

January 31, 2008

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Mike McNamara's Biggest Role Yet: How a Struggling Actor with an Eye Toward Hollywood Became a Champion of Midwestern Independent Film

Early in his career Mike McNamara took all kinds of jobs to make ends meet: waiting tables, telemarketing, testing people through the night for sleep apnea. It wasn't till he bumped into one of his acting coaches, Steve Scott of the Goodman Theatre, during a gig at the 1999 Taste of Chicago that he decided he'd have to be more selective. "I was dressed up in a pink costume, handing out Pepto-Bismol," he says. "I was so embarrassed."

These days McNamara, who's 32, gets steady work as an actor—he recently shot a TNT pilot, *Leverage*, starring Timothy Hutton—and pursues outside projects that match his interests. He writes columns on home buying and local film productions for the trade mags *PerformInk* and *Screen Magazine*. He cohosts *Mac and Slater*, an in-your-face politics-to-pop-culture show on the local, Net-based *Fearless Radio*. And on the first Tuesday of every month except January, he hosts the Midwest Independent Film Festival, a monthly screening of regional films at Landmark's Century Centre.

The series, which McNamara cofounded and curates, launches its fourth season February 5 with the premiere of *Osso Bucco*, starring character actor Mike Starr as a mobster enjoying one last meal in Chicago before a potentially fatal mission and Illeana Douglas, the waitress for whom he carries a torch. Directors Gary Taylor and Fred Blurton, both local advertising vets, and most of the cast will join McNamara at the screening and the cocktail receptions before and after. "We party it up. We make a night of it," says McNamara. "I'd put our Tuesday nights on par with anybody else's plans for Friday night."

McNamara is a slick, affable host. He honed his skills in his two years emceeing the national *Coors Light Maxim Girls Search*. "I get frustrated when I see some of these other film festivals," he says. "They think because they're indie they don't have to worry about dressing themselves. If they're leading a Q and A, they think they have to be somber and morose. If you're doing something that you want other people to care about, you've got to give it some personality."

McNamara, who lives in River West now, grew up on the northwest side and went to high school in West Lafayette, Indiana. He enrolled at Indiana University in 1993 as a biology major with an eye toward med school. But as a sophomore he was drawn to the

John Waldron Arts Center in Bloomington, where he tried out for a play. “I’d always wanted to try acting—I was good at public speaking and had an outgoing personality,” he says. He landed the lead in an adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe’s *Some Words With a Mummy*. “I got a nice write-up in the local paper and thought I was really good.” But when he followed up with a part in *A Christmas Carol*, “I found out that I wasn’t at all. I thought it was more a recital than actually living on stage.”

Still, McNamara kept at it. After graduating in 1997 he decided to give himself time to get the acting bug out of his system. “I thought I’d go back to Chicago for six months, get my ass kicked doing theater, and be ready for med school,” he says. His first part was an ensemble role in a tiny local production in the basement of the Chopin Theatre: “I had three lines and I tackled a guy.” But soon he was landing bigger roles and med school faded into the distance. Feedback was good, but getting by was a struggle. After his Pepto-Bismol moment with Steve Scott, McNamara turned a corner. Through an internship with O’Connor Casting in 1999 he made connections that he used to get agency representation. Soon he was hosting promotional tours and appearing in corporate videos and commercials—“for phone companies and the lottery, things like that.” In 2000 he got a small part in the last episode of the CBS drama *Early Edition*.

Eager to break into film, McNamara began turning up at Chicago Community Cinema, a monthly showcase and networking event organized by independent filmmakers Mark Battaglia and Mike Kwielord at the River North nightclub Excalibur. “Film was so foreign to me,” McNamara says. “I was impressed and thrilled to be hanging out with all these filmmakers, people actually getting things done in Chicago.”

McNamara started talking up the event to friends and fellow actors and then writing press releases and promoting it to local radio stations. Soon he was announcing movies from backstage “to smooth out the transitions between the films.” Eventually he was made the evening’s emcee.

When Battaglia moved to Los Angeles in 2003, Kwielord invited McNamara to take his place. McNamara reluctantly agreed. In the two years he’d been involved with CCC, he’d snagged lead roles in indies like *Turning the Corner* and *The Evil One* and small parts in bigger movies like *Barbershop 2*, in which he played a yuppie scandalized by Cedric the Entertainer on the el. “I was supposed to be in and out in an hour or two,” McNamara says of the shoot. “But Cedric kept riffing and improvising. Eight hours later we had crafted this five-minute scene. That’s the work I’m most proud of on film—and I was equally crushed when they cut 80 percent of it.”

Fellow cast member Michael Ealy invited McNamara to Los Angeles to meet his agent, but acting jobs and personal commitments kept him at home. “I missed that opportunity to jump-start things in LA. When that passed, I changed my focus, to see if I could create a foundation for myself here in Chicago.”

By mid-2004, Chicago Community Cinema “had started to stagnate,” McNamara says, “because at the end of the day you’re stuck at a touristy nightclub that no artist ever goes to except for this event.” He proposed to Kwielord that they reinvent CCC, move to a

proper venue, and screen films made from throughout the midwest or by filmmakers with midwestern roots. "I told him it was that or nothing for me," McNamara says.

The Midwest Independent Film Festival launched in May 2005 at the Landmark with a short program featuring Sugar Mountain by Buffalo Grove native Aaron Himmelstein, the actor who plays the young Austin Powers in Goldmember. Kwieford had a connection with the Himmelstein family and one of Aaron's shorts, The Blue Bowl, had screened at a CCC event.

McNamara and Kwieford steadily built their audience, giving away tickets, networking at other film events, and clamoring for media attention. In the festival's early days, they'd fill only half the theater's 270 seats; now crowds are overflowing. There's talk of expanding to two or three of the Landmark's theaters to accommodate the growth.

The series alternates between short film showcases and feature films, many of them local or world premieres. It gets more than 100 submissions a year, but the majority of what's screened McNamara has sought out himself. He was just in Park City at Sundance and Slamdance to promote the festival and scout more films.

McNamara puts in about 100 hours a month on MIFF but, like everyone else, he's a volunteer. He'd like to raise the budget to pay himself and a few other staffers, but either way he's in for the long haul. "I'm doing my best to take real good care of our baby," he says. "I'm already thinking about films for 2009. I'm actually thinking about one or two films for 2010."