

Gumption and luck make stars out of West Marin twins



Logan and Noah Miller of West Marin play themselves in the film "Touching Home" along with Ed Harris, who plays their father. Photo courtesy of the Miller brothers.

by **Jacoba Charles**

In the hush of the high-ceilinged Kabuki Theater, the film "Touching Home" rolled before a sold-out audience at the 2008 San Francisco International Film Festival last week.

At the back of the theater, two identical young men in suits sat on the floor and watched the struggles of their early 20s play out on the screen.

After being inches away from playing professional baseball, Logan and Noah Miller landed back home in Nicasio. They tested their bond as brothers and their commitment to their dreams, while coping with their alcoholic, homeless and loving father.

Logan and Noah, twins from West Marin, had no background in making movies when they decided to write, direct, produce and act in "Touching Home." What they did have was perseverance learned from years of being athletes, hope, and 17 credit cards.

After two years of gumption and luck, the pair had recruited actors Ed Harris, Brad Dourif and Robert Forster; secured a Panavision New Filmmaker grant, which gave them access to professional

cameras and discounted film; hired a film crew; and learned how to act.

"Many, many people told us we were insane, but we've always loved the people who'd say, 'Why not? You never know,'" said Noah and Logan, who complete each other's sentences, tossing them back and forth between them like a baseball.

Early years, and baseball

The brothers started life fighting, they said. Born six weeks premature and weighing three pounds each, Logan had a hole in his heart and Noah's appendix ruptured. Several surgeries later, the boys grew up tough, athletic and prepared to take on unfavorable odds.

They spent their early years in Lagunitas, gradually moving east through Forest Knolls and landing in Fairfax, where they lived with their mom as they attended Manor School and then Sir Francis Drake High.

West Marin remained their stomping grounds. They fished, hiked, and spent weekends with their father, who lived in a trailer in the San Geronimo Valley. In the summer they would pull crowds out of Lagunitas creek, and they played baseball on every field in the area, they said – guaranteed.

"I don't even remember the first time

that we played catch," Noah said. "I mean, there were two of us; it was just something we always did."

They do remember one of the first places they played, though: an old horse pasture on Tamal Road, which has since been built over with houses.

In addition to playing, the boys started working early on. Their father became homeless when the boys were teenagers – but he held down a job as a roofer and construction worker even when he was living in his pickup.

"We started going to jobs with our pops when we were really young," they said, "We would clean up shingles that fell off the roof, and used to sell them in front of the Cala Market in Fairfax."

Versed in manual labor, the boys pinned their future on baseball. They were good, and when they graduated from Sir Francis Drake High, they were drafted into the minor leagues. Close enough to taste the big leagues, the two worked hard despite the challenges.

Eventually, Logan played with the Blue Jays; Noah played college ball for Southern Arkansas. But at age 24 the two had become old men by baseball standards, and they landed back home with a resume that included nailing shingles,

digging ditches, and not much else.

So they decided to make a movie.

Changing careers

The idea hit them when they visited a friend in Los Angeles, the twins said. They call it their epiphonic summit.

"When you're there, the allure of the movie industry is..." Logan said, and Noah finished with, "...palpable."

Making a movie about their lives, and their father, seemed like a crazy but possible dream. Friends and strangers had always been fascinated with their life story: their father who was homeless but went to work every day; their charisma as twins who did everything together.

They bought a book on screenwriting and finished a draft of the screenplay on cheap spiral-bound notebooks within a month. It was terrible, they said, and though they wrote 11 different scripts they never put any serious effort into turning the drafts into drama.

Then, on January 5, 2006, their father died in Marin County jail. His loss, and the undignified way that his body was treated, filled them with a sense of helplessness and anger that needed an outlet. Turning their screenplay into a film became a way to heal, and they threw all of their energy

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and determination into the project.

“We said, ‘We have to at least try to do something positive with that guilt and pain,’” said Noah. “We bought a whole bunch of books on movie production.”

Less than two months later, the two had been awarded the New Filmmaker grant. Two months after that, they took their movie trailer to the San Francisco International Film Festival on a laptop, with the idea of finding some way – any way – to show it to Ed Harris.

“He was the only guy to play our dad,” Logan said. “He looks just like him.”

After failing to intercept Harris on the way into the theater, and after failing to get a microphone during his Q & A, Noah simply tried to walk backstage, with Logan on his heels. Though they were stopped, an employee passed on their request for a few minutes of Harris’ time, and they wound up showing the actor their trailer in an alley while he smoked a cigarette.

He took their script and their phone number; he read it and liked it; the rest is history.

Everything about the creation of *Touching Home* is improbable. The twins first



“*Touching Home*” was filmed primarily in West Marin. The Miller brothers wrote, directed, produced and starred in the movie.

funded the filming of a trailer on credit cards; then they recruited a major star, who thought they had funding; then they found the funding –and they still had to direct, star in and produce the movie.

And the film that eventually appeared in the Kabuki is a polished, tender film that may be, more than anything, an ode to West Marin.

“Touching Home”

The Miller brothers’ film is an emotional, allegorical version of their life. Facts are

blurred and mythologized into what becomes, for the viewer, a greater truth.

Maybe the grandmother in the film was a great-grandmother in real life; maybe they worked with their father as roofers instead of at the Lunny quarry. But for the viewer, that doesn’t matter – and the twins were perceptive enough to know that.

The movie gets rolling when both Noah and Logan return home, temporarily spit out by the world of baseball.

On the long drive to California they

had assured each other they would play ball again as soon as they regrouped; but failure, romance and working alongside their alcoholic dad strained their commitment to baseball and their relationship to each other.

While the plot of the movie focuses on the boys struggle to return to baseball, the emotional meat lies in its subtle exploration of the complexities of the illness that is alcoholism, and the many ways that a goodhearted man can fail himself and his sons.

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rary environmental standards.”

The landfill, which has been in operation since 1958, has been working to update their permit for ten years, said Jessica Jones, the district manager for the landfill. It is the major site of waste disposal for Marin County and also receives household and commercial waste from throughout the region.

The planning commission and the landfill have agreed that the permit should be based on the FEIR’s mitigated alternative, rather than the originally proposed projects.

The new permit would include a 6-million-cubic-yard expansion of the dump’s capacity, bringing the total to 25 million cubic yards of material. “In terms of years, the landfill will be able to remain open until 2024 instead of 2017 under the mitigated alternative,” Jones said.

Under the new permit, methane produced by the dump will be converted to electricity. The dump could continuously produce five megawatts, Jones said – 2 percent of Marin County’s energy demand, or enough to power up to 5,000 houses.

Other changes would include an easily accessible public recycling area near the scale houses; a materials recovery facility where up to 400 tons of construction materials can be recycled daily; a buyback

area for reusable construction materials; and expanding compost sales to include private as well as wholesale customers. The existing green waste and concrete recycling areas, currently allowed under an interim permit, will be added.

The dump’s daily intake limit of 1,290 tons of garbage would not change, Jones said.

Environmental concerns

The dump lies nestled in a curve of San Antonio creek, where it flows into the Petaluma River just north of Novato. The marshy floodplain formed by the two rivers was diked and drained by farmers in the early part of the century, said Jones.

“Baylands were thought of as worthless land in the fifties,” she added. “The site was diked up, and then the owners determined that a beneficial use of diked up baylands was a landfill.”

Today, the dump is a flat, dusty mesa rising 70 feet above the marsh. Heavy equipment arranges garbage into new, smaller plateaus that are covered in a dirt shell. Spread out in a seemingly random pattern, they look like layers in a modern-art layer cake.

The arrangement of the plateaus is actually part of a careful plan to ensure maximum stability of the dump, which will someday reach a maximum height of 166 feet above the marsh, Jones said.

The riverside location of the facility has caused a great deal of concern. “I’ve been uncomfortable all along that we have a land-

fill in a terrible location,” said Commissioner Peter Theran during Monday’s hearing.

“What is a good place for a landfill,” wondered Jones. “All sites have their advantages and disadvantages.”

Concerns about the Redwood Landfill center on its proximity to the marsh, and the fact that it is constructed on fill material.

Among other environmental concerns are the ability of the operation to withstand an earthquake; the impact of increased leachate production; effects on wildlife; and the impact of increased greenhouse gas production.

“In this day and age when we should be restoring wetlands and reducing greenhouse gasses, we have a proposal that will do the opposite,” said Fred Smith, director of the Environmental Action Committee of West Marin, during the hearing.

However, during the last two weeks of public hearings, many of the major concerns with the FEIR have been addressed, said Nona Dennis, president of the Marin Conservation League. Many minor changes and clarifications have been made by planning commission staff.

More major changes include two studies – one on greenhouse gas emissions and one on long term flood protection – that will now be done prior to approval of a permit, instead of after. There are also going to be more specific standards for leachate management, Dennis said.

Other changes include assurances of financial means to appropriately manage the landfill after it closes, and that there will be third party monitoring of the landfill.

In the hearing on Monday, the planning commission also discussed the possibility of allowing the landfill to increase capacity only as long as it remains in compliance with the requirements of their permit, when they receive one.

Looking to the future

Many of the details worrying environmentalists and neighbors are not actually considered under the purview environmental review process, said Dennis. Once the FEIR is approved and the actual permit is being considered, more detailed concerns can be addressed.

“Our feeling is that that the environmental impacts have been fairly exhaustively examined,” Dennis said. “The landfill is operating in a way that needs serious improvements, and those aren’t going to happen until they get into the permit process.”

Before the permit is finally approved, the FEIR must be certified by the Solid Waste Local Enforcement Agency, Hinds said. After a series of public workshops and hearings, the LEA will decide whether to revise, approve or not approve the permit.

Permits from the Regional Water Quality Control Board and the Bay Area Air Quality Management District will also be needed, said Jones.

“We anticipate getting a new permit by September, but it could be longer, she said. “But after ten years, six more months seems like nothing.”