

## Oscar-blessed producers go on shopping spree with new projects

Saturday, 06 January 2007

from Variety

Producers Grant Heslov and George Clooney ("Good Night, and Good Luck") are shepherding "White Jazz," from James Ellroy's novel, to be directed by Joe Carnahan. The story of LAPD corruption will star Clooney.

Already, several of last year's nominated best picture producers have acquired some challenging future projects that are in various stages of development, starting with "Crash" winner Paul Haggis' "In the Valley of Elah," which he has written and will direct.

The story of a returning soldier from Iraq who goes missing, it's based on a Playboy article by Mark Boal and will star Tommy Lee Jones and Charlize Theron.

Producers Grant Heslov and George Clooney ("Good Night, and Good Luck") are shepherding "White Jazz," from James Ellroy's novel, to be directed by Joe Carnahan. The story of LAPD corruption will star Clooney.

"Munich" producer Kathleen Kennedy will oversee the production of Tony Scott's upcoming "Emma's War," a drama set in the Sudan, adapted from Deborah Scroggins' book and starring Nicole Kidman.

No stranger to pushing rocks uphill, veteran producer Richard Zanuck has frequently taken on some notably risky acquisitions, most notably best pic winner "Driving Miss Daisy," which no one else believed in.

About a year ago he came aboard what looks to be a true rarity, an R-rated musical based on Stephen Sondheim's acclaimed "Sweeney Todd." And like "Miss Daisy," he is completely smitten with the Demon Barber of Fleet Street.

"At this point in my career, I have to be passionate about a project to keep me stimulated," he says. "I'm not interested in making just another movie. I've been associated with literally hundreds, so cranking out another one is not a goal."

The film's director, Tim Burton, and Zanuck have formed a stable working relationship over the past several years, and their belief in Sondheim's Tony-winning tuner is equally firm. "Neither of us has ever done a musical before, so we're both very excited."

Zanuck calls it a "horror musical," which like the stage production will be mostly sung. "And everyone in it will be doing their own singing, including Sacha Baron Cohen," who plays a rival barber to Johnny Depp's Sweeney. John Logan ("Gladiator," "The Last Samurai") has written the script, and the film will be produced entirely at London's Pinewood Studios early this year.

The Oscar-nominated producers of "Erin Brockovich," Stacey Sher, Michael Shamberg and Danny DeVito, have reunited for an as-yet-untitled film based on "The Cure: How a Father Raised \$100 Million -- and Bucked the Medical Establishment -- in a Quest to Save His Children," an article written by Pulitzer Prize-winning scribe Geeta Anand.

"The father, John Crowley, gave up working for a drug company to help find a cure for his children, who suffered from a rare muscle disorder, Pompe's disease," says Sher. Through his efforts, Crowley tracks down a maverick scientist who has a potential cure, and travels the world trying to put together the money to produce the drug.

Sher has already lined up Harrison Ford to play the scientist, director Neil Burger ("The Illusionist") and screenwriter Robert Nelson Jacobs. "It's one of the movies you have to do because you feel it has something to say about the human condition," says Sher.

The success of his first motion picture production, "The Queen," has emboldened producer Andy Harries ("Prime Suspect") to purchase the rights to the bestselling autobiography "Cloughie: Walking on Water," the story of Brian Clough, one of England's legendary soccer managers. "It's not really a movie about football or what Clough did on the field, it's more a portrait of a charismatic leader," Harries explains.

The team behind "The Queen" will reunite in early 2008 to bring Clough's story to the screen. Peter Morgan pens the script, Stephen Frears directs and Michael Sheen tackles the title role.

Harries has two other adaptations in the works about which he is equally excited, a film version of J.G. Ballard's "Cocaine Nights," about a group of expatriates in Spain who live in a gated community in the near future, and "Boy Soldier," based

in part on a book by Russell E. McLogan, about a 12-year-old boy's experiences fighting in Sierra Leone in the 1990s. Guy Hibbert is scripting.

Adaptations of musicals and bestsellers have the name recognition that tends to grab most of the attention in the movie pipeline. A few original scripts, however, are already being noticed -- at least by their enthusiastic producers.

Oscar winners Dan Jinks and Bruce Cohen ("American Beauty") recently acquired the rights to the story of a woman whom Jinks labels "the most unlikely Nobel Peace Prize winner ever." Audrey Wells ("Under the Tuscan Sun," "Guinevere") has written the screenplay and will direct "My Name Is Jody Williams," in which the title character wins the prestigious award for her efforts in the fight to eradicate land mines. "It's a phenomenal story," says Jinks, "with comparisons to 'Erin Brockovich,' and a great starring vehicle."

"Rain Man" and "Bugsy" producer Mark Johnson recently acquired a project called "America," which he refers to as an Arab-American "Diner" (his first film credit). The screenplay was written by Isa Totah, who is Arab-American, and two of his friends, Will Potter and Eric Matheny. "We've had coming-of-age stories about Italian-Americans, African-Americans, even Vietnamese-Americans, but never one from an Arab-American perspective," says the producer. "It illustrates our lack of knowledge about that world."

Johnson has enlisted the help of Tom Shadyac in getting the film made. "Now all I have to do is convey that enthusiasm to someone with money," says Johnson.

Producer Laurence Mark ("Jerry Maguire," "Dreamgirls") is eager to get his pet project "Sammy" to the screen. It is adapted from, of all things, a lunch conversation between Mark and writer Delia Ephron. "She was chatting about people who claim they speak to the dead, and I chimed in about pet psychics," he says. "We realized there was a romantic comedy here about a pet psychic who falls in love with a guy who talks to the dead. Naturally, when we discussed it with executives, they thought we were off our rockers."

Ephron decided to write the script anyway. "She realized the idea sounded wacky, but she understood that as a movie it would be about believing that all things are possible," says the producer, who is now in negotiations with Lasse Hallstrom to direct. "I'm determined to get it made," he says. "After all, like the movie, it's all about believing."