

Man in Motion Picture

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BEIJING - It's taken 10 years, multiple scripts and two movie companies for Vancouver filmmaker Michael French to tell his story about the crucial moments when Rick Hansen's Man in Motion tour turned into an international sensation.

Along the way, he turned down a Hollywood script he says would have turned his movie, *Heart of a Dragon*, into a sure-fire moneymaker, but would have destroyed Hansen and his family in the process.



CREDIT:

Scene from *Heart of the Dragon*.

Instead, French, who was with Hansen on the day he assaulted the Great Wall of China, brought the script back to Canada and spent a decade polishing it, finding the money, and eventually shooting it in China.

Now, French and his partners, including executive producer Mark Gordon, are preparing to release the film this fall.

But before doing so, they felt they had to pay homage to China.

French, Gordon and their Chinese partners arranged the screening as a toast to the 2008 Paralympics, which in their own right are one of the legacies of China's move towards more accessibility and better treatment for people with disabilities.

"We knew this was the right place to show this film for the first time to an English-speaking audience," French said in an interview from Vancouver. "The Paralympics in China have so much symbolism that we knew we had to show it here first."

So earlier this week they sent the film, with a new adaptation of David Foster's hit song *St. Elmo's Fire*, to the BC-Canada Pavilion.

And sitting in the front row was Tim Frick, Hansen's former coach, partner on the Man in Motion tour and now coach of the Canadian women's

wheelchair basketball team.

The film been screened once earlier this year at the Shanghai Film Festival, and once a month ago in Beijing for a Chinese audience at the request of the Chinese government.

The film isn't a documentary of Hansen's tour. Instead, it could be best described as an adaptation, based on the true story and it takes a few liberties, or what French agrees is literary licence.

The movie is written around a few days in the tour when Hansen was preparing to climb the Great Wall as part of a 40,000-kilometre round-the-world tour to raise money for spinal chord research and to raise awareness of people with disabilities.

It was a time of great difficulty for Hansen and his entourage. Tempers were frayed and some supporters, like Frick, had left the tour. The tour had also not really coalesced yet into the international sensation it eventually became.

But the Wall, and Hansen's scaling of it are wholly symbolic of what happened. A stone barrier meant to be impenetrable, the Wall is where Hansen, deeply determined to wheel himself around the world under his own power, was finally confronted with his own limitations. It is the only time on the tour that Hansen ever allowed anyone to lift him up stairs.

And in doing so, he discovered that his tour was as much his team's as it was his.

That's the premise French also sought to capture in Heart of a Dragon.

But the film was nearly scrapped over literary differences of opinion.

French said Sherry Lansing, the former CEO of Paramount Pictures and a friend of his, saw a trailer of a documentary he did on Hansen years ago, and hired both him and Gordon to produce the film.

But Paramount's scriptwriters wanted a film that French said was wholly wrong.

"It was brutal. It was Fatal Attraction Take 2," he said. "It's just that while it was a great dramatic telling of someone who was disabled, it was also a story that would have just torn Rick Hansen's heart out and his family's heart and anyone else he ever knew."

French said Paramount proposed a budget of \$75 million.

"While it was great dramatically, it was very untrue and it was a very old way to look at disability," he said.

"The only way Sherry Lansing thought a studio could make this movie was to deal with some enormously dark parts of a person's life and we just thought that if you go to those dark places and you focus on those dark places, then you are really reinforcing some very old stereotypical ideas

about disability. And that was the opposite of who Rick was."

French and Gordon convinced Lansing to let them take the script back to Canada. French said he's still friends with Lansing.

Eventually the pair, along with several other investors, made the film for about \$8 million. They also courted actors who accepted the argument that this was a film to be made to enhance careers, rather than to make money. Foster, who has long supported French's efforts, recorded a new version of St. Elmo's Fire, which was adopted by Hansen's Man in Motion tour.

If the film breaks even the first \$1 million in profit goes to the Rick Hansen Foundation, French said.

The title character is played by Canadian Victor Webster, and Sarah-Jane Potts plays Amanda Reid, Hansen's physiotherapist (and eventual wife). Andrew Lee Potts plays Don Calder, Hansen's best friend, who was with him on the day he was paralyzed in an accident near Williams Lake when he was 15. Yu Na is MayLee, the Chinese translator who tries to explain to a cynical reporter (Jim Byrnes) why Hansen is a hero in China.

Frick said after the screening he was touched by the way French captured the events on the Wall. He said it's not exactly true to what happened - some of events took place elsewhere - but he thought it was still a remarkable film.

Hansen, in an interview from Vancouver, said he's seen earlier versions and felt French understood what happened to him that day on the Wall.

"From that perspective, it was a pivotal point for the entire tour, it was the pivotal point in terms of team dynamics and in terms of a nation getting what I was doing and also responding," he said.

"The symbolism of that, and the struggle on the wall became a reflection back to other countries, including Canada, that helped define the final stage of our tour."

He appreciated that French refused to compromise in making the film, even though he combined some events.

"I am absolutely thrilled for Michael. He was so determined, and like the tour itself he struggled through many incredible challenges to tell his story and to be shared with people around the world," Hansen said.

"I have nothing but respect for him for what he is trying to do, and for trying to protect the integrity of the story and make sure that it was largely based on true events as opposed to being so far off that it wouldn't resemble anything that might have been true."

French said Gordon is screening the film to distributors this fall and hopes to have in theatres shortly.

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