

Entertainment

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Quality partners

Glemmer, Pace pair up for miniseries, movies

By Ethel Simmons
staff writer

RONNIE CLEMMER and Bill Pace, two well-known names in Detroit television, are now tackling the Hollywood scene, with some success.

Clemmer, who was a TV-show personality, and Pace, a producer-director, shared the same dream of creating quality productions. Now, as partners and vice presidents in Longbow Productions, they are working on several projects, including a network TV mini-series and a feature film.

They have moved their base of operations to Los Angeles but have a third partner, their financial one, in the Detroit area. He is Southfield entrepreneur Dick Kughn, president of Longbow.

"We're new guys on the block," Clemmer said during a recent visit to the offices of the Observer & Eccentric. Pace arrived later, to join him in the interview, where they discussed how their move to Los Angeles has helped them develop TV and film projects.

THEIR FIRST production is a mini-series they are co-producing with Lorimar (where "Dallas" and "Falconcrest" are produced). The series, which will run in two-hour segments two nights on CBS, is about the 1925 murder trial of Dr. Ossian Sweet, a black doctor in Detroit who was defended by Clarence Darrow.

Not long ago, metropolitan Detroiters had an opportunity to see a drama about this same trial, in an original play presented locally (Arthur Beer did the play at the University of Detroit), but Clemmer said that play was not their inspiration. "We had started research the previous year," he said.

Briefly retelling the story, Clemmer said it's about a 30-year-old black doctor who wanted a nice home on Paradise Valley and moved into a white area. Racial threats led him to ask his brothers and friends to help him defend the house. Weapons were smuggled in, and when whites rushed the house, the blacks opened fire, killing and injuring two of the attackers.

Street and his friends were put on trial for conspiracy to commit murder, and eventually were acquitted. The Sweet trial is known in academic circles and to historians, Clemmer pointed out. A network TV dramatization would bring the elements of this important, emotion-charged case into focus with a wide viewing audience.

"Darrow came out of retirement

to take the case," he said. The famous defense lawyer had just finished the Leopold-Loeb trial and the Scopes Monkey Trial. "Darrow called it the single most important case of his career."

DESCRIBING THE plot implications, Clemmer said, "It's coming to terms on an intimate black and white drama, as well as a large-scale social drama."

"We originally took it to PBS, but they already had a Darrow project. They were doing the life of Darrow." Clemmer and Pace were told by a contact that Lorimar was looking for something special. The partners' project proved to be what Lorimar wanted.

"You're going to hear they're not open to quality drama anymore, they (producers) just want slash and trash," said Clemmer, who is grateful that isn't true.

Getting the project off the ground was difficult. "The real challenge was the writer," Clemmer said. They managed to get Hollywood's Joel Olsansky, "a highly respected writer. Once he was committed, CBS went for the deal."

Clemmer said he and Pace have been in and out of Detroit several times, doing research on the production. Helping them is researcher Susie Levin of Southfield, who was an intern working with Clemmer when he was at the WJBK-TV show "PM Magazine."

"NOW JOEL is writing the script, which will take several months. He will direct and we hope to have a summer shoot," Clemmer said. Some weeks later, Pace said by phone that the script was delayed, due to the Writer's Guild strike.

Part of the mini-series will be shot in New York, but Clemmer said some film has been shot of the historical area — the Garland-Charlevoix area on Detroit's east side — where the racial confrontation occurred.

He wasn't ready to announce the cast. "We have a very good idea who will be portraying the 68-year-old Darrow but we can't say. We also will have a major black TV and movie star to play Sweet."

Clemmer and Pace are still raising money from investors for their feature film "Montana." It's a coming-of-age story, which they plan to shoot by next spring. The film is based on the principals of horseman Ray Hunt. The partners created the storyline, for which Emmy Award-winning TV and feature film writer Kathryn Montgomery will do the script.



Former metro Detroiters Ronnie Clemmer (left) and Bill Pace are vice presidents of Longbow Productions in California. They are working with Lorimar on a miniseries on the murder trial of



Dr. Ossian Sweet, for CBS-TV, and are raising money to produce a feature film called "Montana."

Another Longbow project is "P.J. and the Dragon," a TV movie based on the story of a Detroit family whose son was stricken with leukemia. Detroiters Harvey Ovshinsky has written the script. Ovshinsky also helped develop the Darrow mini-series, writing the original treatment on which the story is based.

SINCE MOVING to California, Clemmer and Pace have had to listen to the gibes of some Detroit critics who wonder if they can contend with the lifestyle of La-La Land. "If you're going to be in the Hollywood game, you have to be out there," Clemmer emphasized. "If you're happy with what you're doing, you're happy no matter where you are."

Every time he is in Detroit, Clemmer visits Detroit Country Day School in Beverly Hills, where he used to teach English, direct drama and coach football. He sees Don

Craig, who is an old friend there, as well as other teachers and students.

"I came back for a 10th reunion for the class of '77 — a lot of kids who were especially close to me," Clemmer said.

Bill Pace, a native Detroit (Clemmer is from Texas), said that in putting together the TV miniseries on the Sweet trial, "We are trying to stick as factually as we can, trying to uncover 1925 Detroit. We're checking transcripts and factual information, to find out what was going on in the city at that time." Records in the Detroit Police Department and the Detroit Public Library have been helpful.

"There's so much conflicting testimony," Pace said. They got clearance to go over the police reports. A library in Chicago has microfilm, and the NAACP's newsletter is a source. "We've literally crosschecked the country to put together the trial's transcripts," he

said. "It's just an exhaustive process."

One of the surprises of research emerged when they talked to an 80-year-old man who was a friend of Sweet's. He had been at a meeting when Sweet and other friends got together to talk about defending the house, but he was out of town when the shootout took place.

During Pace's years as a producer and director in Detroit, he worked at TV studios "on the cutting edge," at various times for four different TV stations: 7, 2, 4 and 58. "It was good training ground," he said. Pace originated "LateNight America" at Channel 58.

HIS BACKGROUND didn't significantly alter the toughness of breaking into the L.A. market, however. "A lot of people knew me from 'LateNight America,'" he said. "It was carried on the network in Los Angeles, but it gave us no real edge. We

started from scratch and had to learn every rung of the ladder." Quality productions is the partners' forte. "It doesn't mean high-brow, artistic. The program has to have substance, something to say, not be trivial," Pace said.

The move to Los Angeles in 1986 is finally beginning to bear fruit. It may look easy, the partners declare, but it's hard work, not lucky breaks, that is paying off.

Said Clemmer, "If we both get passionate, we try to make the project happen."

Pace: "Our interests are similar." Clemmer: "And values. We do it all together."

Pace: "It's a partnership in the truest sense of the word. I would not have survived this long in this grueling process without Ronnie as a partner."

What makes it especially rough is that "so many people say, 'No,'" Pace said.

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