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Archive

Kindness Counts: Paul Kaufman Pays It Forward

by moviesharkd

Paul Kaufman. Most of you probably don't know his name, but I guarantee that you know his work. An Emmy Award and Canadian Screen Award-winning director and producer, Kaufman made his directorial debut in television with a project for Showtime, "Run the Wild Fields", a WWII period drama which earned Paul his first Emmy for Best Director. And with that production, Paul found a home in television.

For decades now, Paul has consistently delivered some of the finest entertainment in made for television movies like "Honeymoon with Mom" and "The Christmas Cottage", plus his fun cult classics, "Surviving Gilligan's Island: The Incredibly True Story of the Longest Three Hour Tour in History" and "Return to the Batcave: The Misadventures of Adam and Burt". And there are also more than 70 hours of countless television episodes directed by Paul for acclaimed series like "NCIS: Los Angeles", "The Mentalist", and "Grimm", just to name a few.

But then things shifted and changed. The cinematic stars realigned for Paul and he made the leap to not only directing feature films but directing feature films addressing social issues; his first - BUTTER.

Recalling the catalyst for this cinematic shift, Paul told me it happened about four years ago. "My kids are older now, they're out of the house and I wanted to start a new chapter in my career where I was going to make films and tell stories that were going to have a social impact." And as many directors often do, Paul hit the digital library for books that might inspire him or be works that he could adapt for the screen as, in addition to being a director, he also has some originally produced scripts to his credit. "I didn't know if I was going to do a film about bullying or mental health or suicide or drug addiction or if I just was looking for stories that resonated with me personally that were going to have a social impact. And I found BUTTER."

A young adult novel by Erin Jade Lange, BUTTER is the story of "a morbidly obese teenager who's going to eat himself to death live on the internet on New Year's Eve." That was Paul's jumping-off point. It took about a year before he could option the book, but once he did, he wrote the script, knowing this was the story for him to tell.

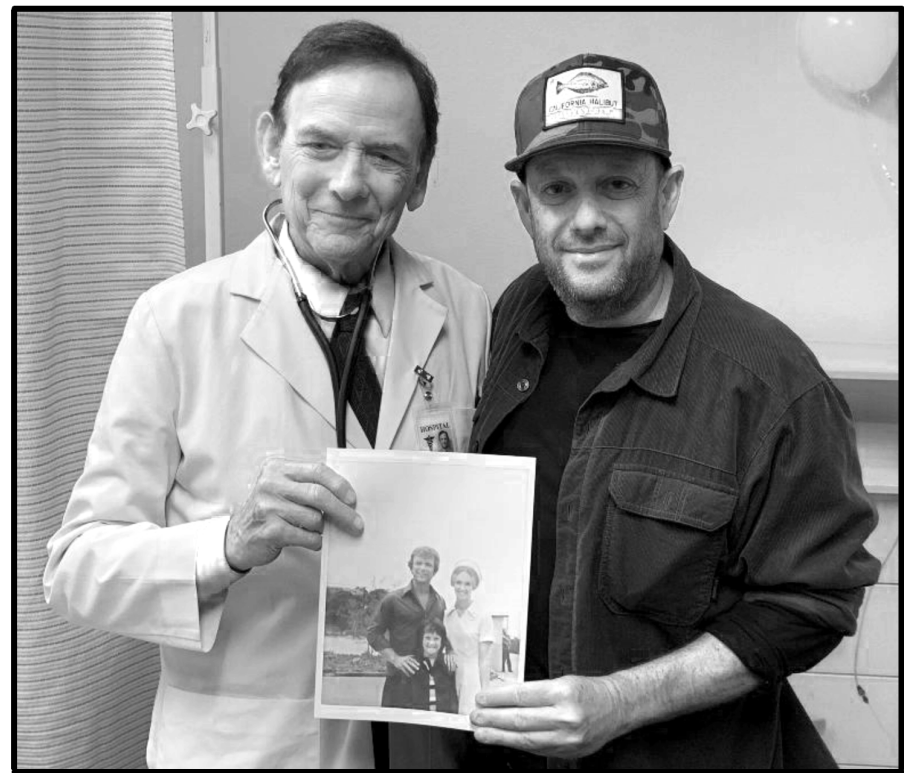
Covering issues like bullying, lack of self-esteem, peer pressure, social media use and abuse, pitfalls of popularity, obesity, parental pressure, dysfunctional families, and teen suicide, Paul expanded on Lange's book and deftly crafted an adaptation that is meaningful, promoting discussion but doing so with a lighter touch versus plunging the film into an abyss of emotional darkness.

Starring newcomer Alex Kersting in the title role, Paul brought together an eclectic cast spanning age demographics with everyone from Mira Sorvino and Mykelti Williamson to Jack Griffo, Adain Bradley and McKayley Miller, to Ravi Patel, Annabeth Gish, and Monte Markham.

But what in Paul's past or psyche had been buried all these years, just waiting to push him into this new chapter of storytelling and in the case of BUTTER, teenagers?

Knowing his work, as Paul talked, I could see the youthful influences that helped shape his career and bring him to this point in time. And it all came down to a simple act of kindness.

"When I was nine years old, I moved from England to Los Angeles with my family. My favorite TV show was "The Six Million Dollar Man". My aunt and uncle ran a school in the Hollywood Hills for kids with high IQs. One day they were filming "The Six Million Dollar Man" at my aunt's school and she called and asked, 'Do you want to come and watch?'. I was like, 'Oh my god! I'm gonna get



Lee Majors' autograph! It's gonna be amazing...I have a British accent. I have my little Kodak Brownie camera with a cube on it. I have my autograph book.'

"I was on set and someone came up to me and said, 'When you go up to Lee Majors, just make sure you don't disturb him on the set.' As he left the set and walked outside towards his trailer, I knew this was my moment. So I run up to him and said, 'Mr. Majors, can I have your autograph, please?' I don't specifically remember what he said but it was something like not now or get lost. He gave me no time of day. But, there were two people who saw this, two actors in the show, and they came up to me and said I could have their autographs. One was dressed as a nurse and the other was a very handsome young man in his 30s. Someone took a picture of me and the two of them. And this man was so nice to me. He made my day. And I never forgot that.

"Many years later I found the photograph and wondered who that guy was. I want to repay him. Now that I'm a director, I want to put him in something and tell him how he inspired me." That kindness to a nine-year-old inspired Paul's own onset behavior once he started directing. "Be nice to children on my set. Whenever there's a kid on my set, I put them in the director's chair, I let them call action and cut and I give them earpieces so they can listen, I bring them to craft service, I get them candy. And all along I wanted to thank that man but I didn't know what I do." Paul finally discovered the identity of that kind man. It was Monte Markham. "Now Monte Markham was on my list to cast in something.

"But never could I find anything for him. Then BUTTER came around and I said, 'I'm going to cast Monte Markham and I'm not going to tell him anything about our meeting years ago until we wrap.' Markham gets cast and although not the role Markham thought he was being cast for, he was still all in. "It's just a couple of lines but I've been just such a big fan of yours that it would just really mean a lot to me if you did it." And shoot it he did only to arrive at the final day of filming when Paul gathered everyone together.

"No one knew what was going on. My AD knew and Mira [Sorvino] knew. Some people knew the story but didn't know what I was doing. And I told everyone the story...when I was a kid, I went to "The Six Million Dollar Man" set and a man was so nice to me and I took this picture. I handed the picture to Monte and he looked at it and his face was just dropping. I was tearing up and I said to him, 'You were so kind to me as a child that I learned to be kind and inspire other children on all of my sets and with everything that I've done. And I just truly wanted to thank you.' There wasn't a dry eye in the room. "Monte called me the next day and said that he told his family and that 'just being an actor and knowing that I had an impact on you in the way that I did means so much to me. It was just a beautiful beautiful thing'." Kindness counts.