hilary and Gerry -- was have (my) great production designer Shepherd Frankel ('Step Up') build before the set was even built a mock set (that was) an exact duplicate of the apartment for me. Gerry and Hilary and I rehearsed this opening scene that takes about 10 to 13 pages (and is) just about their marriage.

"I felt that if I had that relationship as the core, the rest of the movie would fall into place. So we rehearsed that scene quite a bit because there's a lot of movement in it and it's fast paced. It's about a couple who are sort of undressing and arguing at the same time and it reveals all the different sides of their marriage. The other actors came in and we rehearsed as we went along."

With LaGravenese having started out as a writer, I asked if that makes any difference in terms of how he directs. Is there a writer's mindset that he brings to directing? "I think I still direct like a writer," he told me. "I'm still working out style and cinema language and how to use a camera. To me, I'm at the beginning (of directing) and I'm looking forward to learning much more about it and learning much more about how to use the camera to tell a story and how to use cinematic language. I think in my movies right now the script is still very much the more dominant force."

While directing "P.S.," LaGravenese pointed out, he also had no time to storyboard: "With the next one, I would love to do that. I did not have time on this. This was a very tight production so we had to sort of move along. I had Terry Stacey ('Friends With Money,' 'The Nanny Diaries') as my cinematographer and we had a wonderful relationship. I wanted to make a movie that was very romantic and I told him that the movies of the '30s and '40s were where I was coming from a little bit (but) in a modern style. But, as far as the feeling, I wanted it to be sort of unapologetically romantic. He took that (point of view) and so the lighting and how the girls were shot (reflected that). We took pains to make it as beautiful as we could."

Looking back at production, LaGravenese observed, "The schedule was a huge challenge. I had done a rewrite of my own rewrite. I had done another rewrite on it and added a section that happened in Ireland that hadn't been in there before. Everyone loved it, but the schedule was already set and the budget was already set so we had to squeeze a fatter script into a tight schedule. So we had long days and it was a real challenge, but everyone was so wonderful to work with and Alcon was such a great partnership to have. They were so supportive. We all got really close. What happens is that when you're all on the same side it can be a really great experience."

Shooting was done over a 45-day period: "We had a couple of incidents during (production). We had an accident with Hilary that happened on set. We had to close production for about five days. There's a strip that Gerry Butler does with suspenders and we shot all of his coverage. Then the next day we turned cameras around and (in) the very first shot he was doing it for Hilary and the camera was on Hilary. The suspender clip got caught under a table -- it was like a TV tray table -- and Gerry didn't know it (because) his back was to it and Hilary couldn't see. All she thought was that he was stuck and she was laughing, but in a split second the suspender snapped and ricocheted over Gerry and hit Hilary in the head.

"She was amazing. We all turned white. She kept our spirits up and said, 'It's going to be fine. Don't worry about it.' We rushed her out and we had to take a few days for her to heal on that. But she never lost her cool. She was completely supportive. She was taking care of me about it. But it was just a freak accident that happened so quickly it was before anybody could do anything."

Weather was another challenge LaGravenese had to deal with. "It's a real challenge to shoot in Ireland

because you get four seasons in one day," he explained. "It can be misty and gray in the morning and then it could be blue sky and then it can rain and then the sun can move. So matching shots is a real challenge when you're on a country road in Ireland. We were there for two weeks (and ran in to that a lot), but I love it. It's a wonderful country. I love going there."

After shooting in Ireland the production moved to New York. "It was great," he said. "We had great weather. We were in the city on the Lower East Side and Brooklyn (in) Williamsburg. We had a great time. We were at Hell's Gate Studios. I think it was an old coffee factory or something (before being turned into a studio). As you're coming from New York to Queens on the Triborough Bridge it would be to your right. It's at that point in the river that they call Hell's Gate, which is one of the more violent parts of the river."

Postproduction was particularly important on "P.S.," he noted, because, "The story is a real mix of humor and drama and finding that balance was a challenge. So really the key there is having great actors -- and I did. We had just the best, a wonderful ensemble of actors who all give terrific performances."

LaGravenese didn't shoot a tremendous amount of coverage: "There wasn't a lot of takes, again, because of the schedule. We moved pretty quickly. But the actors loved the script and loved their characters and really understood it. There's a lot of chemistry between the ensemble so they worked very well (together and) I was very lucky."

Filmmaker flashbacks: From Oct. 6, 1989's column: "While Hollywood is buzzing about whether Sony will sell Tri-Star and Loews Theatres to help cut its cost of acquiring Columbia Pictures Entertainment, Wall Street is speculating about different scenarios.

"The New York branches of five Japanese banks have lined up to loan Sony the funds it needs quickly to make its \$3.4 billion acquisition. Insiders say that after taking on Columbia, Sony will have several long-term options for repaying or reducing those loans other than by selling off pieces of Columbia.

"If it chooses to do so, Sony can raise money by issuing more stock in Tokyo or in the United States, where its Sony Corp. shares are traded on the New York Stock Exchange. One Japanese film executive told me Sony might think twice about issuing more shares in Japan, where its stock was recently selling as high as 9,070 yen (about \$64 in U.S. dollars if you figure 141.2 yen to the dollar). That's substantially higher, he adds, than many Japanese stocks that typically sell in the \$30 to \$40 per share range...

"Rather than float more shares in Japan, Sony could issue additional stock in New York and raise dollars through its American subsidiary. Sony Corp. shares on the Big Board have been trading lately at about \$60, a price that still allows for plenty of upward movement by U.S. standards.

"A third possibility -- and the one that is the most interesting to some observers -- would be for Sony to generate funds by spinning off its CBS Records unit as a new publicly held company. That scenario would not only enable Sony to take in American dollars to use toward acquiring Columbia, but would also provide Sony with a mechanism for further rewarding CBS Records' chairman Walter Yetnikoff for the integral role he has played in bringing Sony into the mainstream of the American music and film industries. By all accounts, without Yetnikoff Sony would not have been able to achieve so much success in the United States so quickly.

"Creating a new publicly traded CBS Records would give Sony the ability, if it chose to do so, to fold its new filmed entertainment operations into that company. Sony would also have the latitude of making other entertainment acquisitions in the future and folding them into the company..."

Martin Grove hosts movie coverage on the broadband television channel www.UpdateHollywood.com.