Interview: Morten Tyldum, Graham Moore of 'The Imitation Game'

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CHICAGO – Telling the story of Alan Turing – the British closeted gay man who broke a Nazi code in World War II, saving millions of lives – was put upon the talented shoulders of two disparate individuals. Screenwriter Graham Moore – from Chicago – and Norwegian director Morten Tyldum collaborated on "The Imitation Game."

It was a bit of luck and happenstance that brought the two creators together (see below), but their passion for properly vetting the complex story and distilling it to the audience was a wise and loving process. Graham Moore was born in the South Side of Chicago, but knew of Turing from his other life in computers and science. Morten Tyldum is a notable filmmaker from Norway, who was looking for his first American project. They were supported by the amazing performance of Benedict Cumberbatch in his portrayal of Alan Turing, and a host of other fine British actors, including Keira Knightley. "The Imitation Game" opens on Friday, December 12th.

Benedict Cumberbatch and Morten Tyldum on the Set of 'The Imitation Game'
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

HollywoodChicago.com interviewed the filmmakers during a promotional tour in early November. Their insights into Alan Turing, and the exquisite approach toward his story, is captured in their enthusiasm and dedication to the project.

HollywoodChicago.com: Morten, this is your English language film debut, but to me it's more about atmosphere than the mark of a particular culture. What is similar in the 1940s English manner that was familiar to you as a Norwegian native?

Morton Tyldum: British culture is what I grew up with, in a sense, with the BBC. I've always admired the way the British dealt with the world, especially in the late 1930s through the World War II years. It was an apocalyptic and dark time, and they were being bombed to pieces, but the stoic dignity remained.

To me, this is a film about outsiders, the outsiders looking in. Alan Turing and Joan Clarke [Keira Knighley's role] never really fit into their society. And the internationalism of the project was a factor – a Norwegian man directed, an American wrote the screenplay and the film had a Spanish Director of Photography [Oscar Faura] – and that was fitting for a story about outsiders trying to fit in.

HollywoodChicago.com: For both of you, describe your journey in landing your assignments for this film. What characteristic of your work do you think got you into the project?

Graham Moore: I had been this huge computer nerd my entire life. I went to space camp and computer programming camp. I was that kid. From a very young age, I knew about the legend of Alan Turing – among awkward, nerdy teenagers, he is a patron saint. He never fit in, but accomplished these wonderful things, as part of a secret queer history of computer science.

And so I always dreamt of writing something about him, and I thought that there had never been a proper narrative treatment of his life, that he deserved. I by chance met the producers of the film at a party, and one of them told me they had optioned a biography. When I asked who it was, they said, 'it's a mathematician that you've never heard of.' When they told me it was Alan Turing, I almost tackled them, and I told them I'd do anything to write this film, I'd write it for free. It was all about luck and passion. That is how it started, and I felt that everyone else involved was just as committed to the story.

Tyldum: I was just making my first run into Hollywood, and what I was seeing were action thrillers and superhero movies. Graham's script came my way, and when it was presented to me as 'probably not what I was looking for.' But I loved it, and had the same experience I think most viewers will have – I'd never heard of Alan Turing. I became obsessed with him, and that obsession won the producers over.

I wanted the film to be entertaining and engaging. I didn't want it to be dusty or a history lesson that drags you down. It was a vibrant man that lived in exciting times. An awkward mathematician becomes the key to everything in a war, and we wanted to preserve his eccentricities and the pressure that the decoding team felt every day. Everything depended on it, and the war's outcome changed because of him.

HollywoodChicago.com: Graham, the film was 'based on a true story.' Whenever I see those words, I always wonder automatically whAT changes in the timeline needed to be done. What were the most significant timeline or narrative changes to Turing's story in your screenplay?

Moore: What is amazing about the story is that the most fantastic things that occur, that people most don't believe, are absolutely true – like the Soviet mole that they allowed to operate within British war intelligence – that was all true.

Tyldum: Did Turing write a letter to Winston Churchill to keep the program going? Yes he did. Did he publish a crossword puzzle in the Sunday Times to recruit potential code breakers? Yes he did. We used the actual crossword puzzle in the film.

Moore: We condensed the timeline, essentially. The process of breaking the code was enormously complicated in real life. So one of things we wanted to do was open up Turing's story to the audience and make a film about these complicated topics, but at the same time create a narrative that the audience understands, without insulting their intelligence. But the on a broad conceptual level, everything is true.

HollywoodChicago.com: Morten, Benedict Cumberbatch is such an "inner actor" in my opinion – that so much of his performance simmers underneath his overt interpretation. What did you notice in the editing process about Benedict's persona as Alan that you never noticed on the set?

Tyldum: Benedict is so interesting, that one of the difficult elements in editing is that you wanted to stay just on his character while other characters had dialogue. His reactions are so interesting, he's so alive the whole time. I became fascinated just in how he reacted to certain scenes.

The Cast of Code Breakers in 'The Imitation Game'
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

HollywoodChicago.com: The theme of the film was about the ultimate outsider having to become the ultimate insider. What do you think a gay person – during a closeted era in history – loses about themselves when they have to compromise their nature, as Alan Turning had to do during his time on earth?

Moore: I think he bore an incredible weight upon his shoulders. I think one thing we always felt is that he was someone who was separated from so many elements of life around him – because he was a once-in-a-lifetime genius, because he was a gay man at a time it was against the law and because he was forced to keep all his secrets from the very circumstance he was involved in. We felt he could keep secrets because he kept secrets his whole life. The British military didn't realize they had hired this expert 'secret keeper' to keep their secrets.

Tyldum: Another thing we talked about is that he was able to come up with amazing solutions precisely because he was an outsider. He wasn't burdened with 'normality,' he was freed from that. He already was looking at the world from a different angle. As a colleague of his once said, everything Alan Turing came up with as an idea, it was something that anyone else could never come up with, because it just came from a different place.

HollywoodChicago.com: I was struck by how the British culture, and so many other countries before and after it, used so many resources to strike down the so-called 'perversion of homosexuality.' What do you think a culture or society fears most – and loses the most – when they do so much to persecute and marginalize a certain category of human beings?

Tyldum: They lose a lot of Alan Turings, smart people who could have helped society. The same could be said of women at the time, Joan Clarke would have made a much bigger contribution if she were living right now. We fear those who are different – in race, sexuality and religion – and it's still a problem today. If we embraced and celebrated these differences, we'd simply have more resources in society.

HollywoodChicago.com: Morton, since you were born in the 1960s a lot of your teenage years and young adult years were spent in the early gay liberation period. What do you remember personally about your attitude towards gay individuals when you were growing up, and how did that attitude evolve as you got older?

Tyldum: I had parents who were very liberal, so I grew up with a more progressive attitude toward gay individuals. I've always been surprised when I'm around people who see gay folks as a problem, because for me it was like, 'whatever.' My mother thought I was gay when I was younger, and made a point to tell me it was okay. [laughs] Given when I grew up, I feel lucky that in my life I never viewed it as a problem.

HollywoodChicago.com: Graham, you were born in 1981 in America, how did the attitudes – in your view – differ about gay individuals in your generation?

Moore: It's funny, because I went through a similar process with my Mom as Morten went through with his Mom. I hung out with a nerdy computer and theater crowd, a mix of gay and straight men. I wore nail polish, had long straight black hair, the typical teenage fashion disasters. [laughs] I remember having the same conversation with my mother, she told me that it was okay if I wanted to tell her I was gay. I wasn't sure at the time, but it was all okay with her.

HollywoodChicago.com: My final question to both of you is, since you've immersed yourself in all things Alan Turing during the production, is there a single question you'd like to ask him, if he were sitting with us right now?

Moore: I'd like to ask him if he ever believed in God. He was a very committed atheist in his life, actually wrote about it and caused a rift in his family, but I'd like to know if the circumstances and trauma of his later life changed his view. I wonder if that made him more or less faithful, which way to you go from there?

Tyldum: I'd ask him about Norway, he went to Norway a lot. There is a secret gay community in Norway at the time, and he had a secret lover there. That was after the war, and he was part of this community in Norway.

HollywoodChicago.com: Which proves that every story is local.

"The Imitation Game" opens everywhere on December 12th. Featuring Benedict Cumberbatch, Keira Knighley, Matthew Goode, Rory Kinnear and Charles Dance. Screenplay adapted by Graham Moore. Directed by Morten Tyldum. Rated "PG-13"

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