

Allen hopes O'Brien connection boost to his film

By WAYNE ENGLE
Courier Staff Writer

"Don't rest on your laurels" is an old saying Chris Allen believes in wholeheartedly.

So the young Madison man is working hard toward producing his second made-in-Jefferson County feature film.

Allen created the story for "The Living Years" and started in the movie a couple of years ago. Seeing that as only the first step in a film production career, he is now seeking financing for "In My Life...", a fictitious tale based in this county.

The new Hoosier-oriented story was written by Allen and tells a story spanning 60 years in the life of James Trumper, a farmer and military veteran from southern Indiana, and his family. The Trumper story involves a mysterious exchange of souls between a young gang member and an aging farmer, and the events stemming from that exchange.

Allen already has recruited a cast of local residents and filmed a "trailer" for "In My Life..." In movie terms, a "trailer" is a collec-

tion of scenes taken from various parts of a dramatic picture. The average moviegoer might call it a preview.

So far, Allen has been able to raise enough financing for the trailer only. But he's seeking a producer to make it possible to film the entire movie.

And while on a recent trip to Hollywood for that purpose, he may have taken a big step in the right direction when he obtained a verbal commitment from former child actress and Academy Award winner Margaret O'Brien to appear in the film.

O'Brien earned a special Academy Award when she was 10 years old as the Most Outstanding Child Actress of 1944. She received the special Oscar for her portrayal of Tootie in the M-G-M movie "Meet Me In St. Louis."

The two met at a reception held after a charity event where singer and actress Liza Minnelli performed, Allen said.

Allen had arranged to meet with

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A star, then and now

Chris Allen of Madison is shown above with former Hollywood child star Margaret O'Brien, right; and actress Theresa Soldana. At right, O'Brien is shown at age 10 with screen immortal Judy Garland.



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actor Randal Malone, who appears in the MTV show "Singled Out." Malone is a friend of John Ross, who in turn is a friend of Allen's and who contacted Malone about the Madison man's quest.

And Malone is a close friend of O'Brien's.

"He introduced me to Margaret and Theresa Sokkara (another actress)," said Allen. "Of course, I already knew who they were."

Allen said he tried to be "as humble and charming as I could" to the two actresses, who he described as "nice — very nice. They didn't have to give me their time at all. But I was able to get a few laughs out of them, and that cracked the ice."

Allen said he had a copy of the trailer for "In My Life..." with him. Malone told O'Brien and Soldana about it, and also told them he really liked the Hoosier's concept.

"Then he turned to me and said, 'Chris, tell them all about it!' I was like, 'Duuuuh!'" Allen said, laughing at the memory. "I was a little flabbergasted — my jaw dropped, like in those old Warner Brothers cartoons. But then I started telling them about the story."

He said the "hook," or feature that grabbed their interest, was the fact that the story tells of 60 years of a man's life, seen through the eyes of a street hoodlum. "It just changes him totally," Allen said.

"They liked it! They said, 'Original! Original!'" he exclaimed. "Margaret O'Brien had that little gleam in her eye. She said, 'Very interesting!'"

The discussion of his planned movie led to a discussion of "Meet Me In St. Louis." The director of that movie was Vincente Minnelli, and during filming he began dating the female lead, Judy Garland. They were later married, and in 1946, their daughter Liza was born.

Twelve years later Minnelli was the director for a movie filmed on location in a small Midwestern town.

"I told Miss O'Brien about Mr. Minnelli directing "Some Came Running" in Madison," said Allen. "She remembered that."

At the end of their conversation, Allen told O'Brien, "Maybe when I get the movie going I can ask you to play a cameo part in it."

He said she smiled and replied, "I'd really like that; it sounds very interesting."

Allen said Malone told him he liked the trailer for "In My Life..." very much, but suggested that it might be wise to consider it for a made-for-TV movie rather than a theater feature.

"It's kind of hard for a gentle family love story to compete with all the giant special effects they have today in features," Allen acknowledged.

Allen had one more memorable meeting during his evening at the

Rodeo Hilton Hotel that evening. He chatted with actress Alicia Silverstone, currently co-starring in "Batman and Robin."

"I told her I was going to 'pitch' my movie to potential backers," he recalled. "She said, 'Well, pitches are important. Good luck!'"

Allen made other contacts while showing his trailer in Hollywood.

"They were amazed at the natural scenery here in southern Indiana, and the vintage cars," he said. Allen arranged to borrow a number of cars from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s for the filming of the trailer.

"They said that was the biggest plus," he went on. "They advised me to go back to where I came from, hype the movie as starring Margaret O'Brien, and plan to film it here in Indiana because of the scenery and because production costs will be less here."

Randal Malone told him one of the cable TV venues would probably be the best place to look for financing.

"I'm still mind-boggled by the whole thing," said Allen, grinning and shaking his head. "That in a little social meeting I could convince someone of my total sincerity. Everyone's said it's a story that can reach so many people on a personal level. The possibility of having a big star in the movie might bring the old film nostalgia back to this area."

So Allen continues busily seeking his producer.

And what if this big break doesn't pan out? What if Margaret O'Brien changes her mind about wanting to appear in the movie?

Allen grinned again and shrugged his shoulders.

"I spent the last week writing her into the movie," he said. "If it doesn't work out, I can write her out again. It won't deter me."

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