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## **PROFILE**

*March 31, 2005*

### **Home Movie**

*Andrew Wagner put his project, **The Talent Given Us**, on hold until he and his family were good and ready.*

**By Jamie Painter Young**

Andrew Wagner may hold the record for the longest rehearsal period with a cast in a motion picture. The writer-producer-director spent 40 years prepping his lead actors for his directorial debut feature, *The Talent Given Us*. That's because his stars also happen to be his parents, Allen and Judy Wagner. His supporting cast is also made up of close friends and family, including his sisters, an ex-girlfriend, and a childhood buddy, among others. Although his sisters are professional actors Maggie has appeared in more than 25 films; Emily has played a recurring role on ER for 10 seasons Andrew's parents had never acted before, but you wouldn't know that by their strong performances in the film.

*The Talent Given Us* tells the story of a mother who drags her reluctant husband and two grown daughters across the country in an SUV to track down the son she doesn't know how to reach. Along the way, she and her husband confront their failings as partners, lovers, parents, and human beings. The seriocomic film, although fictional, feels very much like a documentary because of its sense of immediacy and its drawing from real-life relationships and situations. Filled with refreshingly honest performances by its cast, the movie has been surprising audiences at film festivals, including this year's Sundance Film Festival, where it played in the American Spectrum category.

Andrew wrote an early draft of the screenplay in his late 20s, when he was inspired by a true situation. At the time, he was editing his thesis film for AFI, from which he graduated in 1992. "I was sleeping on friends' floors and in garages, in someone's guest house whatever I could do to get through film school," he says. "It occurred to me that my mother and father [who live in New York] did not know where I was. I had failed to keep them up-to-date on my domicile. An idea for a story struck me, about a woman in midlife in the final movie it's someone in the twilight of life and she doesn't know where her son is. And the way she comes to realize this is, she's walking down Broadway with her husband and bumps into her son's old teachers from high school, and the teachers want to know where the son is and how [he's doing]. And, not knowing, she is overcome by humiliation and makes up some sort of lie. She's overcome with regret until, in a fit of agitation, she demands to go out in search of her son and, in doing so, [she] wrangles the rest of the family into the odyssey."

Although Andrew was drawn to his screenplay, he says circumstances prevented him from pursuing the project at the time. "I felt very connected to it," he says, "but it was one of several [scripts] I was working on. I also had an intuition that I was too young to direct that film. It was very much about the passage of time, about a life unlived. And it was about the need to awaken and to continue to grow at any cost, at any age. I felt I was too young to make that film in some way."

So, Andrew put the script aside and got more life experience. He remained in Los Angeles and continued to write, and he even got paid at times for his screenwriting. He directed a couple of shorts. He did all sorts of jobs to pay the rent and allow him time to be creative: delivering pizza, refereeing Little League baseball, substitute teaching, and more recently accepting a full-time position teaching cinema and American literature and coaching varsity basketball and baseball. He got married. It was not until his 30s passed that the idea for *The Talent Given Us* struck him again.

"I think what happened when I turned 40 is that my career was not where I wanted it to be," he admits. "I had become much more in contact with the feelings that I was writing about years before, and I understood them much better." But then something else happened that he could not have predicted: Andrew's mother called to say she and his father were walking down Broadway and bumped into his old high school baseball and basketball coaches, who wanted to know how he was doing. "I said, 'Oh, my God, that script.' I mean, I had forgotten about it entirely." Andrew decided it was a sign to finally make the film. His very understanding wife agreed to let him use their nest egg, which was supposed to go toward a down payment on a house one day, and put it into a low-budget feature.

Soon after, Andrew was lying in bed one night and the lightbulb went off. "I was thinking about the film, and I found myself thinking about my mother and father and their idiosyncrasies and that detail of behavior that, as filmmakers, we try to coach our actors into reproducing," he recalls. "And of course that's why actors train, and that's why they're so committed to the craft, to be able to reproduce, with exacting detail, that kind of authenticity. The trouble I was having was seeing someone else reproduce those loveable and less admirable quirks of character that best describe my parents, and, not being able to see anyone else, I started to see them. One night I woke up, and I turned to my wife in the middle of the night, and I said, 'Sweetheart, something really terrible has just occurred to me. I'm thinking about using Mom and Dad to play themselves in the film.' She said, 'Go to sleep. You're dreaming.'"

As much as he tried to reject the notion of directing his parents to play cinematic versions of themselves, he could not get the concept out of his head. Andrew decided to bring up the idea with his parents and then his friends. "My parents said, 'No. Out of the question,' and my friends said, 'You're crazy,'" he says. Still, he refused to give up on the idea. "I can be pretty persuasive," he continues. "The only thing that you have as an independent filmmaker, working with such limited resources, is your conviction. There's a great feeling of necessity to make the film you want to make, to live a creative life."

Andrew is not sure what exactly convinced Allen and Judy to eventually agree to be the stars of their son's feature. "It was probably an intuition, a feeling that deep down they would be fed and nourished in some way in their souls," he says. "I suspect, on some level, even my mother and father somehow opened up to the question of need in their own lives to break the mold, to break the routine, to find something in themselves that was dormant."

Andrew was hoping his parents would surprise him when it came time to shoot the film, which took them on a 37-day road trip from New York City to L.A. His stars did just that. "I was after the surprising, and the surprising came, but I was still surprised by it, if that makes sense," says the filmmaker. "This would only have worked if my parents surprised me, because there was no precedent in their lives with each other or with me, certainly not as artists, that would give rise to any confidence in me that they would avail themselves to the deepest core of their beings and release that to the story we were telling." Allen and Judy certainly surprise audiences with their candor, lack of vanity, humor, and emotional wealth.

In an interview for the Los Angeles Times, Judy told the reporter, "My feeling was that I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to be on the screen, because it was very personal to me, but I gave in and made a commitment. We were all traveling in a Honda Odyssey, seven of us trapped inside for 37 days, but, though it was hard, it was a great bonding experience. Who gets to spend that much time with their family after they're grown up and without killing each other to boot."

To meet his \$30,000 budget, Andrew shot the film himself on a Panasonic DVX100 24p mini-DV camera and had only one other crew member on the shoot, his sound man, Tommy Hines. Andrew then edited 100 hours of video footage down to 100 minutes. After showing an early version of the film to producer Gary Winick, whose company, InDigEnt, made *Pieces of April*, *Tadpole*, and *Personal Velocity*. Andrew was signed by Winick to direct a second feature. The sophomore film, *Starting Out in the Evening*, is scheduled to begin lensing this summer. Early stages of casting are currently under way, and Andrew is hoping that Paul Newman accepts the lead.

Regardless of how much experience an actor has, Andrew believes that trust is key when directing performers. "Actor or nonactor, you have to welcome your actors into the process," he says. "You have to help them feel that you trust them, that everything is a vital, necessary, and beautiful thing to give. I really wasn't thinking of 'mother,' 'father,' 'nonactor,' 'sisters,' 'actors.' I was really just thinking of their humanity. Everyone has humanity. Half your job as a director is creating an atmosphere where people want to let their innermost truth come forward and to let their humanity serve the process of storytelling, whether it's Paul Newman or Allen Wagner." BSW