

Berks native's film to play GoggleWorks

Rowan Joseph's "Dalton Trumbo's Johnny Got His Gun" will open Friday. E3



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The critically acclaimed musician and songwriter proves that love inspires. E4



New Arts Program remains provocative

A show by sculptor Betty Beaumont debates the future of our children. E5



E Section

Spotlight E2
Music E4
Movies E6

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ENTERTAINMENT | E3

Rowan Joseph re-imagines an anti-war classic

The Berks-bred actor, director and producer brings a World War I novel to the screen in a theatrical style, starring Ben McKenzie of "The O.C." and "Junebug." The film opens Friday at the GoggleWorks.

By Tracy Rasmussen
Reading Eagle Correspondent

Rowan Joseph said not much about his life has changed since he left Reading after graduating from Holy Name High School in the 1970s.

He's still acting, writing and directing. Only now he's directing actors such as Ben McKenzie (recently of "The OC" and "Junebug") and producing movies that play to a national audience.

One other thing that has remained constant is that Joseph sees the relationships he has formed to be as valuable as the talent he has.

"I'm doing the same things I was doing in high school," Joseph said. "My life hasn't really changed that much."

Except, of course, for his name.

Growing up and performing in Reading, Joseph was known as Joe Rowan and he was a regular performer with the former Reading Civic Opera where he credits actors Larry Longlott, Bruce McLean and the late Betty Lou McLean with both friendship and mentoring.

"They are really my heroes," Joseph said. "When you do (theater) long enough you realize that talent doesn't fall into the realm of professional alone. I learned so much from them."

Now, as Rowan Joseph he's acting in movies like "Raising Helen," and "The Princess Diaries 2" as well as directing stars such as David Morse and Mary-Louise Parker and numbering people like Garry Marshall (he was producing director for Marshall's Falcon Theater) and Jack Klugman among his friends.

"I've found that if you want to keep working in this business you need to do multiple things," he said. "So I've spent time as a film actor and a theater actor. When you do that, you have a lot of down time, and I'm not someone who likes to sit around."

So, instead of sitting around Joseph started to work on movies and started a theater company, Theater A-Go-Go, which is currently touring with a production of "An Evening With Jack Klugman."

He also started Greenwood Hill Productions to develop movie projects.

"Dalton Trumbo's Johnny Got His Gun" is the first film to come from that company, and no one is more surprised — or pleased — than Joseph that the film was picked up for national distribution.

"This isn't normally how it



Actor Ben McKenzie with Rowan Joseph during the filming of "Johnny Got His Gun."

works," Joseph said. "Ninety-eight percent of films don't end up in theaters. So it's been a terrific experience all the way around."

The film will have its Reading premiere at the GoggleWorks Friday with showings through Nov. 13 and question-and-answer sessions with Joseph set for Friday, Saturday and next Sunday, after the showings. See www.goggleworks.org for information.

"Johnny Got His Gun" was written in 1938 by Dalton Trumbo, as an anti-war statement. The book is narrated by Joe Bonham, a young soldier who was devastatingly wounded on the last day of World War I. The attack leaves him with no limbs, no ears, eyes, nose or mouth — and a fully functional and healthy brain. Throughout the book Bonham relives the 20 years of his life, and eventually comes to understand what his future will be like. He finally finds a way to communicate with the outside world and uses this ability to ask that he be put on display to show the true ravages of war.

Although there are other film versions of the book, Joseph's film is not a remake. It's a film of a one-person play. The film is shot in a black-box theater with just a bench, a chair and McKenzie.

"As a director I'm very visually oriented," Joseph said. "I know the look I want."

What he didn't know though, was that he was making a movie.

His original intent was to simply make a video that could be a learning tool.

It was shortly after he got the touring rights to "Johnny Got His Gun" that Joseph discovered that more than 30 percent of the New York production of the 1982 play based on the book had been lost and Joseph decided that it might be a better idea to concentrate on making a video of the play to preserve it.

"We couldn't afford to do both the tour and the video," he said. "So we decided to do the video. We hoped it would do well in the institutional market and maybe, our pie in the sky hope was that PBS would pick it up."

McKenzie signed on when Joseph was able to find a friend of his who could get the script in his hands.

"I knew that his agents were going to fight him on it," said Joseph, of his low-budget film. So he found a connection through Ernie Sabella (who played Pumba in "The Lion King") and discovered that McKenzie had spent a year sleeping on Sabella's floor before he got his television show.

"He put us together," Joseph said.

Oscar-nominated film editor Jay Cassidy was brought onto the project to edit, and he mentioned to Joseph that the video could easily stand as a movie in theaters.

There wasn't time to show the film at festivals, which is usually how the two percent of



Ben McKenzie in a scene from "Johnny Got His Gun."

picked-up films get picked up.

"We wanted to get this out before the election," he said. "We knew it would be timely."

Truly Indie, owned by entrepreneur Mark Cuban, picked up the film almost immediately.

"We sent it in," Joseph said. "And to our utter amazement they picked it up when it hasn't played in one festival."

Joseph isn't speculating about his strange trip into theaters, but he's happy that the film is there, and will let people decide for themselves if the live theater on film aspect works. For him, as a director, the format is just about perfect.

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"I don't really like directing live theater," Joseph confided. "I do it when I have to, but I don't have a passion for it. When you direct theater it's not always the same every night ... you know, the actor has an idea... But on film it's the same every time I watch it."

And every time he watches it, he's still filled with the same sense of awe that he was when he first read the book in 1973 at Holy Name High School.

"I've probably seen it 100 times and it's amazingly timely," he said. "It holds us. And I know that 10 or 15 years from now I won't be embarrassed by the work."

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Upcoming projects in the works

By Tracy Rasmussen
Reading Eagle Correspondent

"Dalton Trumbo's Johnny Got His Gun" is the first film to be released through Rowan Joseph's Greenwood Hill Productions, but it won't be the last.

The former Reading resident (his mother still lives in the area) has two other movies in production.

"The Hex" is a teen horror movie that takes place in Lancaster, that Joseph said is more suspense/thriller than blood and guts.

"We kill off people in the film," he said. "But it's based on the 10 things people are most afraid of like spiders and snakes and fires." The plot is kicked off by some high-school kids who steal a hex sign, releasing its hex.

"But I still wanted there to be something at the core of it that was socially responsible," Joseph said. "So in this case, it's about choosing what you choose and the consequences."

The second film is "The Pottsville Maroons," which he's developing with Penny Marshall. That film is about the baseball team in the town where Joseph spent his early childhood.

Neither film has any sort of timetable though.

"The next one will be 'The Hex,'" he said. "But who knows how long it will take to get made. It's unbelievable now to think that ('Johnny Got His Gun') happened so fast, but sometimes it does happen like that. Who knows?"

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Entertainment calendar

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