



Actor-Filmmaker Jerry McGill
survived
the slums,
a stray
bullet,
and a
brush
with
Sundance.



Now he's facing a new
challenge - the film industry... **So**

**why won't
Hollywood
return his calls?**

by Catherine Zee

When Jerry McGill rolls in to the restaurant he has chosen for us to meet at in Portland, Oregon, a few heads turn. It is not simply because he is in a wheelchair. There is something about his demeanor that respectfully demands attention. With his broad shoulders, engaging smile and long dreadlocks down past his shoulders, wet from the rain, he is a soothing, confident force. He conveys strength. The fact that he's model handsome doesn't hurt either.

I first met McGill in New York, when I was a struggling journalist and he was

a struggling playwright/actor/full-time college student. We worked on the same floor of an office building at Fordham University in the Bronx, and I — like many others — was always struck by how warm and personable he was. Here was a guy who was always upbeat, always positive, despite what “appeared” to be obvious setbacks. I was impressed by his aura and one day in the cafeteria we struck up a conversation over our mutual love of films. We have been dear friends ever since, despite his move out to the West Coast to be closer to his one lifelong goal — to be a filmmaker.

It has not been an easy road to the success McGill once dreamed of. As

any aspiring filmmaker will tell you, this business is fraught with great highs and great lows. He has gotten “oh so close” at times, only to face the inevitable sting of rejection. He has produced, written and directed his own short film, *That Summer of Purple*, financed by meager savings from his job as a customer service rep. One screenplay, *Breathe And Let Go*, written in 1995, was submitted to the Sundance Screenwriters Lab and made it all the way through to the final round before being cut. “That one hurt,” says McGill sipping on a cup of Earl Grey tea. “I had already started dreaming about what Utah would look like — fantasizing about how it would feel to be in that atmosphere with all of

those others writers and directors. I just knew that once I got there it would make all the difference. I would be around the people I needed to be around to make my career happen. But things don't always go as you planned."

This is a statement McGill knows better than many. As a child growing up on Manhattan's Lower East Side, he knew even then that he wanted to be a performer. In the fifth grade at the ripe age of ten, he was accepted into the Elliot Feld Ballet School's program for gifted children. He was bussed to modern dance classes twice a week and found to his surprise that he really enjoyed the experience. "God, I hated wearing those tiny dancer's briefs and tights and shoes, but there was something about the entire experience that was so thrilling. You have to remember: I was a kid straight out of the slums and here I was getting picked up from school, plopped down in this majestic world of dance, then carted back to the slums. It was somewhat magical."

That feeling of magic would be tragically brief. One New Year's Eve while returning home from a friend's house McGill was shot in the back by a stray bullet. From where it came no one would ever know. No one would be arrested. He would spend six months at Saint Vincent's Hospital being rehabilitated to adjust to his new life as a quadriplegic. At the age of thirteen, it appeared his dream of being a performer was over.



"It's funny, I've always tried to believe in the theory — there's a reason for everything. There just has to be or nothing makes any sense at all. At the time I was very concerned about my mother. I thought I had let her down. I was her only son and now here I was a useless cripple. But I was actually very fortunate. That staff at Saint Vincent's was a very loving one. My therapists, my doctors, they all teamed up to help me see that just because I was in a wheelchair, it didn't mean I was less than anyone else. They never let me get too down on myself. At the most important time in my life I had great love and support. I will never forget that."

He would carry that positive aura with him. In his freshman year in high school McGill saw an ad in a local newspaper for a theatre company in Manhattan that trained people with disabilities to be professional actors. Unable to believe what he was reading, he called to audition and was accepted to the National Theatre Workshop of the Handicapped on the spot. A nationally recognized

company, NTWH has been featured on "60 Minutes" as well as in numerous newspaper articles and news programs. McGill himself was the feature of a *Daily News* article.

"I remember when Jerry first came in to meet us" recalls Rick Curry, the artistic director of NTWH. "He had this gleam in his eye and this incandescence about him. He was only sixteen years old but it was a no-brainer that we would accept him. We just had to." Easily the company's youngest member by ten or twelve years, McGill thrived in the atmosphere.

"It did so much for me, spiritually, emotionally, to be around disabled people who were strong, confident, articulate. Leading normal lives, having children, relationships. It helped me to see that I really needn't worry about being different from my peers — that if I just lived my life with a certain degree of poise and confidence I could be just as happy and content with my life as anyone else."

"I'm a black male in a wheelchair. How often have you heard that story told? . . ."

In his twelve years with NTWH, McGill would experience many wondrous and unique moments, from appearances on television shows and live theatrical performances, to traveling internationally. One experience stands out to this day with him. "I was doing an actor's benefit performance of *A Christmas Carol*. It

was one of those star-studded deals and somehow I got cast as Tiny Tim. The actor playing my father was Christopher Reeve, still hot off of his *Superman* career. I remember one rehearsal I stepped on one of his lines and he said something like, 'Woah, we gotta watch this guy.' Little did he know someday he would be in a similar situation as me. Life is so...unpredictable."

When McGill finally decided to leave NTWH it was because he had been awed by another theatre company in Manhattan called the 52nd Street Project. Their mission was to bring children in the Hell's Kitchen area together with professional theatre artists to create plays and boost the self-esteem of the youth involved. McGill was instantly impressed at the performance he saw and afterwards he immediately approached the company's artistic director, Willie Reale, to find out if there was any way at all he could help out. Reale told him to write him a letter along with a resume. McGill sent both out the next day. Within a month he was on board acting in their next production. Reale recalls his initial experience with McGill. "It was funny, because we had never had an actor with a disability before and quite frankly, I didn't even know if the guy could really act or not. But there was something about him, he was so damned enterprising and charismatic. I just had to give him a shot."

His experience with the 52nd Street Project would be deeply affecting in a

variety of ways. Aside from work that was spiritually uplifting, McGill would find himself in the presence of many influential and admirable performers. He found himself acting in productions with the likes of Lili Taylor, Michael Imperioli, Tim Blake Nelson and Martha Plimpton. His second production cast him opposite Frances McDormand, well before her Oscar-winning turn in *Fargo*. The two would rehearse at her apartment a few times a week. "That was a special time for me. Franny was so inspirational. The most down to earth celebrity I had ever met. A true pro. I learned a lot from her in that short time."

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He and McDormand are still friends today. He also still maintains a friendship with Tim Blake Nelson and at times he has felt a struggle inherent with the nature of having famous friends. "It's an interesting dilemma. Franny once did a reading for me of *Breathe And Let Go* and it was phenomenal. It was post-*Fargo* and I got a great response. Suddenly people in the industry were calling me. But they all had one caveat. Franny had to sign on to star in it and I didn't feel comfortable asking her to do that. She had done me enough of a favor by just doing the

reading, and I didn't want to threaten our friendship by asking her to sign on to something she may not be interested in. It's a decision that still haunts me because who knows, I ask her to do that — she says yes — and maybe by now I'm the next Spike Lee. Still, I don't have too many regrets. I really do think not asking her showed a certain amount of integrity."

And so now McGill bides his time and waits while continuing to plug away at an industry that seems unwilling to recognize his unique voice. "I'm a black male in a wheelchair. How often have you heard that story told? And I don't just want to tell my story — but the story of many disabled people. As a society I find us fascinating and our stories have a lot to offer."

He still submits work consistently to agents and the Sundance Labs but he has found it extremely hard to get just a callback. "This is a tough business as anyone will tell you. The constant rejection alone is enough to send you leaping off a bridge. But you have to believe in yourself. Even when no one else seems to, you have to believe that you can eventually get through with time and persistence. If I could just get one person in the right position to believe in me I know I can be an innovative force in this profession. I just want to get one wheel in the door."

Catherine Zee is a freelance writer and the author of two published novels.