

THE GIFT OF JUSTICE

An independent film inspired by a true civil rights cold case comes to South Beach



'DEADLINE': Eric Roberts stars as one of the reporters trying to solve the murder of a 13-year-old.

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Mark Ethridge, a Pulitzer-Prize winning newsman, was talking about his book *Grievances* — based on a series of real-life articles he wrote about a racially motivated murder in a small South Carolina town — at a 40th high school reunion.

His former classmate, Curt Hahn, who runs a Nashville film company, listened intently, and as a socially conscious filmmaker, he



HAHN

naturally began to imagine the arc and possibilities of transforming a cold case and novel into a screenplay, a screenplay into a film, a film into a larger heirloom of the American South.

From that reunion, from the countless conversations and the meeting of minds, *Deadline* was born. The independent film,

hyped by a 45-city grassroots national campaign on a 45-foot tour bus, makes its Miami red carpet premiere Wednesday at Lincoln Road's Regal South Beach Stadium 18 before its nationwide opening April 13. The film showed in West Palm Beach on Tuesday and moves to Fort Myers Thursday.

"I like movies about redemption where people who are flawed and sinners in some way, end up doing the right thing. I like movies where justice prevails, and things like

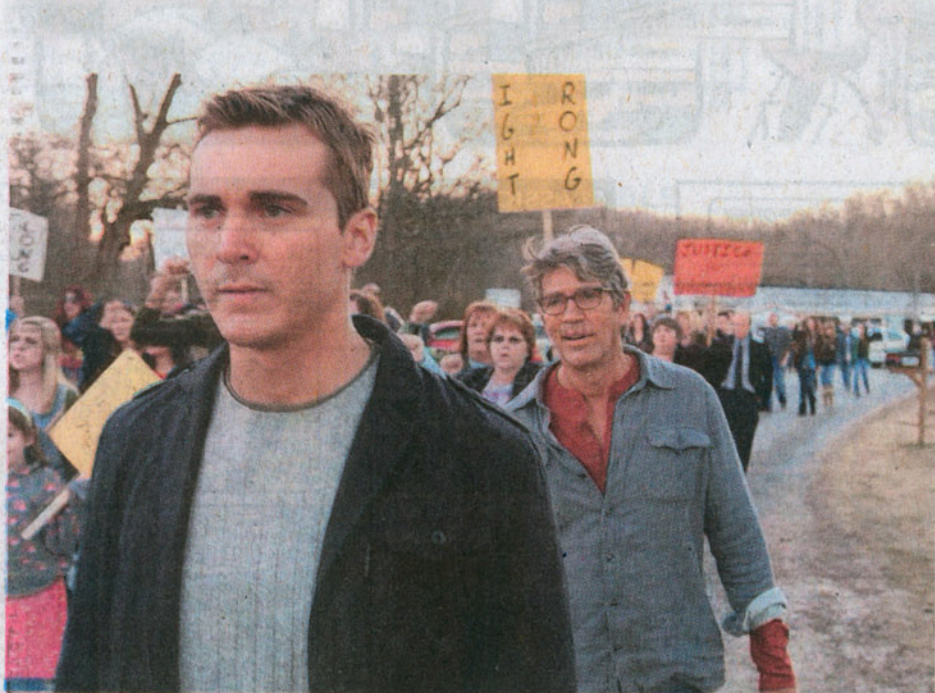
racism are exposed for the evil that it is," says Ethridge, a third-generation journalist who wrote the articles for *The Charlotte Observer*. "I think this movie tells us that individuals can make a difference when they make a commitment to justice, but also it shows how important journalism still is to society."

In *Deadline*, two young reporters at the Nashville Times, played by Eric Roberts and Steve Talley, begin investigating a decades-old

murder shrouded in secrecy, at times putting their own lives in danger.

The narrative, built powerfully atop a civil rights cold case, lives through three media. It started almost four decades ago, when a wealthy white man walked into the newsroom of *The Charlotte Observer* intent on helping to solve the murder of a 13-year-old African American boy in the Low

• TURN TO 'DEADLINE', 6E



ON THE CASE: Steve Talley and Eric Roberts star as two reporters investigating a decades-old murder shrouded in secrecy.

Country along the Savannah River. He had been shot in the head on his way home. He offered the details of this unsolved case — it had not been investigated in the 20 years since it happened — to Ethridge, then a general assignment reporter.

"He told this really compelling story and even after the hard news of it and the indictment and the trial, the story just wouldn't let go of me," says Ethridge, who also wrote the screenplay. "I just kept thinking of the young man and the family and the

Indie film was inspired by a true civil rights cold case

people in that small town, and it stuck with me so long I felt there was a powerful novel in it."

Grievances, published in 2006, was widely praised as an exploration of the dark, and often hidden chapters of racial unrest in the South, the intrepid world of journalism, and the sometimes messy march to justice. "Mark Ethridge has captured the South in a way that is every bit as evocative as *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* and he has told a story as riveting as the best Grisham courtroom thriller. But *Grievances* is no mere thriller. It is a story of the heart that will resonate with readers long after they have turned the final page," said Pat Conroy, best-selling author of *The Prince of Tides* and *The Great Santini*.

After the 2007 reunion, Ethridge and Hahn, director and CEO of Film House, began transforming the novel into a movie — cast, financed and produced in Nashville.

"The challenge was to take the 280 pages and turn into 100 pages and to make it visual. The film deals with more than solving

the crime and bringing the guilty to justice and the feeling of closure," said Hahn. "What you end up with is white and black families working together in the South trying to move forward. When we showed the film to test audiences, they said it reminded them of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. To be mentioned with that classic in the same breath is simply awesome."

In that way, the film's greatest gift maybe its ability to tap into the stains and fault lines of the South, but also into the region's unfaltering resilience and ability to forgive and redeem.

While the core injustice is intact, some of the details have changed. The killing shifts from vintage South Carolina to contemporary Alabama, the newspaper from North Carolina to Tennessee. "We made sure the film is faithful to the spirit of the story," Hahn says. "What we are hoping is that when people leave the theater, they know that ordinary citizens can see something wrong and do something about it and that the pursuit of truth and justice can have an incredible healing effect."