

SONOMA TRIBUNE

“WAITING FOR RONALD” - ARTICLE:

WORRIED ACTORS TURN NERVES INTO AWARDS AND FRIENDSHIP Unique Bond Formed Between Two Stars After Concerns Evaporate

It's not unusual for actors to be nervous for an audition. It happens all the time. But the audition for *Waiting for Ronald*, an award-winning and moving film about two developmentally disabled friends, was not the usual audition. It wasn't just about getting the role. There were far bigger concerns for two very different actors.

Michael Luckerman, who auditioned for the co-starring role of Edgar in the film, is not developmentally disabled and was worried about being believable -- not only for the audience but for the primarily developmentally disabled cast. "I didn't want to offend anyone. I also didn't want it to be obvious that I was the only one of Ronald's friends who was acting disabled and wasn't disabled in real life," Michael confesses.

On the other side of the casting session, Jody Clark, the developmentally disabled actor who brings life to the title character, had worries of his own. Although he was used to working on a number of film sets as an extra, Jody had never acted before. "I always thought that actors were better than I was," he explains. He worried if he would be up to this very special challenge.

Writer, producer and director, Ellen Gerstein, wasn't worried about either of them, however, and cast Jody and Michael as the film's unique pair of friends. It was a courageous and risky decision -- one that would later result in professional and personal triumphs for all concerned.

While the cast prepared for the filming of *Waiting for Ronald* to begin, Gerstein encouraged each of her actors to spend time together and develop a true relationship, not just one for the screen. Jody and Michael learned that they shared many interests. "Right off the bat I knew that we had a lot in common because I love dogs and he does, too. He fitted right in," says Jody. "We had a lot of fun going places like the mall, walking our dogs together and spending time at each others' houses."

For Michael, as he and Jody got to know each other, he realized that his goal for the project was evolving. "I believe I was expecting to work with someone who may or may not be able to react and respond to what I was doing in the scene, which would leave me pretty much on my own to do what I had rehearsed. Instead, I now had to try and bring in what I had rehearsed, but also be flexible enough to react to someone who was capable of great emotions, insight, and acting chops." Michael concludes, "The process shifted from maintaining a believable character with a developmental handicap to creating a character that Jody would believe as a challenged person, so as not to insult his own disabilities."

Throughout filming, Jody and Michael continued to learn from each other. "Jody was kind and emotionally available. He made my job so much easier," Michael states. "I'm grateful for his encouragement and patience throughout the film."

In a show of mutual admiration, Jody remains one of Michael's biggest fans. "Michael Luckerman is a wonderful person." And commenting about their chosen careers as actors, Jody shares that "although he's normal and I'm disabled, he taught me that we were just the same. I found out that he had problems, too."

What began as a most unusual audition for two nervous actors resulted in an Audience Choice Award and a Best Actor nomination for Jody Clark at the Method Fest Film Festival. Above all, *Waiting for Ronald* became a celebration of friendship, courage and new beginnings, on and off the set.