

The Producer as Problem Solver

Before the recent real-life election of a new pope, Michael Jackman helped bring a film version—*Conclave*—to movie screens and the awards circuit. It was a career highlight for a veteran film producer who often labored far from the Hollywood that lives in our collective imagination.

By Susan Karlin

This wasn't Michael Jackman C'85's first time at the Oscars. He'd been twice before, in 1989 as "picture car coordinator" for the 1960s-set *Mississippi Burning* and in 2017 as a coproducer for the sci-fi epic *Arrival*. Yet despite both films' multiple nominations, his titles still relegated him to the proletariat sections of the theater. Now, things were different. At the 97th Academy Awards ceremony on March 2, Jackman was part of the glitterati, seated down center among the featured players as one of the producers nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture for the lavish Vatican thriller *Conclave*.

Directed by Edward Berger, the film stars Ralph Fiennes, Stanley Tucci, and John Lithgow as rival cardinals scheming to sway the election of a new pope after his predecessor's death. It would

turn out to be eerily prescient. Less than two months after the Academy Awards and six months after the film's October 2024 release, Pope Francis would pass away, prompting a real-life conclave culminating in the election of Robert Francis Prevost as Pope Leo XIV. The comparisons to the film would catapult its ratings on streaming platforms. But on Oscar night, Jackman, 62, was simply trying to catch his breath after a fairytale ride. The Best Picture nod, among the film's eight nominations, placed him squarely in the spotlight. And with it, the heady arrivals and sparkling scene inside Hollywood's Dolby Theatre finally gave the normally unflappable industry veteran pause. "I tried to be in the moment and just enjoy it," Jackman recalls. "This never happened before, and it may never happen again."

The Oscar ceremony was the climax of six increasingly peripatetic months that began with the film's late summer premiere at the Telluride Film Festival in Colorado and followed with a fall theatrical release to glowing reviews and steadily burgeoning box office revenues that would eventually far eclipse its \$20 million budget with more than \$125 million in worldwide earnings. Still, Jackman's nearly 40 years working his way up the ranks on such films as *Arrival*, *Greyhound*, *Gangs of New York*, and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* had instilled a more measured approach to Hollywood. By the time *Conclave* surprised with six Golden Globe nominations in December, he was already well into executive producing his next picture, the upcoming Boots Riley sci-fi comedy *I Love Boosters*, and on a family vacation in Brazil. Jackman and his wife raced home to attend the Golden Globes, commencing a whirlwind campaign of award shows, luncheons, screenings, Q&As, press junkets, swank hotels, and nonstop travel as the film landed on top 2024 film lists and captured several awards, including a BAFTA Best Picture win. "For the first time in my life, I wasn't keeping my own calendar," he says. "I got like a six-page calendar one day and thought, 'Oh, this is my calendar for the week.' It's like, 'Oh no, this is my calendar for the day!'"

After a career of working mostly behind the scenes, producer Michael Jackman called the awards season frenzy around *Conclave* "an amazing, thrilling ride."



While the media hyped the Best Picture horse race, the circuit bubble was more like a delightfully exhausting and endless party among friends and colleagues. Not only had Jackman's old employer, FilmNation Entertainment, produced both *Conclave* and fellow contender *Anora* (which lists Jackman in the production credits), but Jackman also found himself part of a triad of Oscar-nominated Quakers alongside Fred Berger C'03 ["Alumni Profiles," Jul|Aug 2017] and Marc Platt C'79—producers, respectively, of the Bob Dylan biopic *A Complete Unknown* and the film version of the (also-Platt-produced) Broadway musical *Wicked* ["Passion Plays," May|Jun 2006]. Berger and Platt had previously coproduced *La La Land*, the 2016 film that won six Academy Awards (but not Best Picture, though it was mistakenly announced as the winner at the end of a chaotic Oscar night eight years ago). Berger knew Jackman, but didn't realize he'd gone to Penn. "We were at some award show texting from different tables, and he said, 'By the way, we're both Quakers!'" says Berger, who is unrelated to the *Conclave* director. "We were laughing about it and said, 'OK, we gotta find Marc and take a photo.'"

Such was the leadup to Jackman entering the 3,300-seat Dolby Theatre for the Academy Awards. "I looked up at three mezzanines leading up to the sky, and realized, 'I've got a great seat in the middle, next to all of these other amazing filmmakers and casts that we'd been spending a lot of time with on the same circuit together,'" he says. "So, it was an amazing, thrilling ride."

Despite landing a Best Adapted Screenplay Oscar, *Conclave* ultimately lost Best Picture to *Anora*. But the evening's outcome couldn't shake Jackman's zen. "You want to be the movie that wins," he says. "But the big quantum step for me, personally and professionally, was the nomination."

Moreover, it reignited a long-abandoned dream. When *Conclave* landed at FilmNation in 2022, Jackman was serv-

ing as the company's executive vice president of physical production and post. For the previous 20 years, he had chosen jobs that kept him close to his Westfield, New Jersey, home while his kids grew up. This meant moving away from the producing roles that get awards recognition—but usually require extensive travel and exhaustive on-set oversight, often for months at a time.

"I really thought the opportunity to ever be in a position where I might be nominated for an Academy Award was done," he says. "I made this decision with the knowledge that it probably took this possibility away. While I never second-guessed it—being home for my family was more important—to then get nominated for an Oscar was a beautiful karmic moment."

Once his kids were off to college, Jackman ventured back to on-set producing, with Netflix's *The Good Nurse* followed by *Conclave*. The latter had Jackman planning the budget, production structure, and shooting locations, spending six months in Rome with the production team prepping and shooting the film, liaising between departments, and balancing creative visions with budgetary constraints—but always in service to the story and visuals. "I like going to set and solving problems," he says.

"Mike is passionate about not just film but filmmakers, actors, directors, designers, and all the other artists and craftspeople who bring a project to fruition," says the acclaimed actor Tucci, who plays Cardinal Bellini. "His friendly, easy demeanor makes him approachable to have a chat or problem solve. This is a very important trait for a producer, who needs to be across every department and have an understanding of that department's needs. Mike has it in spades."

Fred Berger has long admired Jackman's producing range since interning for him at Focus Features, which, among other duties, enlisted him as Jim Carrey's hand double on *Eternal Sunshine of the*

Spotless Mind. "It's very rare to find a producer who has such a mastery of the technical processes and yet is really a creative collaborator who's always thinking, 'How can I protect budget and schedule and build the movie structurally to give the filmmaker more time and latitude?'" Berger says. "And above all that, is kind and generous, who lifts people up on set."

Jackman earned his toolbelt from decades managing crises arising in different departments on every film. Even *Conclave* wasn't immune. Its biggest Paped moment came when, a month before shooting and after they'd built a replica Sistine Chapel complete with a CGI ceiling, the production attorney asked whether they had the rights to the images. Jackman felt his soul leaving his body.

"We were like, 'We don't have the rights. Wait...what? Like, who has the rights?'" he recalls, laughing. Turns out, the Vatican. On the rare occasions that it even leases rights, it only does so for five years, which doesn't work for movies. "We hadn't even shown them the script because we didn't want to risk them not liking it," Jackman says. "So, there were definitely a few hours where I was talking to our head of business affairs, going, 'What are we gonna do? We can't stop! Is the pope gonna sue us?'" Salvation came several torturous hours later in the form of Archivio Scala, a Florence archive that licenses the rights to Michelangelo's preliminary drawings for his Sistine Chapel paintings.

Jackman's ability to navigate uncertainty on set parallels his improvised career path. "Looking backwards, I can connect a lot of dots going forward," he says. But back then, "there were no dots to connect. It was just, 'What is gonna be interesting?' and 'What am I gonna learn?' So, for me, it's the curiosity and the restlessness."

Born in New York, Jackman grew up primarily in Cambridge, Massachusetts, after his father enrolled at Harvard Law School at 40. Despite living in the shadow of Harvard, Jackman was genetically predisposed for Penn. Both

Jackman photographed in the AMC at Lincoln Square 13 movie theater near his New York office and sharing a selfie with fellow Quakers and Best Picture Oscar nominees Fred Berger (left) and Marc Platt (center) at an awards ceremony.



his father, Norman Jackman W'53, and uncle, Robert Jackman W'56, graduated from the University, and he and his wife, Lisa Leavitt Jackman W'88, an executive recruiter, have since passed along the Quaker DNA to their kids, Alexandra Jackman C'21, a University of Michigan law student, and Sam Jackman C'25 W'25, who works for a real estate brokering firm. As a teen, Michael was so set on Penn that he thwarted parental pleas by not only refusing to apply to Harvard but also booby trapping his Dartmouth application. When asked, "Where do you see yourself in 25 years?" he wrote, "I see myself as a successful Harvard alumnus."

At Penn, Jackman majored in psychology and continued his three loves from high school—football, crew, and performing. He found a whimsical perch with the irreverent a cappella group Pennsylvania Six-5000 (now known as Penn Six), where he met lifelong friends Jordan Foster C'86 WG'91 and Jim Karp C'88. "He was prin-

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cipled, almost to a fault, driven, and talented," says Foster, now a partner in a New York investment management firm. Foster remembers Jackman bringing down the house with a rendition of Michael Jackson's *Billie Jean*, where he donned a black leather jacket and single sequined glove and moonwalked across the stage. "The crowd went nuts, and the girls would be all over him afterwards, like he was a rock star."

Jackman's closest academic flyby to producing was taking "Monday Night at the Movies," a legendary film analysis class taught at Penn by *Film as a Sub-*



versive Art author Amos Vogel. But hints of leadership talents emerged when he took the reins of Penn Six in his senior year, engineering a group busking in downtown Philly to raise money to cut their first album and go on tour.

"He just figured out how to pull all these pieces together and get it done," says Karp, a London-based financier and investor. "He's organized and diligent, but also great with people. He can bring people around to his way of thinking without them even knowing it. I think if someone who knew what a movie producer does had seen Mike back then, they probably

Jackman (top, center) was a star performer and leader in the irreverent a cappella group Pennsylvania Six-5000. In the Quad with (left to right) Jim Karp, Larry Narun C'85, Doug Larson C'85 EAS'85, Josh Rosenberg C'87,

Al Paprocki W'87, John Auyong C'88, and the late Rich Gentry C'86. He also found time for pranks like creating a parody Yo and Yo Mural on a wall in their dorm with roommates Geoff Berg (center) and Eddie Boyce (left).



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could have predicted that he would end up doing something like that.”

Jackman’s other creative outlet took the form of absurdist pranks with partners-in-crime Geoff Berg C’87, now a San Diego commercial real estate developer, and Eddie Boyce C’85, a Maryland vintner. Randomly assigned as freshman roommates, they bonded over their dark humor. They not only continued rooming together all four years, but have remained close, still laughing over their antics more than four decades later. “Mike always had a great sense of humor and was also really creative,” says Boyce. “So, he would take things and run with them.”

Berg recalls Jackman and some other dorm friends once transferring Boyce’s bedroom contents from their High Rise East dorm room and reassembling them

in the same configuration in the floor lounge. Another time, they pulled an all-nighter painting a parody of a very earnest student-created Yin and Yang-themed mural gracing one of the floors. “Mike was a very good artist,” says Boyce. The guys’ version: The Yo and Yo Mural featuring a Sistine Chapel motif of God’s outstretched hand dangling a yo-yo. “The group that had done the Yin and Yang mural actually were offended,” says Berg.

Then there was the time they kidnapped a Mickey Mouse souvenir that belonged to Jackman’s then-girlfriend and turned it into a prisoner of war, complete with a dangling cigarette, AA battery “bomb” strapped to its foot, and makeshift parachute that had it gliding to freedom from their 18th floor window over the Zeta Beta Tau fraternity. “Things you can’t get away

with these days,” says Berg. “The three of us were just in hysterics. Mike’s girlfriend didn’t think it was funny.”

Even after graduating, producing still wasn’t on the horizon. “I thought I wanted to be an actor,” says Jackman. He moved to New York, landing a job in 1986 as a production assistant at Orion Pictures to at least keep a foot in entertainment while he tried to jumpstart an acting career. He did grunt work at the film production and distribution company, but Jackman had two things going for him: computers and coffee.

At the time, film budgeting and scheduling was just beginning to transition to computers. At Penn, Jackman had come close to minoring in computer science before sidestepping a final class demanding too much math. But he still grokked computers more than the older executives. So, Jackman often stood out in meetings with studio brass as the lone PA who could work the machine.

And his other superpower? “This is my coffee story,” announces Jackman. “And I’ve told this to my kids and their friends.” Jackman’s entrée job included coffee runs. He’d take orders for everyone, come right back so the coffee remained hot, and make sure people got their correct requests. Meanwhile, another PA, the son of the executive producer’s friend, deemed it beneath him. He would run out before too many folks could order, stop at the newsstand on his way back so the coffee was cold, and confuse the orders. “So, when they were figuring out who to hire for the next film, and they said, ‘Hey, should we bring in Jack?’ They’d go, ‘Jack couldn’t even get coffee right. Let’s bring in Mike.’ It’s a very simple lesson. It doesn’t matter what the job is; you should be great at it because that’s what you should do in a job. And you can also be recognized for being great at a terrible job.”

The strategy worked. Jackman eventually graduated from coffee runs to more integral jobs—like the care and feeding

of Liam Neeson, Dennis Quaid, and Cher during the legal drama *Suspect*, and the wrangling of some 300 vintage vehicles for *Mississippi Burning*, a thriller about the deaths of civil rights workers in the 1960s starring Gene Hackman and Willem Dafoe. But he still wanted to act.

So early in preproduction of *Mississippi Burning*, Jackman told director Alan Parker he wanted to be in the movie. “And he looked at me and said, ‘No,’” Jackman recalls. “But I brought it up again the next week. Parker still said no. Every week, I would ask him to put me in the movie. It became a running joke.”

Three weeks into shooting, Jackman heard they were having trouble casting reporters and FBI agents. “I had pretty long hair at the time, so I went into the hair and makeup trailer and said, ‘Can you give me a haircut?’” he says. “The hairstylist said, ‘Sure. How do you want it?’ I said, ‘I want it like one of the reporters who haven’t been cast yet.’” Shortly after, a shorn Jackman emerged from the trailer as Parker serendipitously walked by. “He looks at me, ‘Did I cast you?’ I said, ‘Not yet.’ So, he cast me the next day.” Jackman ended up playing a reporter in several scenes, most notably in a two-shot with the legendary Hackman, who died earlier this year. (“I feel so sad about Gene Hackman,” Jackman says. “He was a sweetheart.”)

The part got Jackman into the Screen Actors Guild, not to mention adulation from an autograph seeker in front of a bemused Hackman. And his association with the film got him his first trip to the Oscars. (“I was 26 and starstruck,” he says.) But after working on three movies in as many years, and getting an inside look at an actor’s life, the bloom had withered. “I was like, ‘I’m good. I don’t need to do this anymore,’” he says.

“When an actor is in a movie, they’re treated incredibly well, and when they’re not in a movie, they’re treated like cat-

tle,” he adds. “If you’re really famous, it’s very hard to have a personal life without being on the front page of a magazine if you fight with your spouse.” Even the rejection faced by producers is far worse for actors, whose lack of success often has nothing to do with their talent. “I wanted to do something where, if I was good at something, I could excel.”

Jackman shifted his full attention to producing, zigzagging between money gigs and those that piqued his curiosity, sometimes learning jobs *on* the job, but always trying his best regardless of circumstances. “Some of the worst starts to jobs became some of the best professional experiences of my life,” he says.

But a pivotal moment came in 2003 when traveling began to impact his young

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family. When his daughter was three and his son was six months, Jackman found himself on location for 10 weeks in Gainesville, Florida, on an ill-fated movie that fell apart on the day it was supposed to start shooting. Jackman’s “pay or play” deal earned him \$100,000—the remainder in the film’s account. But the crew had been working for two weeks without pay and were owed the same amount. “So, I paid the crew and came back with nothing,” he says. “It was not a good time.”

His family was equally frustrated. Despite returning most weekends, “my son didn’t know me when I got back and my daughter was miserable,” he says. “Every time I left, it would snow, and my wife was left to clear it out. It was not a great experience. I felt like, ‘How am I going to raise my kids if I’m doing this? I want to

coach basketball. I want to be here for every play. I want to hear all the recitals.”

Jackman stopped traveling as a producer and shifted focus to New York-based post-production and related film work for entities like the Weinstein Company, Deluxe Creative Services, and finally FilmNation. That work—which had him overseeing the editing, sound design and mixing, visual effects, music, and other finishing elements—still fed his penchant for film and problem solving. “Whether it’s creative, budgetary, or logistical,” he says, “I like to try to find solutions where we all win.”

These days, Jackman still feeds his performing bug through a local glee club and playing guitar. He’s also maintained ties to Penn by mentoring students and alumni interested in the film industry and guest lecturing in cinema studies courses. “I love coming back to campus and talking to recent graduates,” he says, with a grin. “If I’m lucky, I get to talk them out of acting.”

Despite the success of *Conclave*, FilmNation needed Jackman as an executive. Last fall, he amicably left his perch there to move into being an independent producer, guiding projects through the full production arc, from idea and development through shooting and post. He’s now scouting ventures to work on with some of the producers he hit it off with on the pre-Oscar circuit, Berger among them.

“Now my guiding principle is more about letting great projects organically evolve from people I want to work with,” Jackman says. “Instead of chasing a project or job, I’m chasing wonderful people. The reality is, the environment, or the personalities of the director, producers, or actors don’t impact whether it’s a good movie or not. People can be horrible and make a really great movie, or wonderful and make a bad movie. I just want to work with people I like and let the movies take care of themselves.”

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