

Liberatore: Film producer returns to alma mater San Rafael High to direct movie

Paul Liberatore

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To hear him tell it, Tony Vidal was "a quiet, nerdy guy who studied a lot and got good grades" at San Rafael High School in the late 1960s. But he wasn't above playing a prank or two.

Three decades later, the 56-year-old film producer and screenwriter returned to his alma mater to direct his first movie, "The Prankster," a teen comedy about high school kids who rebel against authority by pulling what Vidal calls "sophisticated and fun pranks" - like humiliating their boorish dean and sabotaging the Senior Follies.

"The people who are pranked deserve it," Vidal said the other day in his Sausalito office. "The Pranksters are kind of like Robin Hoods who right the wrongs of the high school world. They get even through their pranks. Kids love the idea of that, of course. Every kid is a prankster to some degree."

Vidal, who lives in Larkspur with his wife and 10-year-old daughter, called on some of his own memories as a Marin teenager when he was writing the script. He graduated from San Rafael High in 1970, and subtitled the film, "You Thought Your High School Was a Joke!"

"My frame of reference was San Rafael High School," he said. "In my mind's eye, I was remembering everything the way it was when I

was a student. I imagined things like a fight behind the gym. As luck would have it, we ended up staging the movie's fight behind the gym just as I had envisioned it. In a way it was the perfect locale."

The independent film, the first for Vidal's Marin-based Prankster Entertainment, was shot on campus over 23 days in September and October with a cast of young television stars from shows such as "Lincoln Heights," "Hannah Montana" and "Saturday Night Live."

Since the movie was being made while the regular school year was in progress, it was a case of art and life existing side-by-side.

"For the most part, it went great," said San Rafael High Principal Judy Colton, who had a small part in the movie. "There were some glitches, but they were very willing to work around our schedule and everybody was respectful. The kids were excited, but after a while you get used to having film crews there every day. Still, it was kind of fun to watch."

And to actually be in. Colton was cast in a small speaking role, playing the dean's secretary.

"I had one line in the movie," she said. "I said, 'Good morning, dean, here's your mail.'"

For its use of the campus, renamed Tres Rios (Three Rivers) High in the movie, Prankster Entertainment paid the school \$30,000, which went to modernize its Third Street entrance.

As an additional thank you, "The Prankster" will have its premiere for the students on Feb. 12 in the newly renovated Hayes Theater on campus. On Feb. 15, it screens at the

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Lark Theater in Larkspur for an audience that will include industry people and, Vidal hopes, potential distributors.

Vidal's goal is to have "The Prankster" in theaters by the fall, but so far it is without a distribution deal, one of the challenges of independent production.

A USC film school graduate, Vidal is a former head story analyst for Orion Pictures and the Ladd Co., where he evaluated scripts for blockbusters such as "Born on the Fourth of July," "Romancing the Stone," "Ten" and "Caddyshack."

He became head of the screenwriting program at UC Davis, his college alma mater, and worked as a senior writer-director for a Silicon Valley startup, streaming business and learning video programs over the Internet.

He recently co-wrote "Her Best Move," an indie about girls' soccer that was distributed by MGM this past summer.

Vidal put up most of the \$1.7 million budget for "The Prankster" himself, and the future of his fledgling company is riding on its success. "I wanted to make a movie that was true to my own vision, and the only way to do that was produce it myself," he said

Still quiet and soft spoken, he's set up shop in a funky one-room office on the Sausalito waterfront with posters of "Zorba the Greek," "The Shawshank Redemption" and the 1950s B-movie classic "Attack of the 50 Foot Woman" decorating its walls.

He shares the space with a small staff that includes associate producer Michael Valentino, a Tamalpais

High School grad with deep roots in Marin (his father owns Stefano's Pizza in Mill Valley).

With five screenplays ready to go before the cameras, Vidal hopes to be the only full-time independent film production company in Marin, and he's written an appropriately new-agey manifesto for a "conscious media company whose goal is to awaken slumbering spirits" and "to put people in touch with the sacred."

Like another independent Marin filmmaker, George Lucas, Vidal is a fan of Joseph Campbell and a big believer in Campbell's "The Power of Myth."

And like Lucas he's rejected Hollywood to stay in Marin.

"I'm from here and I've lived here for the past 28 years so, for selfish reasons, I wanted to work close to home," he explained. "There's no reason not to work in Marin. We're a 50-minute flight from L.A. and the business is so decentralized anyway. So much of it has gone to other states and other countries.

"That said, there's no financial incentive to shoot in Northern California, but there is an aesthetic to this place, the beauty of the area. And there's a very talented pool of people here, actors and technicians you can call upon to make movies. So why not?"

He wrote "The Prankster" because he's comfortable in the teenage genre and familiar with it, naming favorites like "Fast Times at Ridgemont High," "Clueless," "Sixteen Candles" and "Breaking Away."

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The protagonist of "The Prankster," Chris Karas, played by Matt Angel ("Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles," "Raising the Bar" and Disney Channel's "The Suite Life of Zack and Cody") is a shy, handsome "A" student of Greek descent, not unlike a young Tony Vidal.

To the dismay of his Old World father, Chris wants to get into a top college and has to reconcile his ambition not only with his dad, but with the troublesome demands of his Prankster buddies.

The movie has a fairly stock cast of characters - the hottie editor of the school paper that Chris falls for, the wimpy, insufferable student body president, the catty blonde cheerleader, the bully jock, the handsome fellow Prankster who tempts Chris at every turn, Chris' eccentric but wise uncle.

"I wanted a movie with a real story and a message for young people," Vidal said. "

The message is to find out who you truly are and to have the courage to be that person. Or, put another way, the theme is to be authentic and true to yourself."

Tony Vidal has certainly been that.

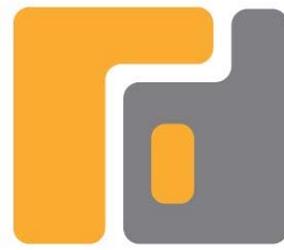
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