

'MAJESTY'

BY DELFIN VIGIL

"Her Majesty," a charming family-friendly movie set in 1953 New Zealand about a 13-year-old girl obsessed with meeting the queen of England, easily could have been a royal pain in the arse to make.

Written and directed by Mark Gordon, a 43-year-old Mountain View native who had never before stepped foot in Kiwi country, the independent film came up against plenty of obstacles to summersault through.

After spending more than a dozen years watching people try to turn his script into a movie, a frustrated Gordon teamed up with his sister, Lisa, and long-time friend Susan Hailey, and headed to the land Down Under without much of a cast and crew and, some might say, without much of a clue.

Instead, Gordon happened across one happy accident after another.

First, he found the perfect town, Cambridge, where her highness' royal tour really did pass through in 1953.

Then he discovered Sally Andrews, whose audition for the queen-obsessed teenager brought three adults to tears. And when Gordon, the American outsider, let it be known that his script was tackling sensitive racial tensions between colonized New Zealanders and the country's native Maori tribes, the country welcomed him with a resounding, "Wow! What a great idea!"

Things could hardly have gone any smoother.

Since its 2001 release, "Her Majesty" has won three out of seven New Zealand Film and TV Award nominations and has taken prizes at film festivals in Chicago, Cleveland, Seattle, San Diego, Palm Beach, Newport Beach and Edinburgh, among other cities. It opened in Bay Area theaters this weekend.

Even her majesty herself, Queen Elizabeth II, recently saw a private screening of the movie and endorsed it with a royally good review

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"WHY CAN'T THERE BE FAMILY MOVIES WITH AN APPEAL FOR ADULT AUDIENCES, TOO?"

Lisa Gordon, sister of "Her Majesty" director Mark Gordon

"What I really wanted," says a smirking Gordon, "was a photo of the queen wearing a 'Her Majesty,' baseball cap."

Strike one.

Gordon won't be able to add a photo of her highness to his baseball card collection. But that just may be the bit of backlash he needs for inspiration, which he apparently thrives on.

"Early on in my career, I had a writing coach tell me that I didn't know how to write women characters," says Gordon, who spent much of the past decade as a television writer in Los Angeles, where he now lives. "So I got it in my head that I'll show her. There's nothing quite as inspiring as when someone tells you you can't do something."

Gordon's sister felt the same way.

"I have two kids and honestly get so bored sitting through some of their favorite movies," says Lisa Gordon, a Palo Alto resident. "There are so many bad family movies out there that are usually either cartoons or takeoffs of television shows and filled with product placement. Why can't there be family movies with an appeal for adult audiences, too?"



RULES

SCREENS



Clockwise from top: "Her Majesty" director Mark Gordon, producers Susan Hailey and Lisa Gordon, and Sally Andrews [escorted by Cameron Smith] as the queen-obsessed teen.



So, when her brother was having difficulty financing the film, she and her longtime friend Susan Hailey, another Peninsula mom, offered to be the film's executive producers and film fund managers. The two women's backgrounds and contacts in business, marketing and public relations ensured that Mark Gordon could focus on finishing the film without any distractions from Hollywood.

"Her Majesty" was shot entirely on location in New Zealand, with an all-New Zealander cast. Completely Hollywood-free, the movie's final cut had many surprised when they learned that Gordon wasn't a New Zealander himself.

It may be equally surprising to many that Gordon was never a 13-year-old girl, because not only does he successfully get into the mind-set of another culture, he also scripted a convincing portrayal of what it's like to be made of sugar and spice and everything nice.

"I write from a humanist standpoint," Gordon says. "Whether you're boy or girl, coming-of-age issues are similar. And when the 13-year-old character, Elizabeth, kisses an envelope and says she feels like a thousand summersaults, well, let's just say I picked up on things from previous girlfriends."

While the film enjoyed success in film festivals across the world, "Her Majesty" has also passed the elusive child test.

"My kids have seen 'Her Majesty' eight times and they love it," Lisa Gordon says. "And not just because they star as extras in some of the crowd scenes."

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