

'Roseanne' writer from Judson talks faith-based filmmaking

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Twenty-nine years ago, theater professor David McFadzean left Judson University to move to Hollywood and help his former college roommate start up a new TV series based around a comedian named Roseanne Barr.



Former Judson University professor David McFadzean is a producer and writer, known for "Home Improvement" (1991), "What Women Want" (2000) and "Bernie" (2011). *Brian Hill | Staff Photographer*

Last week Wednesday -- eight network TV series and seven feature films later -- McFadzean returned to Elgin to receive a Lifetime Achievement Award from the college's Imago Film Festival, to tell students at a chapel service about the power of storytelling and to discuss the state of faith-based moviemaking in an interview with the Daily Herald.

After spending a year as the head writer on "Roseanne," McFadzean and his partners in Wind Dancer Films created the long-running series "Home Improvement." They also produced the series "Carol & Company," "Buddies," "Thunder Alley," "Soul Man" and "Saint George"; and produced the movies "Bernie" starring Jack Black and "What Women Want" starring Mel Gibson, plus "Where the Heart Is," "Firelight," "Walker Payne," "As Cool As I Am" and "The Keeping Room."

At 69, he said he's now producing an animated children's series for PBS called "Ready Jet Go!" and "trying to figure out how to retire" so he can spend his time writing plays.

And, he recalled, he indirectly brought Elgin into every living room in America. That ex-roommate, Matt Williams, wanted "Roseanne" to be about the turmoils of a blue-collar family woman.

"He flew to Elgin to talk me into joining him and I said, 'Elgin is just the kind of town your show is

talking about," McFadzean said. So they called several female factory workers into a room in the Holiday Inn and had them talk about their daily lives, then used some of those ideas in their stories.

"Lanford, Illinois, where 'Roseanne' is set, is really Elgin," he said. The characters even sometimes referred to Fox Valley locations.



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McFadzean said his marriage began as a rocky relationship between "a happy heathen and an amiable agnostic." But that changed while he was working as a high school teacher in Indiana. The Billy Graham Organization rented the school's auditorium for a crusade by evangelist John Wesley White and McFadzean was assigned to be the school's liaison to that group.

After the crusade was over, among much tension and problems, a local church member who had worked on the project came to him and, assuming McFadzean too was a Christian, said, "I want to thank you for staying so calm through all that, brother."

The church member invited him to attend a Bible study with several other prominent people from the city. McFadzean said he agreed to join that "as a good career move" and because "they treated me as if I were already loved." That led to his really turning over his life to Christ and integrating a Christian perspective into his later career in show business, though none of his productions have been specifically faith-based. Asked to review the state of faith-based movies -- as well as Hollywood movies that deal with faith and ethics -- he said he has not yet seen the Elgin-made "The Resurrection of Gavin Stone." He said he was very impressed by last year's Oscar-nominated "Hacksaw Ridge," about a real-life World War II medic who won the Medal of Honor by saving dozens of wounded soldiers behind enemy lines -- despite being a pacifist.

"If that message doesn't challenge the average Christian to re-examine their faith" he said. "It would be remarkable fiction. That it's true is incredible."

During a 2002 visit to Judson, McFadzean complained that "most films made by Christian filmmakers are more like pornographic films than they are like Hollywood films. They are low-budget. They're poorly acted. And you know exactly what's going to happen at the end."

He said some faith-based films are still like that, but others have good acting and production values. He said many end up only "preaching to the choir," but that's not necessarily a bad thing.

"Many films are aimed at specific communities. Bertolt Brecht wrote plays for Communists. They can bring new spiritual insight or at least spiritual reassurance. But you want to preach to the choir in a way that has artistic insight and quality."

He thinks "God's Not Dead," about a college student forced to defend his faith against an atheist professor, became a big hit because "it pictured Christians as the underdog in an arena where many Christians feel their views are unwelcome."

But he said mainstream Hollywood got badly burned with the big-budget "Noah" and "Exodus: Gods and Kings" because their writers went astray from the Bible to jazz up their storylines.