



Jon Kuyper '85

By any measure, Jon Kuyper '85 has led a storied life. A film producer for powerhouses Warner Bros. and Lionsgate for nearly a decade before going freelance in 2014, Kuyper's CV includes such Academy award-winning films as *The Great Gatsby*, *The Hobbit* trilogy, and *Mad Max* and reflects collaborations with A-list directors from Baz Luhrmann and George Miller to Peter Jackson and Sean Penn.

ABOVE: Jon in Newport with his son Luke, Class of 2020.

Yet Kuyper says his life could easily have taken a very different path. "After graduating from Pomona College, I had three career interests: politics, teaching English in a boarding school, or working in the Hollywood film industry," he recalls. "In the end, the decision hinged on lifestyle choices. Pursuing a career in politics meant moving to Washington, D.C., my home state of Connecticut, or Sacramento, none of which was a preference. Teaching English in a boarding school meant getting my master's and moving back to the East Coast...also not terribly appealing. So almost by default, I went with the Hollywood film track, because quite honestly, I wanted to live in Southern California." The rest, as they say in the business, is history.

Today, Kuyper makes his home much farther south—in Sydney, Australia—and works as a freelancer, line-producing "more modest-size films" that capture his imagination. He's earned that luxury. Since launching his production management career with Roger Corman in Los Angeles in 1991, Kuyper has produced or supervised production on more than 50 films worldwide, with budgets ranging from \$300,000 to over \$100 million. After striking out on his own two years ago, he signed on to produce Sean Penn's drama *The Last Face*, starring Javier Bardem and Charlize Theron, which was shot in South Africa. He's currently back in South Africa, working on *24 Hours to Live*, a thriller starring Ethan Hawke, filming in Cape Town.

Despite this impressive CV, Kuyper insists his success is due to a series of happy accidents and “being in the right place at the right time.” He didn’t even major in film, he points out, instead earning a degree in English literature at Pomona. “Being a good filmmaker doesn’t require majoring in film. In fact, when I lecture students on filmmaking, I advise them to study something they love and can draw upon. You can learn almost everything you need to know about filmmaking on the job.”

One of the most important things you learn, Kuyper contends, is that there’s no one right way to get the job done. “I think that one of the reasons I’ve been so successful working abroad is because of my approach,” he observes. “Over the years, I’ve learned the way that things are done in a given country and when I’m there, I make it a point to work with locals rather than taking an adversarial stance. There are lots of ways to do things, and I’ve learned to embrace different methodologies.”

Another of Kuyper’s potent skills: his ability to help directors and “money men” strike the precarious balance between art and commerce that is essential to the success of any film. “As an executive producer, I’m the translator between the film maker and the financier,” he explains. “The director has a vision, but the financier has a bottom line – after all, it is the film business. I serve as the bridge between the two, helping the director execute his vision and helping the financiers achieve their goals with respect to budget, timeline, legal issues, etc.”

Kuyper speaks of his skills with easy confidence, but when pressed, he concedes that his job entails managing complex logistics with numerous personalities and moving parts. “A typical film has a cast and crew – a circus if you will, because with a group of that size and complexity, it really is like the circus coming to town – of somewhere between 100 and 150 people.” That said, he immediately points out that when it comes to filmmaking, there’s little that’s typical. “When we were filming *Mad Max*, for example, we were serving up to two thousand lunches a day under tents in the desert – it was like a military operation.”

Then there’s the director, with a vision that Kuyper must help to realize... as smoothly as possible. And when working with a personality like Sean Penn, there’s no telling what might happen. “Sean is one of the most passionate and talented directors I’ve ever worked with,”



ABOVE: Director Sean Penn discusses a shot with producers Bill Gerber and Jon Kuyper.



LEFT: Kuyper and Sean Penn worked together in 2014 on *The Last Face* a film set in the war-torn country of Liberia.

says Kuyper. “He’s super smart, demanding and relentless. His dad was a director, his mom was an actress, and Sean’s been acting since childhood—he knows the business inside out and he asks a lot from his team.” Penn is also improvisational, which makes the executive producer’s role particularly challenging. “He keeps you on your toes,” says Kuyper wryly.

Kuyper and Penn worked together in 2014 on *The Last Face*, a film set in the war-torn country of Liberia. “One morning, Sean came to the set and told me that he’d had a dream the night before in which Bardem and Theron were walking through a sugar cane field on fire,” Kuyper recalls. “I thought the scene would be shot as a green screen – with the burning field filmed at one time and the actors superimposed on the image later, but Sean told me, ‘No, we’re shooting this for real.’” Kuyper was terrified of putting two Academy award-winning actors in danger, but Penn insisted, and the shoot proceeded. “I did my due diligence, staged a controlled burn, and had fire crews stationed all around, and it went exactly as Sean had said it would,” Kuyper says, “and then the scene didn’t even end up in the film. That’s filmmaking,” he concludes with a rueful chuckle. “It’s a very non-linear process, and that’s the magic of it. There are many times when I think, ‘Maybe this isn’t possible,’ but then things come together.”



ABOVE: Jon with Jean Reno, whom he regards as the wisest, most wonderful man he's ever worked with throughout his career. Reno may be remembered from "The Professional", "The Big Blue" or any of the "Mission Impossible" films.



LEFT: Luke on set with a real live crash test dummy.

Over the years, things have come together repeatedly for Kuyper, including on his two proudest achievements to date: *The Great Gatsby* and *Mad Max: Fury Road*. "Those were big films with big risks, but they were both big successes. Working with Baz Luhrmann on *Gatsby* was difficult, but his attention to detail was incredible and the results were very satisfying." The *Mad Max* shoot, which took place on location in the Namibian desert, was also a tremendous undertaking. "There were all of these Aussie stunt men doing insane things in front of the cameras, while everything behind the cameras was carefully choreographed to make sure we got the shots," says Kuyper. "It was very gratifying and a proud moment for me to see everything coalesce into an Academy-award winning film."

Kuyper clearly has a knack for managing what many would view as barely controlled chaos, yet he attributes much of the good fortune he's experienced in his life to the preparation he received while a student at Portsmouth Abbey. "I was so well prepared for college when I left Portsmouth Abbey that I felt like I had an unfair advantage compared to the other students. I saw a lot of my classmates suffer through the transition, whereas I came in knowing how to prioritize my time, do the work, and manage my life."

As competitive as Pomona College was, Kuyper continues, he never felt that he worked as hard there as he did at the

Abbey. "I had so many great teachers during my time at Portsmouth: Cliff Hobbins, the Teddy Roosevelt of teachers, was always counseling us to 'Buy low and sell high.' His lectures have stayed with me to this day. Mr. McGuire was a great art teacher—he opened that door for me. Mr. Garman was a great photography teacher—I think photography at the Abbey was what helped lead me toward film. And Dr. Finnegan gave me a passion for English literature. I read books in his courses that were incredibly influential—*The Great Gatsby* was one of my favorites—and he instilled a love of storytelling that translated into a career in film."

Yet Kuyper says that the Abbey's biggest gift was the lesson it taught him about handling the impossible task. "I learned that when faced with a seemingly insurmountable job, it's best not to tackle the whole thing at once, but instead to chip around the edges, doing the little bits that you know so that eventually you can get your arms around it. As a producer, I use this approach all the time – when I start a new project, I don't freak out and look at what needs to be done for the whole film – I just start knocking off the jobs I know how to do first until, eventually, the whole thing becomes manageable."

Kuyper is also grateful for the friendships he formed while at Portsmouth, many of which continue to this day. "My classmate John McCormick '85 remains a good friend – we see each other every year or two and have met up all over the world." For his recent 30th reunion, Kuyper continues, 42 of the 62 boys in his class showed up. "We picked up right where we'd left off, even though many of us hadn't seen each other since graduating. It was thrilling to be able to resume those old friendships so easily."

In light of these fond memories, it's not surprising that Kuyper is delighted to have his younger son Luke in the Class of 2020. "I'm so proud that Luke is at the Abbey. I hope that he walks away with the confidence and self-reliance that a great boarding school instills and makes the kinds of friendships that I made." Talking to Luke, this outcome seems likely. "I love the academics here at the Abbey – the classes are difficult, but the teachers are excellent," he says, "and I've already made a lot of good friends."

"Connecting with classmates at my 30th reunion reminded me what a special place Portsmouth Abbey is and how important it is to stay in touch with the people I met there," Kuyper concludes. "From now on, when I travel, I'll be knocking on doors – it's neat to have friends around the world."

– Lori L. Ferguson