

PAYBACK

What sponsors get from the ACL Fest
■ Saturday in Life & Arts

MOON ART

Ex-astronaut's paintings are out of this world
■ Sunday in Life & Arts

INTERVIEW ■ BENJAMIN MCKENZIE

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2008 ■ SECTION D

Antiwar classic pairs TV actor, stage director on the big screen

By Michael Barnes

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Benjamin McKenzie, like his primary medium, is cool.

Rowan Joseph, like his, is warm. Very warm.

Seated side by side at Jo's Hot Coffee promoting their movie, "Johnny Got His Gun," the television actor and the theater director present a study in extreme contrasts.

Austin-raised McKenzie, star of "The O.C." and the upcoming TV pilot sketched out as "L.A.P.D.," could be any size. His physical presence concentrates instead in his cleanly sculpted features and aquamarine eyes.

INSIDE

■ Review of 'Johnny Got His Gun,' D5

His forehead tilts forward, not as a weapon in a charm offensive, but almost to hood his responses. McKenzie keeps something in reserve, an essential on the screen. (A budding Robert Redford then?)

He speaks in short, declarative sentences, factual without elaboration, while avoiding the impression of obfuscation. ("I live a quiet life in

See GUN, D5



Michael Barnes AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Actor Benjamin McKenzie, left, and director Rowan Joseph.

GUN: 'Johnny' piqued interest of a diverse duo

Continued from D1

the hills above L.A. Way up. Above the perpetual chaos of Hollywood and West Hollywood. A little yard. A dog. I hang out at my house.")

Pennsylvania-born Joseph is a rumpled eruption of emotions. Always in movement, always in thought, he's making intellectual connections — theater, books, movies, actors, lighting — faster than anyone could absorb them.

If McKenzie recedes into reflection, Joseph can't wait to rhapsodize about his first movie project, how he envisioned McKenzie as Dalton Trumbo's injured World War I soldier after seeing his "Junebug," how the movie was made on an \$83,000 budget with just a bench and a chair, how he relied on his theatrical background to simulate water with \$53 worth of dry ice.

Most miraculous of all: How the 77-minute movie with a single actor was picked up for distribution on the first inquiry to Mark Cuban's Truly Indie company.

Poised beyond his years, McKenzie, 30, is a veteran of saturated media promotion, having survived 92 episodes of an evening soap opera with generational impact. Joseph, 51, runs Garry Marshall's Falcon Theatre and has won awards as director and producer in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. Yet theater doesn't produce the kind of 24-hour attention that a hit TV show generates.

That might partly explain their divergent demeanors. The pair came together over matching needs. Joseph was obsessed with the stage version of "Johnny," as well as Jeff Daniel's legendary 27 performances in the role (at McKenzie's current age). McKenzie was looking for ways to build on the career platform of "The O.C." — for which he expresses gratitude — while escaping the peg as a brooding, good-looking kid.

"It lasted only four seasons," he says of "The O.C.," contrasting it with other pop watersheds such as "90210." Instead, he wants to follow in the footsteps of actors who outgrew their youthful vehicles. "There's a guy you may have

heard of — Johnny Depp — likable guy, pretty good actor. He was on a show called '21 Jump Street.'"

McKenzie, who has been stumping for Barack Obama in his spare time, hadn't read the Trumbo book, but was immediately entranced by the "scary" project.

"The writing is very rich; the character is incredible," McKenzie says. "You get very few chances to play something like this on stage or in film in your life. And it's so timely. The story is almost 100 years old, if you consider it takes place in World War I, but we're still talking about generals sending 18-year-old boys — and now girls, too — off to war that they don't understand while they were there."

For his part, Joseph had never seen the "O.C." One thing that clinched McKenzie for the role was a candid Web image.

"I saw a picture of Ben walking down the street of L.A. — whistling. Nobody whistles. Not in L.A.," Joseph says. "I said: 'That's the one.' He has to look like he stepped off the battlefield in World War I. He has to be an Everyman. He has to be a boy at the beginning and a man at the end."

In just a few screenings, he's been delighted by the reaction of McKenzie fans to the material, composed almost entirely of words and very little cinematic visualization.

"It's been a long time since people listened in movies," Joseph said. "Audiences, younger audiences, are having that experience for the first time. It's a bench, a chair and Ben."

Joseph received two calls from the first screening in Washington, D.C., one from Cuban's group asking what cities they'd like to play, the other from the Pentagon asking whether he wanted a tour.

"Ninety-eight percent of films don't get distribution," Joseph says. "How did we get here? This is surreal. It's just sort of 'wow.' Thank God for Dalton Trumbo and Ben."

mbarnes@statesman.com; 445-3970