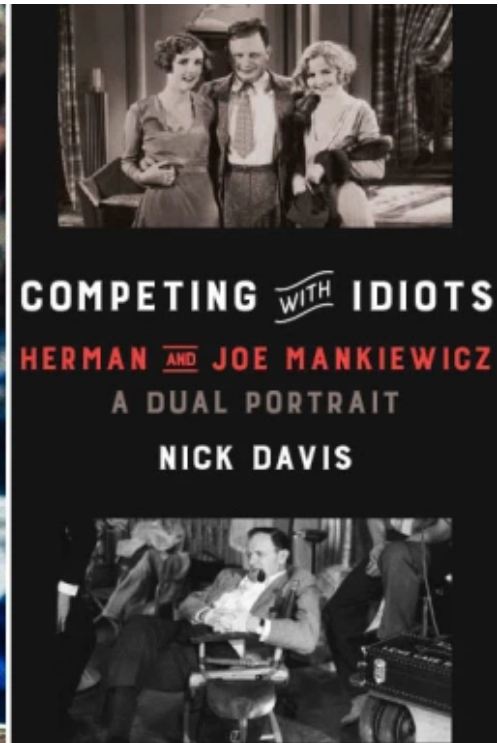


Nick Davis Pulls Off Rare Doubleheader, Directing ESPN's 'Once Upon A Time In Queens' And Publishing Dual Biography Of Ancestors Joseph And Herman Mankiewicz

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AP

The hustle of show business means people not-infrequently have two projects hitting the market at the same time.

Even so, filmmaker Nick Davis is the creative force behind one of the more unusual doubleheaders in recent memory. He directed ESPN "30 for 30" limited series Once Upon a Time in Queens, an account of the World Series-winning, earth-scorching 1986 New York Mets. The two-night, four hour docuseries, whose executive producers include Jimmy Kimmel, premieres tonight and concludes tomorrow. Also today, Knopf has published Davis's book, Competing with Idiots, a dual portrait of Joseph and Herman Mankiewicz nearly two decades in the making. The Hollywood royals were his great-uncle and grandfather, respectively.

"I've thought about what common ground there is between these projects," Davis said in an interview with Deadline. "And I think what it is is that I have no memory of not being Herman Mankiewicz's grandson. And I have no memory of not being a Met fan. They both were just

ingrained truths of my existence as long as I have been conscious.”

Davis sold the dual biography in 2003 but needed multiple passes to get it right. In a move that ran counter to the impulse to inject the personal and the subjective into every story, he decided to overhaul the book at one point to remove himself as a primary character. In a three-faceted narrative involving himself and his better-known ancestors, he realized, his tale could never match the larger-than-life ones of the brothers Mank.

Competing with Idiots (whose title derives from the famous telegram Herman sent to Ben Hecht, declaring there were “millions are to be grabbed out here and your only competition is idiots”) is transparent about its reliance on prior accounts. Biographies by Richard Merryman and Ken Geist blazed a path in the 1970s for film scholars and cinephiles, and Davis also counts himself as a fan of David Fincher’s 2020 film *Mank*. In researching his book, which is peppered with a number of family snapshots, he listened to audio recordings provided to him by Merryman and Geist and came away with an entirely new understanding of his family tree.

“When I first started the book, I had no clue who Joe was as a person and a very cartoonish idea of who Herman was,” Davis recalled. “I began my life with that view, in a a lot of ways.” Understanding what bound his two subjects – and what differentiated them – became the story’s central challenge. At pivotal moments, Davis was able to summon family recollections and context that casts the brothers in a fresh light. For all of Joseph’s panache on the set and relative rectitude — never succumbing to the drinking-and-gambling vices that did in his older brother — he was also capable of remarkable displays of unfeeling behavior that verged on cruelty. The book opens with one such episode involving Davis’s own mother and a morbid errand that her uncle asks her to run.

Their trajectories were distinguished, but distinct. Herman wrote Marx Brothers movies and *Dinner at Eight* and made a still-debated contribution to *Citizen Kane*. Joe wrote and directed *All About Eve* and *A Letter to Three Wives* before crash-landing with *Cleopatra*. Yet they were brothers for life, despite the 11 years between them, providing encouragement and each learning to persevere under the thumb of an authoritarian father. “I came back around to feeling that they’re very much the same flesh and blood,” Davis said.

Writing the book, he added, “enhanced my appreciation for both of them and everything they went through, especially Joe. I went into this not having much regard for Joe’s work, to be honest. I also came away with more of a sense of sadness for Herman. He really didn’t seem to value what he was doing, which is remarkable when you consider how brilliant his work was and the esteem he had from so many people he worked with.”

Self-effacing, of course, would never be an adjective applied to the ’86 Mets. The reckless but skilled and charismatic group steamrolled through the regular season but endured an operatic series of ups and downs during the playoffs en route to winning the World Series. Known for characters like Darryl Strawberry, Dwight Gooden, Keith Hernandez, Lenny

Dykstra and Gary Carter, the team somehow achieved an unlikely alchemy. They did so against the backdrop of Reagan-era New York City. Not for nothing does Davis feature interviews with figures like filmmaker Oliver Stone, whose semi-autobiographical *Wall Street* depicted the go-go cityscape inhabited by these Mets. He also runs the table and gets just about every player, major or minor, plus manager Davey Johnson and other key personnel to share their recollections.



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Kimmel was among those approached by Davis, who had succeeded in getting Major League Baseball's co-operation in the project. He had forged ties with MLB in the course of directing a film about Ted Williams for *American Masters* on PBS. The league's blessing translated into the most comprehensive collection of video footage and archival material yet assembled about the '86 team. It also blends baseball material with a collage of archival material from the 1980s, in a way that's more satisfying than the 2007 scripted miniseries that aired on ESPN, *The Bronx is Burning*, which covers similar terrain. (Davis has a writing credit on one of the episodes of that series.)

Fans of the 2011 book about the Mets, *The Bad Guys Won*, will recognize its author, Jeff Pearlman (*Showtime*) as one of the on-camera participants in the series. *Once Upon a Time in Queens* is in some ways a visually supercharged companion to the book, vividly revisiting an era when players vacuumed up cocaine on the team plane, lit up cigarettes in the clubhouse and went clubbing until dawn. They may have been well-paid, but nothing like the hundreds-of-millionaires of today's sport, which has been comparatively drained of color. One memorable sequence concerns free agent George Foster signing with New York for the then-unimaginable sum of \$10 million over five years.

Davis likens the project to "a heist movie" about "raffish rogues who come together for one great score. It's an epic story, and not just the story of one season." A general audience, Davis believes, will find plenty to latch onto — the complicated workings of gentrification in a New York coping with crime and (how things change) racial strife.

"I didn't make this for Met fans," Davis said. "I'm a filmmaker first. It's all about story and characters. Here was a band of rascals and rogues, and you can follow their story. It's OK if you don't know baseball or don't like the Mets. This is about their heist."