

On the Making of *Canvas*

by Joseph Greco, Writer and Director of *Canvas* and Member, NAMI Los Angeles



In May 2001, I ran into film director James Cameron in Mexico while attending the grand opening of Fox's movie theme park centered around the giant water tank he had built to re-create the *Titanic's* fateful voyage.

"Hey Joe," Jim said to me, smiling. I was one of Jim Cameron's three assistants during the making of *Titanic*. I was the gopher: I would go-for his coffee, go-for his scripts and go-for his cat when it was sick at the vet. Very

glamorous. I learned a lot and after *Titanic* was released, I left to pursue my own filmmaking career.

"How's that little boat movie of yours coming along?"

"Going well," I answered, forcing a smile.

Jim's 200-million dollar boat movie had grossed more than a billion dollars and I was still struggling to get money to finance *Canvas*.

"Well, don't give up."

Jim bade me farewell and I watched him board a private helicopter and fly away over the awestruck crowd while I made my way back to my beat up Honda Civic.

It often takes years for a movie to get produced. And *Canvas* was no exception. The journey began while I was an undergraduate at Florida State University's film school. My screen-writing professor, Claudia Johnson, encouraged me to use life experience as the inspiration for stories. "Write



what you know.” It is cliché, but true. “Write what you care about.”

I cared about mental illness. I grew up watching my mother struggle with schizophrenia and those harrowing memories had a profound impact on me. There was a time when I couldn't even speak about my mother's plight without hyperventilating. One day, while I was listening to my British astronomy professor drone on about black holes and supernovas, my heart started racing, and I couldn't breathe. I ran out of the lecture hall to my dorm room and called home. My mother answered the phone and I just broke down crying.

It wasn't until after I graduated from college and arrived in Los Angeles, 3,000 miles from home, that I finally had the courage to write about my mother and our family's struggle with mental illness. I had to get it out. I would come home after a full day working for Jim Cameron, sit down in front of the computer, and write until 2:00 am. The words came quickly. And so did the tears. Each morning, I felt lighter, and more at peace than the day before. Two months later, I had a very rough manuscript.

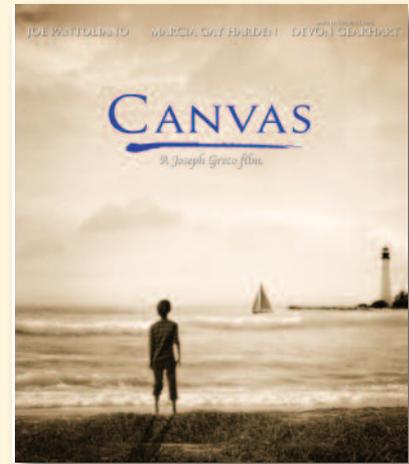
Meanwhile, my short film *Lena's Spaghetti* had recently premiered at the

About *Canvas*

At the NAMI national convention held in Washington, D.C., in June, attendees were treated to a private screening of a new film, *Canvas*, by writer-director Joseph Greco. Starring Marcia Gay Harden (winner, Academy Award, *Pollock*) and Joe Pantoliano (winner, Emmy Award, *The Sopranos*) as well as introducing the young actor Devon Gearhart, the film depicts a family coping with mental illness.

Preferring that viewers be able to enjoy and judge the film on its own merits upon first seeing it, Mr. Greco introduced himself only briefly to the convention audience before the screening, then engaged in lively question-and-answer afterward about the film's story and his personal connections to it.

So that *Advocate* readers could enjoy a similar experience of *Canvas* whenever they had the chance to see it, I asked Mr. Greco to write a brief essay in which he might tell us, not so much about its plot, but about how he came to make *Canvas*, and



to supply a few still photos from the movie as well. This article is the result.

Mr. Greco, who has been a member of NAMI since before the production of this film, asks to extend his thanks to NAMI for its assistance. *Canvas* has its world premiere at the renowned Hamptons International Film Festival in New York, October 18-22, 2006. While further details are not available at the time of the *Advocate's* going to press, the film is planned for distribution in the near future.

— David Todd, Editor





Telluride Film Festival and people wanted to know what I was going to do next. I needed a feature. I read a lot of scripts, but nothing spoke to me. I remembered the seminal films I saw in college; Francois Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, Oliver Stone's *Platoon*, Louis Malle's *Au Revoir Les Enfants*, and Barry Levinson's *Diner*. All of those films were drawn from the filmmaker's own life. I took my manuscript out of the drawer and flipped through the pages. It was maudlin and incoherent. I had no desire to write an autobiographical novel, publish my memoirs, or even make a movie about my life. And yet I

still felt compelled to write a story about a family struggling with mental illness.

I decided to start from scratch and just tell the truth—the emotional truth. I was no longer concerned with adhering to the facts of my own life. I wanted to make a film about mental illness that was not only true to my experience, but also universal. Not everyone grows up with a parent suffering from schizophrenia. But everyone knows what it's like to be embarrassed, angry and frustrated by a family member. This was an epiphany for me as a writer. For the theme, I looked to one happy memory from my childhood for inspiration—sailing with my dad. While my mother was in the state hospital, my father took me out on his sailboat. Mom never came sailing with us, but we always hoped she would. That hope was my story. I decided that a sailboat could be a simple yet powerful metaphor.

Even after the screenplay was written, it took years to get *Canvas* produced. It was extremely frustrating, but I am grateful for the long gestation period. With each rewrite came an





opportunity to make it better. An opportunity to imagine something new. It also allowed plenty of time to get ready. For the mother's paintings that appear in the film, I enlisted the artists at Nine Muses in South Florida. I wanted the art work in the film to be beautiful, but I wanted it to be real. All of the paintings featured in *Canvas* are painted by people with mental illness. When it came time to finally make the film, Joe Pantoliano and Marcia Gay Harden brought their own ideas to the table. They encouraged me to hone the material further, and that collaboration continued through production.

Joe Pantoliano said to me once that, metaphorically speaking, "We either become our parents, marry our parents, or kill our parents." Looking back, I think that is why I decided to write a screenplay about a family struggling with mental illness. I needed to sublimate my harrowing experience into something useful. Make lemonade out of lemons, as they say. Ultimately, I think that is what each of the three main characters in *Canvas* does. That is all we can do in this life, when we are faced with insoluble problems.

I shot *Canvas* in Hollywood, Florida where I grew up. On October 24, 2005, during our third week of shooting, we were hit by Hurricane Wilma. There was no gas, no power, and we were running out of money. It almost shut us down. I decided to embrace these limitations and, together with my incredible producers, cast, and crew, we persevered. Hollywood, Florida had not suffered a direct hit by a Hurricane in over forty years. My mother's presence was felt even then, as the hurricane hit on her birthday.

When *Canvas* was finished, I called Jim Cameron and told him the good news. My little boat movie was finally finished. With hearty congratulations, he signed my application to join the Directors Guild of America. I had made my first feature and I was officially a director.

But that was not the best part. What gives me the greatest joy is seeing *Canvas* touch so many people and maybe even help some to heal. And that, after all, is what any artist hopes to accomplish. 🌀

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