

The Producers: Behind the Scenes of Michael Keaton's 'The Merry Gentleman'

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CHICAGO – The nature of making an independent film versus a mainstream Hollywood production is evident through the efforts of two Chicago-based producers – Steven A. Jones and Paul Duggan of “The Merry Gentleman”.

Jones, who also produced last year's “The Promotion”, works more as a creative producer within the filmmaking process. Duggan, a first time executive producer, handled more of the financial details of the production. Together they helped deliver – for first time director and star Michael Keaton – a stellar morality tale that has echoes of film noir.



First Time Director Michael Keaton with the Crew of 'The Merry Gentleman'
Photo credit: Matt Dinerstein, Samuel Goldwyn Films

HollywoodChicago.com sat down with both producers, for a fascinating conversation about the parameters and challenges of independent filmmaking.

HollywoodChicago.com: What drew you into this project? Was it the pitch or the script?

Steven A. Jones: It was the script. Ron Lazzeretti [the screenwriter], I knew him tangentially from the advertising side, back when I was an animation director. He asked me if we could make this movie in Chicago. I took one look at the script and thought it was a great one, I'm sure there is some way to do this.

HC: This is your very first executive producer credit for a film. Who or what got you involved with The Merry Gentleman and what drew you to the project?

Paul Duggan: I first went for a free steak dinner at Gibson's, and it ended up costing me 6.2 million (laughs). I met Tom [Bastoune, producer and actor in the film] there about 3-1/2 years ago and afterwards we started having meetings about the film. We invested in other businesses together and as a trade-off – because I helped him learn about financing – he increased his producing staff to include me.

HC: Your bio states you have worked as producer on films with five different first time directors. What techniques have you developed that make you a good colleague for the sometimes volatile nature of a first time director? How was your experience with first timers crucial in helping Michael Keaton get what he needed?

Jones: I think a lot of what I have to do with first time directors is trouble shoot. Try to anticipate for them what's going to happen. A lot of it has to do with how much time is spent on any given scene in terms of time and money. For example, pointing out that there money would be more wisely spent doing one thing rather than another.

As far as Michael's directorial debut was concerned, it was his education on the other side of the camera, because he had always been on the actor's side. Communicating to him that no matter how much he thought he knew what the director is doing, when you get to the other side it's going to be completely different.

For example, convincing Michael that we could make this film in a short schedule, you have to educate without being off-putting.



Producers Steven A. Jones and Paul Duggan of 'The Merry Gentleman', in Chicago on April 27, 2009

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald, HollywoodChicago.com

HC: As a financial guru, what kind of pitch is most effective for drawing investors in on an independent film like The Merry Gentleman?

Duggan: We went out to a very select group of people and in the spirit of 'trying anything once' we collected units of funding for the film. Some did it based on their trust in me and others were large investors who wanted to dabble in show business. We brought together a combination of people.

There are risks in all businesses, like for example making computers. There is not an independent computer business, but there is an independent film business. This is a niche that attracts more interest than in other conventional businesses, with a possible avenue to success.

Jones: You mitigate the risk by bringing on good people to make the movie, and involving them in the approval of lead actor Michael Keaton, which made them a little more secure with this investment.

HC: With the different background coming into the role of executive producer, what observations did you make regarding the contrast in business acumen between the film industry and other, more common types of business ventures?

Duggan: They are very similar in the fact that you are still dealing with lawyers and contracts. You have to have an understanding of business law and how it applies. That doesn't change whether it's a real estate closing or a production of a movie.

Actors do have agents...and lawyers, so there are more layers in that aspect of it.

Jones: Those layers are also buffers, you sometimes don't get the opportunity to talk to the person you really need to talk to. So when you talk to the representatives your inquiry is being filtered one way and it's filtered when the answer comes back to you. The worse thing that does is chew up time.

HC: What are the biggest changes you've seen in the film business from when you were starting out with 'Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer' versus the types of issues you have with The Promotion and The Merry Gentleman?

Jones: Henry was done in the days of videotape rental. Now it is a completely different landscape with On Demand, Pay-Per-View, Satellite Systems and all these other places where an independent film can be shown. With Henry we were just concerned with small distribution and eventual rentals.

I can talk about the independent film business, and tomorrow it changes. For example, independent film has been called dead so many times,

but then somebody makes a film for \$20 and it makes a 100 million and suddenly independents are alive again.

HC: What was the moment that really made you, as a first time participant, really feel proud in the accomplishment of helping to produce The Merry Gentleman?

Duggan: There was a rush when the room darkened at Sundance and the film starting running, and there was the credit – Executive Producer: Paul Duggan. That's something I'd never signed up for, it was not on my things to do and I may never do another movie, but...that was cool.

TOMORROW – Tom Bastounes, supporting actor and executive producer, on co-starring with Michael Keaton and Kelly Macdonald in 'The Merry Gentleman'.

'The Merry Gentleman', with Michael Keaton, Kelly Macdonald, Tom Bastounes, directed by Michael Keaton, opens Friday, May 1st, 2009. Check local theaters for film and showtimes



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