

The Making of 'Maggie': A NASA Worker, A Hollywood Assistant & Arnold

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The road to bringing the [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#), Abigail Breslin movie [Maggie](#) to the screen was a tortured, yet persistent five-year push that involved a NASA worker, a first-time director, the backwoods of Louisiana, some interesting local characters and an art department budget of only \$8,000. At one point, the filmmakers' production equipment was almost repossessed as they struggled to get the budget in place all the while as locals were showing up expecting a part in the film. Even the DP fell off and they had to replace him. Twice. In only five weeks — the total length of the shoot.

The film finally made it as *Maggie* bows this weekend in limited release from Lionsgate's Roadside Films, marking the feature film directorial debut of [Henry Hobson](#), the brilliant designer-director behind those highly creative category introductions at this year's Oscars. It also marks a decided turn for Schwarzenegger in a dramatic role as a father who is about to lose his daughter who has been infected with a virus that would eventually turn her into one of the walking dead. The actor is receiving critical praise for the role, as is Hobson for directing.

The challenges to get the picture made were huge and the result is surprising given the behind-the-scenes mishmash.

First off, five years ago a film with a zombie backstory was more of a novelty. Not so anymore with the success of *The Walking Dead* and other zombie-related properties. Secondly, the picture could have been made four years ago if one of the potential investors had his way and Hobson

had been removed as director. In Hollywood, usually loyalty is only as strong as one's options, but in this case sanity won out.

The making of *Maggie* first emerged from obscurity with a bunch of faceless development executives behind the scenes championing the script from an unknown writer.



It all started with two college friends from Illinois who had gone to SIU-Carbondale. After graduation, one became a NASA worker, the other headed to Hollywood. John Scott commands the Chandra X-Ray Observatory, a satellite that orbits Earth and collects information about black holes. Trevor Kaufman entered into a different kind of black hole – the unique world known as the Hollywood assistant.

So Scott, being intensely integrated (left-brain, right brain equivalent), wrote a spec script about a father and a daughter who face a remarkable kind of quandry and gave it to the only person he knew in Hollywood — Kaufman. It started circulating through the assistant and then development executive networks and eventually ended up on the desk of Katie O'Malley, a development executive with producer [Matt Baer](#) (*Unbroken*).



“I read it and loved it because as a father I certainly related to doing anything for my kids and also having gone through the loss of my own parents, it hit a nerve with me” said Baer. “It was

also a new take on a genre that was in need of re-invention, but done in such an emotionally valid way.”

The producer then met with Kaufman who had an agreement to manage his college friend Scott. The writer was flown out from Boston to Los Angeles to meet Baer and they hit it off.

Meanwhile, the script was still making the rounds of all the development executives. An agent at CAA named Billy Hawkins (not there anymore) had given it to his client Hobson who liked the script. But an unknown commercial director who did title cards was no easy sell so Hawkins got ahold of Kaufman and sent him Hobson’s reel which was enough to win over Kaufman and Scott.

No other directors had yet seen the script when they both said yes to Hobson.

During the early quest to make the film, Russian-Kazakh filmmaker Timur Bekmambetov [was set to buy the script](#) for his production company to finance, but he was not interested in committing to a first-time director, especially since the script had not been seen by any other, more established directors. Baer flew to New Orleans to meet with Bekmambetov on the set of *Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Slayer* to try to talk him into sticking with Hobson, but the filmmaker wouldn’t budge.



Hobson then went the extra mile of putting together an entire marketing package to help Bekmambetov’s company sell the project with all the changes that they wanted to make. After a phone conversation with Scott, the group of filmmakers said ‘nyet’ to the Russian and stood with their first choice, the English director Hobson.

“I’m so appreciative to John (Scott) for championing me throughout the process,” said the director. “I was so taken by the script and am very proud to have this as my first feature.”

“The film would have been made four years ago, were it not for our honoring Henry’s attachment,” said Baer who also backed first-time director Antoine Fuqua in 1998 on his first film, *The Replacement Killers*.

Since Scott had been signed with CAA, he, Kaufman and Baer then tried to pitch the project to several indie financiers, the first of which was Pierre-Ange Le Pogam (who had previously worked with Luc Besson). Financing with a bunch of unknowns was tough so they needed to put a cast together or at least get an actor or actress attached.



“The challenge was, the movie is called *Maggie*, but it is the father who has the leading role. There was a period of time where Chloe Moretz was going to play Maggie but we needed the right father to help finance the movie,” said Baer.

Then, out of the blue, the script got on the enviable Black List (and was No. 1 on the Bloodlist that ranks the 13 best genre scripts) and suddenly people were paying attention. But for two years after, they still had trouble casting the father role. Nevertheless, indie financier Inferno (now called Lotus) liked the script so much that they knew they could sell it. Without any acting talent attached, they began pre-selling *Maggie*.

Then along came Arnold, or actually CAA, which repped both the writer Scott and the director, Hobson. Agent Michael Kives loved the script and pushed Arnold to read it, knowing that it would be something very different than the ordinary action hero stereotype. And yes, even though the part was written for an American farmer, Schwarzenegger committed, thereby pushing the entire project forward into pre-production. Shortly after, Breslin signed on as Maggie.

“Arnold comes with an innate audience impression. What people know of Arnold is he’s a hero, has a plan and becomes victorious. That gave the film a short hand in what the audience would expect and then we slowly stripped it away so the audience was surprised,” said director Hobson. “With Arnold being the kind of the elder statesman within the Hollywood universe, the transition from action star to dramatic portrayal is not expected. I’ve been so happy to work with him because of his openness and willingness to dive into the character and draw from his experiences as a father to show his fear and vulnerabilities in the role.”

Lotus ended up selling the project with Arnold on it. “We have Ara Keshishian to thank for that,” noted Baer. There were two other producers who Baer said were vital to the project – two

guys from Louisiana, Colin Bates and Joey Tufaro. They understood the tax benefits of shooting in Louisiana and had the infrastructure to make the movie there.

“The level of financial juggling that goes into a film is insane,” said Hobson, who noted that the art department ended up only having a budget of \$8,000 for the entire film. The end budget all in was around \$8M.

The infrastructure was such that the production office location was based in the center of New Orleans, even though the script called for an isolated farmhouse. There were old plantations in the area, but not farmhouses so, with the restrictions set, Hobson ended up having to shoot in four different houses to get the right farmhouse aesthetic. “It was counter-intuitive to shoot like that but it ended up creating and aiding an unusual palate for the film. It feels like one house but with added personality,” said Hobson.



Other problems? “Oh, there were a lot of difficulties,” Hobson laughed. “There were so many challenges on the production. Then we lost the DP before the end of shooting and had to replace him. We also had to figure out special effects with very little money. That’s when Matt O’Toole came into play. He was this master artist masquerading as a storyboard artist; he then joined with the head special effects make-up woman Kari Sarris, and together they were able to bring this entire world to life. Still through all of this, the vision that we had set up was maintained. We certainly had our trials and tribulations throughout the past five years, but there’s something to be said about perseverance.”

Hobson gave credit to his manager Adam Marshall at Management 360, who worked behind the scenes and acted as a producer “helping to navigate the turbulent waters” of the five-year journey.

After the film was completed, Lionsgate agreed to distribute the film domestically. It premiered in New York during the Tribeca Film Festival last month.

“*Maggie* getting made is about people taking chances on unknowns,” said Baer. “It’s taking a chance on a script and talent I believed in, but I think the most satisfying and interesting example of taking a chance was with Arnold because he is so good in the movie. He managed to turn an

American farmer into an emotionally sympathetic father who gives the movie an added movie star kick but — at times — he is unrecognizable because he melds into the part so well. There are many examples of actors known for one thing and then doing something different and it doesn't work out for them. But in this case, and the reviews are all saying it, it worked out very well." *Maggie* marks Baer's first independent film.