

Interview: Writer/Director Paul Haggis Creates ‘Third Person’

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CHICAGO – Not many Oscar winning screenwriters change the course of their professional lives because of a dream (story below), but Paul Haggis is an exceptionally brilliant writer whose credits include “Crash” (2005) and “Million Dollar Baby” (2004) – which both won Best Picture – and his new film, “Third Person.”

“Third Person” is about the life a writer, portrayed by Liam Neeson, and it is about the circumstances surrounding his life. The ensemble cast includes Mila Kunis, Adrien Brody, Maria Bello, Olivia Wilde, James Franco and Kim Basinger, all surrounding and inspiring Neeson’s character. This is the fourth film Paul Haggis has directed, among his many creations as a TV and film writer.



Paul Haggis directs Liam Neeson and Olivia Wilde in ‘Third Person’

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

Paul Haggis was born in London, Ontario, and bounced around in his early years as a artist and photographer, and studied cinematography at Fanshawe College in Canada. He moved to Los Angeles in 1975, and wrote for such classic TV fare as “The Love Boat,” “One Day at a Time,” “Diff’rent Strokes,” “L.A. Law” and “thirtysomething.” He helped to create the long running series “Walker, Texas Ranger,” and the less well known “Family Law” and “Due South.”

When he switched gears to film writing he did it with a bang. “Million Dollar Baby,” directed by Clint Eastwood, and his own directorial effort,

“Crash,” won Best Picture in consecutive years. Paul Haggis was the first screenwriter to ever achieve that Oscar distinction. Haggis also was an active member of the Church of Scientology for 35 years, and when he split from them in 2009, he caused some controversy when he publicly criticized church policies.

HollywoodChicago.com interviewed this fascinating and philosophical filmmaker, as he promoted “Third Person.” Paul Haggis talked about TV, film and the dream that began the next phase of his culturally influential career.

HollywoodChicago.com: ‘Third Person’ is essentially about the soul of the writer. Since you’ve been a professional writer since your twenties, what are you saying about your own writer’s soul through the essence of the screenplay?

Paul Haggis: I think by nature writers are selfish human beings, and other people often pay the price for that selfishness. We make tough choices all the time, and we almost always choose our work and the story. It’s not easy to live with a writer, and most likely you’ll end up in the story they write.

HollywoodChicago.com: This is an ensemble film, a genre that you’ve had success with in the past, both on television and film. What chemistry is most important when assembling an ensemble that works well together, in your estimation and practice over the years?

Haggis: It’s about scraping down the barnacles, all the tricks you usually use to get a performance, and trust your actors. Trust in the moment, trust the direction and trust that the situation will be honest. That is probably the most important thing.

HollywoodChicago.com: ‘Third Person’ also examines the mystery of love, both in relationships and other realms. What is your feeling about the evolution of love as depicted in the film, and are you personally optimistic about a love that can survive over a number of years?

Haggis: I am, actually, but it’s not easy. It’s all about trust, which I guess is what the film is about, and trusting that person across from you, even when they don’t appear trustworthy, and even when you get the feeling you should run. Protecting ourselves never works, that what we do by default. But as you see in the film, those who try to protect themselves end up losing.

HollywoodChicago.com: You have a number of well-known actors and personalities in ‘Third Person.’ In their interpretation of the characters you developed, which of the actors surprised you with how they viewed the persona of their role, and brought something to your story that you didn’t expect?

Haggis: All of them, absolutely all of them. You look at Liam Neeson, for example, who always gives solid performances – he hasn’t done a romantic lead in 20 years. And you put him opposite Olivia Wilde, and despite the age difference the two of them fell into each other so easily. Even though the relationship is internecine – they struggle to reach each other, even as they are pushing themselves away.

HollywoodChicago.com: Sex is also a theme in the main story, the powerful way it can both seduce and destroy. As a consequence of our relationship with the biological imperative, do you think it is possible to intellectualize our sex drives and create rationalizations for that drive in the distractions of our technological age?

Haggis: The more I learn about love and relationships, the less I know. In trying to figure out who you’re attracted to, many times it ends up being the wrong person. But maybe the wrong person is the right person for you, and maybe it’s not them, it’s you. We fall into a relationship because we’re fascinated with that person across from us, and then we try to change them. [laughs] ‘Third Person’ explores what happens when you try to do that.

HollywoodChicago.com: Where does sex come into that equation?

Haggis: You have to have that chemistry, and you have to have that person – who when you look into their eyes – you want to crawl inside them and look at the world through those eyes. That is what sex is to me, that kind of closeness. Now finding the person you want to be that close to and can trust, that is a different thing.



Mila Kunis Portrays a Hotel Worker in ‘Third Person’
Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

HollywoodChicago.com: In your background as a youth, you had a myriad of experiences before embarking on the path as a professional storyteller, but many of those experiences are defined through your encounter with the film art. How did the magic of the movies become the centerpiece inspiration for the career that had defined your life?

Haggis: I always wanted to be a storyteller, from the time I was very young and drawing comic strips. I was drawing cowboys, and fashioned a character named Sam O’Sam, but I don’t know why I named him that way. He was the hero because he had a curly hat, and the villainous Black Bart had a straight billed hat. You take those characters, who are archetypes, and slowly dig underneath that and find human beings.

I was influenced by John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock. When I was in my teens I discovered the European filmmakers – the French New Wave and the Italians – people who were redefining the cinema. I remember one film in particular that changed my life, Michelangelo Antonioni’s “Blowup” [1966]. I booked it as a 16 millimeter print for this society where I was showing films, I had read about it in a magazine. When I watched that I thought to myself, ‘you can tell a story like this?’ Here is a movie that pretends to be a murder mystery, that mystery is never solved, and then it ends with a tennis game between mimes. Because you wonder what it means it sticks with you, and resonates, and that’s the film I wanted to make with ‘Third Person.’

HollywoodChicago.com: So it's not a particular genre, per se?

Haggis: This is not a date movie, it’s a double date movie. You should take three people with you at least, so you can stand outside afterward and argue about it. Hopefully it’s something that leaves you emotionally satisfied, but poses a lot of questions. There is nothing underlined in this film, with a character who is struggling to ‘rewrite’ his life as he goes, and has to trust that his characters – as I did – will lead him to places that he doesn’t necessarily want to see.

HollywoodChicago.com: Of all the notable and even classic television shows that you wrote for, which one intrigued you the most regarding the possibilities with the characters, and feels the most ‘outside the box’ regarding your viewpoint of those characters?



Paul Haggis in Chicago, June 13, 2014

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Haggis: It wasn't until I did 'thirtysomething.' That was the first sort of comedy/drama on which I really figured out how to write. And that was due to the show runners and wonderful filmmakers, Marshall Herskovitz and Ed Zwick. I wrote my first script for them, and they came to me and said, 'really good script Paul, now what is it about?' I didn't know what they were saying, because it was all there.

They amplified what they were saying with 'where does it come from within you, what questions are you asking about yourself?' I thought, 'I'm suppose to do that?' It was an epiphany to me that writers had to look inside themselves. You can date most of my writing from that moment, when I began to really look inside myself.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your collaboration with Clint Eastwood is part of what defines your career. As an audience, we've now seen so many subtleties within the art and soul of Mr. Eastwood. As an intimate of his work, what aspect of his artistic soul are you most inspired by or love?

Haggis: I love his bravery. You look at the film 'Unforgiven,' and he was so willing to look within himself, not only that Western character he created but who he was, and scrape it out and flick it upon the screen. And he continues to do that. He's also brave with formats, the type of films he is willing to tackle, even a musical with 'Jersey Boys.' He continues to inspire me.

HollywoodChicago.com: You were able to do something that two of your heroes, Godard and Hitchcock, were never able to do, and that was win a Best Picture and Screenwriting Oscar. What does the Oscar mean to you, both as a symbol of achievement and as a pinnacle for a filmmaker?

Haggis: Let's hope it's not a pinnacle. You don't struggle in this business to win Oscars, you struggle to tell a decent story, and to tell it well. That's my daily struggle. If an audience comes to see it, that's great, because you want an audience to see it. But when one of my favorite films – 'In the Valley of Elah' – came out, it was about the point in the Iraq War when people didn't want to think about it, and didn't draw big audiences. So I keep trying to tell a decent story, and tell it well.

HollywoodChicago.com: I'm a recovering Catholic, and you have recovered from both that religion and another. When we give ourselves up to to a church that represents our philosophy of faith, what are the implications for our psychological being, and what were effects for you when you broke away from those two major and soul influencing churches?

Haggis: I was 13 years old when I stopped going to the Catholic Church, because my mother got into an argument with our parish priest. She noticed he had bought a Cadillac, and so she went to him and wondered why he'd buy such a thing because there were poor people in our parish. He told her the he had 'spoke to God, and God wanted him to have that car.' And she said, 'that's funny, I spoke to God too, and he doesn't want us coming to your church anymore. That was brave of her, because she was raised as a devout Catholic.

That inspired when I looked at what I was involved in, which took a long time. I was purposely blind for a long time, as are many folks. So many things were kept from me, and as they started to seep in, I started to push them away. I am a great supporter of underdogs, and I always viewed that Church [Scientology] as an underdog. I purposely never read anything that criticized the Church. When I finally started to, and did some investigating of my own, I was truly shocked. I should have felt that shock many years before I finally left. You have to stand up for what you believe in, despite what might happen to your career or your life.

HollywoodChicago.com: Have you thought about your epitaph on your metaphoric gravestone?

Haggis: I woke up one morning from a dream about 12 years ago. It was about two in the morning, and I was drenched in sweat, because I had pictured my tombstone. And it said, 'Paul Haggis - Creator - Walker, Texas Ranger.' I knew right then I had to do something to erase that. [laughs] I went off then and wrote 'Crash' and 'Million Dollar Baby.'

"Third Person" continues its limited release in Chicago on June 27th. Featuring Liam Neeson, Mila Kunis, Adrien Brody, Maria Bello, Kim Basinger, James Franco and Olivia Wilde. Written and directed by Paul Haggis. Rated "R"

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