

PLAY THE GAME

Q&A With Filmmaker Marc Fienberg

Q: Your family partly inspired the characters and story of PLAY THE GAME, right?

A: My grandfather was devastated after his wife of 56 years died. When he later solicited my advice on reentering the dating world after six decades, it was incredibly touching and emotional. Watching an 89-year-old man experience all the uncertainty, anxiety, and insecurity of a young schoolboy – when to call her, what to say, whether to ask her out – was adorable. It was the perfect companion plotline to the early drafts (the young ladies’ man using mind games to gain beautiful women’s attention). Joe’s struggles and successes informed the screenplay’s whole DNA, taking it to the next level.

Q: Any scenes or dialogue culled from real life?

A: As the writer of the movie, I'd love to take credit for every word, but in truth most of the funniest moments of the movie were either quoted verbatim by my own grandfather, or inspired by him or somebody else at his retirement community. He actually really met a beautiful woman who he later realized had advanced Alzheimer's. He was spurned by a woman who really liked him but avoided relationships because she didn't want to take care of another man who might get sick. These are real-life issues encountered by seniors, and I felt a responsibility to treat those aspects very honestly and truthfully, but also find a way to present them with the humor and lightness that my grandfather did in his own life.

Q: The reel-life Grandpa Joe really evolves.

A: The character transforms from a slightly disheveled, absent-minded, insecure man to a fashionable, confident lothario desired by every woman in the retirement community. Along the way, Joe goes through the awkward stages and feelings that we’re all familiar with from our youth: the loneliness of being without a companion, the nervousness of approaching a woman for the first time, the sadness of rejection, the excitement of meeting someone, the tension of waiting for the phone to ring, the anxiety before that first moment of physical intimacy and the thrill of falling in love again. Joe’s experiences mirror those of audiences both young and old, and people who see the movie genuinely feel attached to Joe throughout his journey – I think that’s why we keep winning Audience Awards at festivals!

Q: How much of *Play the Game* is autobiographical?

A: Well, they say write what you know! For three years, I tried David’s “planned spontaneity,” showing up where I thought my wife Eva would be. Never worked. We eventually met through normal channels, dated, and broke up. But I never forgot her. Four years later I knocked on her door with some BS story of getting a consulting job near her home. It still didn’t work. More time passed, I called and was finally completely honest. Someone pointed out at our wedding that it’s a fine line between true love and stalking! The interesting thing is that I unknowingly took, what some would say is, the advice from my own script and just put it all on the table. And what do you know, it worked!

Q: Is PLAY THE GAME a cynical take on modern relationships?

A: I don't think so. I think it's a realistic take, because it doesn't give the easy, Hollywood answer to the issue of whether or not we need to play games with the opposite sex. And I think that reflects the truth in our lives. It would be great if we could all just tell each other our true feelings at every moment in time, but I think most people find that option unrealistic. So clearly there's some middle ground, and I think the movie helps highlight that there isn't an easy answer to that question.

Q: There's some frank discussion of and even a suggestive portrayal of senior sex. Were you worried that this might turn some people off?

A: Well, first of all, it is tastefully done; we didn't need body doubles, and it is a PG-13 movie. Plus, people don't seem to be turned off by it at all, but rather, almost everybody is usually on the floor laughing. But most importantly, one of the points of the movie is that even seniors need love, companionship and sex, and if that is in the DNA of the movie, I think I had the responsibility to treat it honestly. The rule I had in my own mind while filming was that, if there was something sexual that we would show young people doing, we should be able to show old people doing the same thing. Because whether people want to admit it or not, the truth is out: seniors still do it. And they enjoy it! And that's what I think is special about this movie. In fact, when I cast Andy, he said the main reason he wanted to do the role was that he could be old, sexually active, and not die at the end!

Q: Talk a bit about the casting of the film – you got some legendary talent for a first-time feature director.

A: I wanted Andy from the beginning, but at first he declined because of his concern about the raciness of the script. I later learned that he and his wife couldn't stop thinking about the script, and after several days passed, he called to let me know that he had changed his mind. It was the ultimate compliment and validation of our hard work. Meanwhile, Doris Roberts was considering the part of Rose, which was originally a much smaller role. When Doris told me she was on the fence, I wrote two new scenes for the Rose character in one afternoon. Doris read the new scenes and said, "Well aren't you something? I'll do it!" Then we got Liz and finally the fantastic Paul Campbell and Marla Sokoloff for the young leads. Five spectacular actors.

Q: So did the shoot go smoothly?

A: Well there was the constant specter of my wife, who was nine months pregnant, going into labor on set. I kept joking with her that it was our third child, but only our first movie, so if it came down to it I would get a Production Assistant to help her deliver the baby at the hospital while I stayed on with the movie. Sure enough, with 3 days left of shooting, she started having contractions on set. I was tempted to get some clean sheets and hot water and deliver the kid myself between scenes. Luckily the contractions were a false alarm, and the baby waited until six days after filming ended to make her debut.

Q: Was making PLAY THE GAME the first step to fulfilling a lifelong dream?

A: Actually, no, there was no earth-shattering revelation. I came from a multi-generational family business, and I really thought I was a business guy. Though in graduate school accounting class, I seemed to be the only one who wasn't completely engrossed in the minutiae of straight-line

amortization schedules and depreciation rules. But I got good grades, and interviewed for the same consulting and high-tech jobs as my peers. Amazingly, none of my potential employers picked up on the indifference, bordering on contempt. Then the president of a 15-person startup in San Francisco said they might be interested in hiring me come graduation day. Looking back, that's when I hit the fork in the road. I pre-sold the idea for a series of travel articles to a national magazine, and then bought a round-the-world airline ticket, a blank spiral notebook, and left for Africa a month later. I figured that the best place to find inspiration would be somewhere out of my comfort zone.

Q: And did you?

A: Three months, four safaris, and a trip up and down Mount Kilimanjaro later, I wasn't one word closer to a completed screenplay than when I began. There I was surrounded by wild animals, beautiful scenery, and friendly people, and I was waiting for an idea to hit me in the face. I'd always assumed that you had to begin writing something before you got writer's block. <laughs> So I hopped on a plane to Nepal under the assumption that two years of business school had sucked all the creativity out of me.

Q: But it didn't?

A: Well, I know this sounds impossibly corny... under the shadow of Mt. Everest, hiking on the rainiest of days and the muddiest of trails, a 70-year-old Buddhist monk grabbed my hand to help steady my backpack. But for the next hour as we scaled the hill, he didn't let go of my hand, communicating only with friendly smiles and body language. I was kinda weirded out at first, but he had this indescribably reassuring quality. At the top we shared a cup of tea, and the monk went on his way. A couple of days later, I awoke in the middle of the night with an idea and wrote a loose outline of *Play the Game*. Back in Katmandu [Nepal's capital], I came across a beat-up week-old Newsweek with a small blurb about the rapid growth of that startup. Yeah, I'd interviewed with Jeff Skoll, the president of eBay who now, strangely enough, makes movies. I still have his business card -- one of those cheap ones they made at Kinkos before they even had a logo.

Q: So commerce and art aren't mutually exclusive?

A: The artist in me wants to tell the world my stories. The entrepreneur in me insists that the stories I choose to tell are ones that the world finds relevant and entertaining. What's the use of making a great artsy, dark, confusing film that resonates only with me and fifty other people? My ultimate responsibility is to my investors. They trust that I'm a good enough artist and businessman to make them money. And most of the time, I best serve the investors by best serving the commercial audience for the film.

Q: How did you go from corporate automaton to auteur?

A: I was living in Boston, admittedly not the world's entertainment capital. But even when you're chasing your dream, you have to confront reality now and then. And that confrontation usually comes on the first of the month, along with your bills. The silver lining was that, because of the time difference, I had three extra hours at the end of my day to phone L.A. to get my film going. My wife had a great job, and I took a series of consulting gigs as well as some crappy jobs so I had time to write and make short films.

Q: How did you get the movie off the ground?

A: First I flew to L.A., found an agent, and arranged meetings with production companies. Ultimately, the script landed in front of some MGM executives who loved it -- just not enough to buy it. So I resolved to do it myself. It quickly became clear that if I was going to do the film, and do it right, I had to be in Los Angeles. So my wife and I quit our jobs and arrived in L.A. with no family, no friends, no work, two suitcases, and a six-month old baby girl. Friends argued it was a risky move, although instead of the word “risky,” they’d say “idiotic,” “stupid,” and “irresponsible.” And they were probably right. But ultimately, there really wasn't a choice in our minds. It was something we had to do.

Q: So, anything else in the works, now that **PLAY THE GAME is hitting theaters?**

A: I'll soon be directing **THE MACHINE**, a family comedy I wrote that was one of the top 30 scripts in the nation's most prestigious screenwriting competition, the Nicholl Fellowships. And my production company is in the midst of developing a big-budget studio spy film, and a clever, action thriller, both of which are about as far away from a romantic comedy as you can get. And my wife and I are in the middle of production on yet a fourth baby, which is on the way. This time, we plan to make sure that we are NOT filming when the baby arrives, but who knows? We'll take whatever surprises life throws at us.