

A CONVERSATION WITH SWING SCREENWRITER
& EXECUTIVE PRODUCER MARY KEIL

Q: SO, MARY, DO YOU SWING OR DO YOU JUST LOOK THE PART? (a reference to a line from the film in the opening scene at Club Jimbo)

MK: (Laughs) I wish I could take credit for coming up with that line, but I stole it from a real-life anecdote I heard from Gennaro Cannelora, who did the music for the film. A few years back, at the height of the swing revival, Gennaro went to a swing dance club in San Francisco, dressed to the nines, very period and very handsome. As he tells it, a gorgeous young woman just approached him and out popped the provocative line. Actually, some elements of the screenplay, certainly the central character of Anthony Verdi, were inspired by Gennaro's life.

Q: HOW DID THE TWO OF YOU MEET?

MK: He was my son's first guitar teacher, and at the time he also had a day job working for a grocery store. He'd been a union grocer member since he was 16 years old, and would spend his evenings teaching or playing music in clubs. His father owned an auto repair shop, and -- like the Tom Skerritt character -- had more conservative values and wanted his son to have a sensible career. Let's say his family was not exactly involved in the creative arts. When I met Gennaro, he was sort of in the horns of this dilemma, which captured my imagination.

Q: YOU MUST HAVE FELT SOME EMPATHY FOR HIM – HADN'T YOU BEEN AT A SIMILAR CROSSROADS IN YOUR OWN CAREER?

MK: Absolutely. I was very well aware that the business world was not really for me, and had discovered writing, but was questioning myself, "do I have what it takes?" I knew I needed to be more directly involved in the creative elements. I'd even produced a Broadway musical and a film that was on Lifetime, but it took a few more years to say, "Hey, *I* can write a story." Like Gennaro, and Anthony, I knew if I didn't throw myself into it, I would always wonder "what if..."

Q: SO GENNARO WAS PART OF THE INSPIRATION; WHAT WAS THE PROCESS OF YOUR WRITING THIS SCRIPT?

MK: You see, I had found myself falling into a sort of mentor role with Gennaro – in addition to relating to what he was going through. I would encourage him to pursue the work he really loved, convinced he could do it. In that sense, I can relate to both the Anthony character and the Christine character, who becomes his mentor or muse.

The story actually came in bursts. I had a quite vivid dream in which parts of the story just unfolded - such as the swing dance teacher who was really an angel, and the concept for the nightclub. I would also sometimes be meditating, and an aspect of the story would just fall into place in my mind. When I realized that I had the structure of a story that was viable as a film, I was just vibrating with creative energy.

Of course, I wanted to be sensitive to how Gennaro would feel – I didn't want to “steal” his life. But I had to talk to him about it, so I had tea with him and told him. Naturally, he was really blown away!

Q: IN A GOOD WAY...

MK: Yes, he was very supportive. A few months later, I had a first draft completed, with the main characters essentially in place.

Q: I SUPPOSE WITH ANY SCRIPT, THE CHARACTERS EXIST IN A CERTAIN REALM IN YOUR MIND FOR QUITE A WHILE – AND THEN THE REAL-LIFE CAST BREATHES LIFE INTO THEM. COULD YOU DESCRIBE THAT PROCESS, FROM CONCEPTION TO CASTING TO FINISHED FILM?

MK: It's truly a remarkable experience, especially with some of the supporting characters. The actors bring out so many qualities, various shadings we hadn't anticipated. Jim Hanks, who plays the maitre d' at Club Jimbo, brought some classy elements to his role, whereas I'd written him as more of a bouncer type. And the character of Freddy, Christine's husband – well, Barry (Bostwick) really changed it and made him much more of a three-dimensional character.

The same is true of Mindy Cohn, who plays Anthony's roommate Martha and Adam Tomei, the drummer of their band.

Q: HOW ABOUT THE CASTING OF TWO VETERAN ACTORS: JACQUELINE BISSET & JONATHAN WINTERS?

MK: That was the most fascinating – and the two of them actually had very different approaches to the characters as written. Jacqueline probably hewed the most closely of anyone to the script, but then her character is more archetypal. She's a spirit on a mission to help this young man. Jonathan did stay true to the essence of Uncle Bill, but he brought a quirkiness and a wonderful idiosyncratic quality to the role.

Q: HE'S SO FUNNY IN THE SCENE WITH MRS. WALL (actress Esther Mamet) AT THE NURSING HOME, WITH THE BANTER BACK & FORTH PLAYING CARDS.

MK: It's all ad-libbed.

Q: MS. BISSETT IS DEFINITELY AN ACTOR WE REGARD AS AN ICON. HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN YOU HEARD SHE'D ACCEPTED TO PLAY CHRISTINE?

MK: I was floored! And thrilled beyond belief, of course. Jacqueline is without a doubt iconic. After we had signed her, I went out and rented some of her films, including *Dangerous Beauty*, in which she plays a courtesan in the golden age of Venice. She's stunning! There are very few actresses that have the presence she has and that was perfect for Christine.

Q: AND THE ALLURE AND SEX APPEAL SHE HAS, EVEN AS SHE GETS OLDER.

MK: It's true. And for the dynamic to work between Christine and Tony, there has to be enough of an age difference that a romance can't literally work between them, yet enough attraction and chemistry for him to become infatuated with her. Somehow on a deeper level, he knows the energy is more spiritual than sexual.

Q: YET HE DOES TELL HER, "I'M FALLING IN LOVE WITH YOU."

MK: What he's really falling in love with is his life. That's her entire message "You are falling in love with your life!" In the same way that she teaches him to swing dance, she teaches him to follow his dream. That's when we're most fully alive, and all our senses are awake to the possibility of what we can become.

Q: WHAT INTRIGUED YOU ABOUT CREATING CHARACTERS THAT ARE COMING TO TERMS WITH GROWING OLDER?

MK: You know, it's a curious thing, because I don't have much experience with death and dying, and I wrote a film about two characters facing end-of-life issues. I haven't even been to lots of funerals or wakes where you actually see a person who's died. So I wanted to explore the experience of what happens when we pass from one dimension to another. How does the spirit live on? If I wasn't compelled by that question, I guess I wouldn't have come up with Club Jimbo. It wouldn't exist.

But more than that, I was intrigued by relationships that skip a generation, such as grandfather to grandson, great Uncle Bill to Anthony. Those older adults who have been pivotal in giving you support when you are a young person in search of yourself – a loving support that is different from the type your parents provide in raising you in the more basic sense.

Q: THAT'S INTERESTING...SWING MUSIC CERTAINLY HAS SKIPPED GENERATIONS, OR AT LEAST, HAS COME BACK AGAIN & AGAIN. BEYOND THE GENNARO CONNECTION, WHY DID YOU SPECIFICALLY CHOOSE A BACKDROP OF MUSIC AND THE SWING ERA FOR THE FILM?

MK: To me, dance represents the life force, creativity. As far as swing dancing specifically, it's also sort a metaphor for life. It requires practice and discipline, but is tons of fun. And so the choice we have is to either jump into the fray or stand on the sidelines. I wanted to write a story that chose happiness and fun.

Q: YOU'RE NOT THE SWING DANCE GENERATION, THOUGH...

MK: No, although I did grow up with my listening to my parents' big band records. "Song of India", that was one of my favorites. And you have to consider that the '40's lindy hop gave rise to the '50's jitterbug, which my sisters and I would practice in the basement of our house growing up in Maryland.

It's funny, I had produced a Broadway musical by the time I was writing SWING, and it dawned on me that in a sense, what I had written was almost a musical.

Q: SPEAKING OF MUSICALS AND BROADWAY, HOW DID NELL CARTER GET INVOLVED?

MK: Producer Ken Patton was a really good friend of Nell's. When he got involved early on, he had her read the script. She loved it and finally asked Ken if there wasn't a way to work her in. Within about an hour after he brought it up to me, I had created a role for her which was perfect – the singing, quirky head of the nursing home. She had a great time on the set, loved the project, even got to sing. Little did we know she would die six weeks after we wrapped. It was a shock. Yet, this was a perfect final role, and we've all felt her angelic presence since.

Q: DESCRIBE HOW YOU CONNECTED WITH DIRECTOR MARTIN GUIGUI. CERTAINLY HE BRINGS HIS SENSIBILITY AS A MUSICIAN TO THIS FILM...

MK: Definitely. I met Martin through Elizabeth Estrada, who became a consulting producer on SWING and who was a good friend of associate producer Jan St. John. SWING needed a director with a music background as well as a spiritual bent. I knew from my first conversation with him that Martin was the one to breathe life into SWING. When he talked about the director as the "protector of the script", I was sold. He was fabulous to work with, made many key introductions to the SWING team, both actors and crew and, I know I made a friend for life (and beyond).

**Q: COULD YOU DISCUSS WHERE YOU SEE THE FUTURE OF ROLES FOR
“ACTORS OF A CERTAIN AGE” – ESP. AS WE GET OLDER AS A SOCIETY?**

We all know the population is aging. A major portion of the babyboomers is over 50 now, and we are not, and never have been, a quiet generation. I don't believe there's a question that we'll be insisting on entertainment that features us and at least includes us as a routine matter. We are still living full, active, interesting, vital lives, and the entertainment industry must pay attention to that. Many of us have means, more and more of us have leisure time. We grew up with both television and the movies, and we enjoy them. I certainly know that anything I write will prominently feature 50+ characters since that is where I am.

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