

## Interview: Benjamin Bratt Honors His Journey With ‘La Mission’

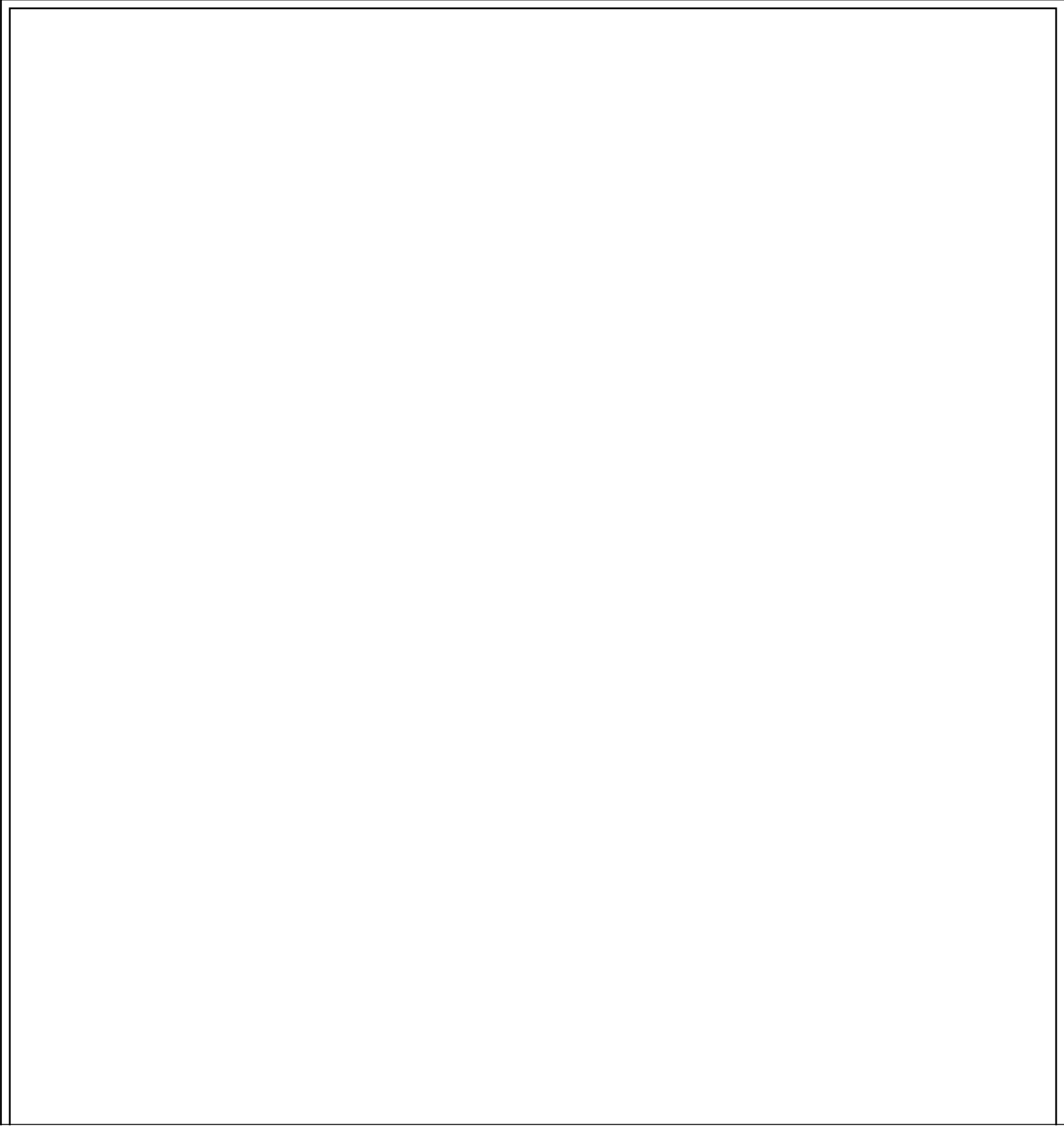
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CHICAGO – Benjamin Bratt is a handsome man. That is undeniable when meeting the popular actor. But what he also expresses is a deep passion and intelligence, both for his work and the world around him. He was recently in Chicago promoting his new film, “La Mission,” directed by his brother Peter Bratt.

La Mission honors Peter and Benjamin’s San Francisco past, as they go back to their Mission District neighborhood to tell the story of Che Rivera (Benjamin), a macho neighborhood guy who is working hard to raise his son and forget the influences of his checkered past. The film has an authentic feel, different from the usual picture postcards associated with the City by the Bay.

Benjamin Bratt has been a working actor since the early 1990s. After getting his big break as Detective Rey Curtis in NBC’s “Law & Order,” he broke away to begin a film career, and is notable for roles in “Miss Congeniality,” “Traffic,” “Piñero” and “Love in the Time of Cholera.”





On ‘La Mission’: Benjamin Bratt in Chicago, July 9th, 2010  
*Photo Credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com*

HollywoodChicago sat down with Benjamin Bratt last week, and he talked about La Mission and working with his brother on the film.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Who were you honoring in your heritage with your portrayal of Che Rivera in ‘La Mission?’

**Benjamin Bratt:** It’s not so much an individual as several different subjects. One is the neighborhood itself, in a city that is largely used for its beautiful iconography, and principally as a backdrop. We wanted to not only put the neighborhood, but the people in the neighborhood, in the foreground and focus the story on them. So really this is my brother and I’s effort to create a cinematic love letter to a neighborhood that is still near and dear to us, and we consider ourselves very much a part of.

**HC:** The character of Che is going through another transition in what is a life of transitions. How did you relate your own life through the challenges that Che faced with the conflict about his son?

**BB:** I think it is interesting to note that although the film is geographically and culturally specific, when you look at what the focus of the film is about – this relationship between a father and a son – and that which binds them together, which we discover is clearly love, it makes it quite universal. Were I not a father myself when I took this role on, I do not think I would have understood what really is at stake for Che.

Here is a man through decades of a certain kind of behavior, he is a man of violence. He faced with a situation that he can’t punch his way out of, with the discovery that his son is gay. He is forced to consider an alternative if he wants to keep his son in his life. That is potentially a road of non-violence, that’s the only thing that is going to lead to a path of redemption.



Che is kind of a representation of the cinematic archetypes that we've come to revere – he negotiates life and gains respect by kicking ass. In a way my brother sets up the expectation to feel a kinship to this person, whether you know Latino culture or not. Che is certainly someone we've seen before. But the trick is he subverts your expectations by then peeling back the layers to see if any humanity lives there, and if there is what is it. What is the energy that drives him? The discovery, surprisingly, is that for Che it's love.

**HC:** Machoism, especially in the face of the Che's reaction to his son's homosexuality, seems to be a prevalent emotion in the culture. How did you reconcile the attitudes that you observed growing up with the influences of maleness in your own life?

**BB:** It's interesting, I grew up in what is widely held to be one of the most progressive and liberal cities in the country, if not the world. The gay mecca of the world. Mine was a childhood of understanding that acceptance and tolerance was the norm. That said, I live in America, where there was and is the prevalence of overt racism, and other forms of marginalization of people that are different. As that pertains to the subject of sexual orientation, the potential for alienation, if not outright violence in the face of someone who is coming up in someplace like the Mission District, is still a very real thing.

What is also interesting to note, when we began to shop the script around traditional Hollywood to get it funded, we were told that the gay context had already been dealt with in film. 'Haven't you seen Brokeback Mountain? Will & Grace is on TV,' is what we were told. What that speaks to, frustratingly, is the perception that the dominant culture has dealt with it on a superficial level, everyone else has too. But if anyone knows anything about the Latino community, the African-American community or any other minority community, homosexuality is such a taboo subject matter that people don't want to talk about it.

That said, it wasn't my brother's aim to focus the story there. It wasn't a coming out story. It is, in fact, a coming-of-age story, but not of the son, but the father.



Heritage: Benjamin Bratt in a Scene from 'La Mission'  
Photo Credit: © 5 Stick Films

**HC:** You and your brother Peter have collaborated on projects throughout your career. What is your working relationship like and what contributions did you give each other in La Mission?

**BB:** He's the older brother by 13 months...

**HC:** They call that Irish twins in my family.

**BB:** Exactly. We ain't Irish, but we're definitely Irish twins. [laughs] But that big brother, little brother dynamic is still very much in play. What's interesting to note that quite honestly on the technical level he doesn't have the experience that I do in the filmmaking forum. This is only his second feature. What he lacks in technical knowledge he more than makes up for in a holistic vision of what a good story should be.

A director by nature needs to be a good leader. He leads with humility and confidence. He has a quiet confidence that people really respond to. What I also appreciate about him, in a way that I've never experienced with another director, is that he not only wants to entertain you, but he also understands the power of the medium. That we in fact as a species live by and define ourselves by the stories we tell about ourselves. So why not take on the authorship of our stories ourselves and put something out there that has a level of positivity, as well as an entertaining element. What we're happy to report is that La Mission has instilled a sense of cultural pride in the Latino community.

**HC:** You've had a long association with Native American issues. What was the greatest sin against the culture, in your opinion, that still

effects the general Native American tribal population to this day?

**BB:** The nearly complete annihilation of the millions of people who were living here, and thriving here upon first contact. On some level, it's a history that hasn't honestly been looked at or illuminated. This whole lofty notion of 'Manifest Destiny,' the removal of anything in the path on the way west, became a God right, a birth right. It negates the reality that millions upon millions of people were slaughtered to make this country what it is.

That legacy still reverberates in reservations across the country. And they show up in different ways, the severity of alcoholism, the prevalence of domestic violence, teen suicide, illiteracy, unemployment. All the social ills that plague society in general are overwhelming enhanced in the face of Native American history and how it effects modern Native Americans today.

It's a process of internalized oppression. When you're told for centuries that you are less than, or stupid, that you're not worthy or subhuman, you start to believe it. Cornel West [Princeton professor of African-American studies] is fond of saying in the face of that, to discover love for yourself is a revolutionary act. Happily what you find today in the Native American situation, is the reemergence of spiritual practices that up until recently were outlawed. There is a resurgence of cultural pride in the Northern Native American population that equals the resurgence of pride that the Latino community is having with their own heritage.

My mother is from Lima, Peru, and nobody wants to be known as Indian. In fact, it's used as a pejorative... 'Indio'...as though it equals 'stupid.' That was the kind of wonderful experience of growing up in San Francisco, it was a place early on in the 1960s and '70s that allowed for the open celebration of who we are, in all of our varied and differentiated aspects.



Michael Caine, Sandra Bullock, Benjamin Bratt in 'Miss Congeniality'  
Photo credit: © Warner Bros. Pictures

**HC:** You are rumored to be coming back to your Rey Curtis role on Law & Order, is that correct?

**BB:** I think it's only a rumor. [laughs]

**HC:** If you were to come back, what side of his character are you hoping that the show will explore after a 10 year absence?

**BB:** I haven't really thought about it. From what I understand, NBC's aim is to create the original show in a Los Angeles format. What I don't think is going to happen is any kind of association with the previous show. It's out of my realm.

**HC:** Given your background and where you came from, was there ever a moment or a situation that you were in that caused you to pause and wonder, 'how did I get here' and what was it?

**BB:** I have that moment every week. [laughs] You're talking to a welfare kid from San Francisco. What I do recognize that it didn't happen overnight or didn't drop from the sky. It's the result of a lot of hard work and a great deal of principle, which I learned from my mother. She was one who came from abject poverty, from Peru, and instilled in us at a very young age, that the only way to really achieve success, however you define it, is by educating yourself. Which is equated to empowering yourself. That's a gift you can give to yourself that no one can take away from you. Once you have knowledge, which is not the same as wisdom – which takes years – no one can take it from you.

One of the sayings that my character uses in the film is to 'stay brown.' He says it to everyone, even those who aren't brown, which is what the real-life Che said to people. It means remember who you are and where you come from. And that's my approach to life, personally, I never forget where I come from, and I am blessed everyday.

*"La Mission" has a limited release, including Chicago. Check local listings for show times. Featuring Benjamin Bratt, Jeremy Ray Valdez, Erika Alexander, Max Rosenak and Jesse Borrego.*

*Written and directed by Peter Bratt. Rated "R"*



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