

Hollywood Unscripted Ep 02 - Scandalous

Announcer: From Curtco, there's no place like Hollywood.

Scott Tallal: Welcome to Hollywood UNSCRIPTED. I'm your host, Scott Tallal from the Malibu Film Society. And today, we're going to do something a little different. We're going to talk about the shockingly true untold story of the National Enquirer. From its earliest days in association with the Mafia to present day connections to President Trump, all exposed in a sensational new documentary, Scandalous. With us to talk about it, director Mark Landsman. Welcome, Mark.

Mark Landsman: Thank you so much, Scott. Glad to be here.

Scott Tallal: Sorry to be so over-the-top, but kind of in keeping with the whole theme here.

Mark Landsman: It's a slightly over-the-top subject.

Scott Tallal: So why National Enquirer?

Mark Landsman: You know, the sort of earliest inception of this project, the earliest ideas, I think, came from just being a person in a grocery store in 2015, being aware of what was in my visual eyeline and sort of noticing that things were strange and unbelievably imbalanced. And that was just the first thing was just sort of this discomfort I was feeling with the racks at the front of the counter that I didn't really at the time have language for. I just knew that it was strange.

Scott Tallal: But you'd been to shopping centers before. Why 2015? Why suddenly?

Mark Landsman: Well, I think we, probably all, many of us, regardless of where you are in the political spectrum, realized that something was different about our grocery stores in 2015 leading up to the election. There was an increasing amount of political propaganda, you could say in your face on the covers of our supermarket tabloids. And that was unprecedented, certainly for me. But then in 2017, around the holidays, my wife's best friend called and said, Hey, my dad is coming into town and why don't we all

go out for dinner? So we went. And after a couple of rounds of drinks at The Cheesecake Factory, he starts telling us about his early days as a reporter and articles editor at a rising publication called The National Enquirer. And the stories were nuts. They were off the wall. I mean, espionage, checkbook journalism, bribery, disguises, bottomless expense accounts, global glamorous travel, all kinds of ethically blurred tactics. It sounded like an Ocean's Eleven movie, to be honest with you. So I thought, well, this is fantastic. I didn't think too much of it and then in April of 2018, Ronan Farrow story broke in The New Yorker and.

Scott Tallal: About.

Mark Landsman: About catch and kill and about AMI's relationship with then candidate Trump. Once Ronan's story broke in The New Yorker, which I thought was first of all just an astonishing piece of journalism, this idea of catch and kill was sort of top of mind, but nobody quite understood it. I called my friend's father again and his name is Malcolm Balfour, and he said, well, it just so happens I'm gonna be in L.A. next week. Why don't you come have some drinks with me and some of my former Enquirer buddies? And so I, of course, said absolutely. And I did. And I sat very quietly while they regaled each other with stories. They talked the way that war buddies talk from the trenches, you know, these unbelievable stories. And it was at that point that I knew that we had a film. And I talked to Malcolm a little bit more. And I said, you know, would you be interested in sort of being the first domino in this project? And he said, yes. And that's how that sparked the project.

Scott Tallal: Did you at that first dinner understand what the film was going to be from beginning to end?

Mark Landsman: No, no. That's the amazing thing about a documentary, is that it's a wave. You catch the wave, but you don't quite know where it's going to take you. And it was impossible at that point to know what would happen in terms of current events. I mean, no one had a crystal ball. Nobody knew the degree to which anything was going on. And it's only in retrospect that you really see it. There were some fundamental questions that we wanted to answer, namely, how the hell did we get here? How did we get to a place where the very notion of a fact in journalism is a debate, that there's a question about that, that the public is getting their information from such diverse polemic

campus. How did we get to that, that we had a reality star who previously had been a tabloid darling sitting in the most powerful office in the world. How did that happen? And what role, if any, did this, quote unquote, sleazy supermarket tabloid have in that process? So I was really kind of wanting to understand history and wanted to sort of connect the dots. A lot of us were just baffled by what was going on. And so that was the impetus for the film.

Scott Tallal: You've described the film as a classic 50s horror B-movie. Talk to us about that analogy.

Mark Landsman: I love that you asked that question. So I love those movies, right? The Creature from the Black Lagoon, Frankenstein, The Werewolf, The Mummy, The Blob, those are great films. King Kong is my ultimate favorite. So what happens in those movies? Right. Originally, there is this creature that in the beginning is fairly I'm not going to say docile, but is not the terror that's about to eat Manhattan. Right? And so the Enquirer really felt similar. The first sort of mad scientist was man named Generosa Pope Junior. And he was quite a genius, a savant. He'd gone to M.I.T.. So he was the son of the most powerful Italian-American in New York City. Generosa Pope, Senior who owned Colonial Sand and Cement, which poured the cement for the Empire State Building, among other places. He also was the publisher of Il Progresso, which was the most powerful and influential Italian American weekly in the country. So he was incredibly influential. This guy was a genius, his son. And he was the mad inventor who created the National Enquirer back in the early 70s. His idea for what that paper would be was very, very different than what it would become many decades later under the current leadership. So that's why I liken this whole thing to a B movie. Initially, Frankenstein is not out to kill small children and terrorize the village. But the monster becomes that largely because he becomes agitated and he transforms. So we wanted to look at how this publication started in one iteration, morphed over time and became something ultimately that was deleterious.

Scott Tallal: You've just touched on four points I want to follow up on. First, among these Generosa Pope, Sr and Jr. Are the rumors true?

Mark Landsman: Well, you know, I don't think they're really rumors as much as historical fact. I mean, you know, look, neither one of them was, quote unquote, in the

mob. And I want to very much respect Italian-Americans who are listening to this podcast, because I think it's easy. It's just kind of lowbrow, if you like. Oh, well, powerful Italian-American must be in the mob. But it's indisputable that the money that launched what would become The National Enquirer came from Frank Costello, who was the head of the Gambino crime family. And it's undeniable that Generosa Pope, Sr. was the most powerful and politically influential Italian-American in New York and possibly the United States at that time. So I don't have any other facts beyond that. So I can't substantiate journalistically what people say, including Generosa Pope's own son, was that the paper was Mafia related. Back in the day.

Scott Tallal: So how did that influence early content, if at all?

Mark Landsman: Well, I don't know if influence early content as much as I think that it inspired Pope's unbelievable determination and drive. This is a man who truly had an anything for the story's ethos, and he didn't take no for an answer. And I think that's because he witnessed his father not taking no for an answer. He didn't have to take no for an answer. It's not an accident that called him the Godfather of tabloids. He's a Corleone character. He's straight out of the movies. And that was another reason why we wanted to make the movie, because he's a larger than life American character like Vito Corleone. And he kind of ruled the Enquirer like that. People were in awe of him and they were terrified of him. People felt incredibly fortunate to be in his employment. And no one bought a car above like a Pacer because it might not have had a parking space on Monday. There was no job security. He kept you running. He kept you on your toes. He kept you competing with your desk mate. So you were constantly looking over your shoulder. It was not an easy environment to work in. And I think a lot of that might have come from some knowledge of how other organizations work.

Scott Tallal: So what are the key turning points in the publication during the Generosa Pope years?

Mark Landsman: I think the first key turning point was going to gore or talking about headless bodies in topless bars, that kind of thing. That kind of gore. So when Generosa Pope acquired The New York Enquirer in the early 50s, it was a racing rag. It had a circulation of under 20,000. Local news and bets and basically, he was really trying to look for a way to boost circulation. How is he going to get eyeballs to this

paper? His father had been ridiculously successful in publishing and he thought, OK, I want to step out of my father's gigantic shoes and I want to make a name for myself. And the story goes that he was driving on one of the New York parkways one day in the late '50s, and he came across a head on collision. And what he noticed was all on the sides of the road, there were hundreds of rubberneckers angling to look at the carnage. And this was a very bloody car crash. And he had an epiphany in that moment and said, that's what I want to do. That's what I want for my papers. He basically went to crime photographers. He got access to police reports, all of this. And he began to publish the most graphic, the most violent, really the most disgusting photographs you could possibly imagine. Man drives spike through head. Woman stomps child you know, baby burned alive, like horrible stuff. And it was gross, but circulation shot through the roof. So that was the first big benchmark was he understood the American psyche. And at that time, the lowest hanging fruit for him was car collisions and murder scenes.

Scott Tallal: There's a big transition from that to winding up at the cash register because.

Mark Landsman: That's right.

Scott Tallal: Grocery stores don't want that at the cash register.

Mark Landsman: That's exactly right. Well, he wasn't thinking grocery stores at the time that the circulation popped to a million in the 50s. It wasn't until the 60s, when Americans were sort of going to the suburbs and the classic newsstand, when the newsboy "extra, extra", that was all going away, so he was realizing, well, we've a problem on our hands here because where are people going to buy our paper? And all of our readership is flocking to the suburbs. So he and the Enquirer leadership at the time identified the one place where they knew that Americans would be several times a week, without a doubt. And that was the American supermarket. And not only did he identify that it was the supermarket where he could get his captive audience, but he identified this very interesting untapped piece of real estate, which was at the front of every single supermarket checkout counter. So he was a bit of like a marketing genius in some ways, like a bit of a Nostradamus. Where are the magazines typically in your grocery store back in the 60s? They're all the way back by the toothpaste in some weird aisle that maybe you don't even go to. But he said, why would they be there? I want it to

be point of purchase and I want it to be eye level. I mean this guy went to M.I.T. briefly and was an engineer. So he basically designed the racks, the racks that you see at the front of the supermarkets. That was Generosa Pope's idea. Then he designed the racks so that you would have Family Circle, Reader's Digest, TV Guide. But right in the center, front center, eye level in the largest slot, that was The National Enquirer. And that's when it just took off. But headless bodies and car crashes were not going to go over well with Missy Smith in Kansas City buying her milk and cheerios. So he had to drastically change his editorial, his content, in order to cater to exactly what she would want. And that's kind of his second big epiphany. And his second big genius was, Who's my reader? And he identified her as this woman in Kansas City. He called her Missy Smith, and she was the average American woman he called. And he knew everything about her from a marketing research standpoint. He knew where she shopped. He knew how many times a week she shopped. He knew what she bought. He knew what she would want to go home and hand her husband to read. He called it, Hey, Martha. The woman would read it. She'd give it to her husband. He'd be reading it and he would yell across the room. Hey, Martha. Can you believe that they found another UFO in Roswell? He also knew that she went to the beauty parlor X number of times, you know, a month, and that at the beauty parlor she would want to gossip with her girlfriends about celebrities, psychic phenomenon, medical cures, miracle cures, fad diets. So this was kind of a bit of genius because nobody was doing this. And so that was the next big movement, was get into the grocery stores and give Missy Smith in Kansas City exactly what she's craving. And then the next huge moment was the death of Elvis Presley. That's when they realized that they could not only sell a million copies a week, they could sell seven million copies a week. And it was said that for every one copy that was bought, three people read it. So you're talking about, you know, nearly 25 million Americans reading this thing.

Scott Tallal: I think that story, the story of the Elvis death in the way it was covered by the Enquirer is really instructive in terms of how this publication operated.

Mark Landsman: You gotta remember, Generosa Pope was so rich. This was a one man operation and he was God in that operation. And he had an endless bank account, a bottomless account. And he was not at all averse to spending cash. You know, at the time, people really weren't talking about celebrity's deaths. It was considered very macabre and kind of off color. Pope was the opposite of that. You know, his

background. He was all for that. So he instructed these guys, he said, I don't care what story you get. I want a shot of Elvis Presley in the coffin. You didn't have the editor of The New York Times asking for that. But Generosa Pope demanded that, and the film uncovers how that happened.

Scott Tallal: You know, it's a short leap from the death of Elvis to the O.J. Simpson trial. And that was a 10 year time span, 15 year time span.

Mark Landsman: That was 20 year time.

Scott Tallal: So during that time is when Generosa Pope passes, newspaper passes into corporate hands. What are the key things that are happening inside the Enquirer before, during, after and getting us to that point?

Mark Landsman: Well, you know, after Pope dies, there's a there's a limbo period and the paper falls into different hands. And then really the next sort of big time period that we focus on is the Steve Coz years. And Steve is a fascinating character,. very much a departure from Generosa Pope. Pope was kind of a workingman's mega multimillionaire. You know, he wore like Sears and Roebuck shirts and drove, you know, an Oldsmobile Cutlass and was just kind of really like a working man's guy. Coz had come from Harvard and was a little bit more you know, they called him a schoolboy and it was a different kind of climate. And he also diversified the paper. He hired more women, more people of color. The stories and the editorials, everything changed under that. It was kind of like the blossoming of the Enquirer that a lot of us associate with, glossy photographs of Whitney Houston or Oprah or Madonna or whatever.

Scott Tallal: Was there anything during the course of your investigation that maybe not in the movie, but that just genuinely floored you.

Mark Landsman: We put everything in the movie, because what's the point? You know, we're not doing catch and kill. We're doing catch and reveal. That's the point of a documentary. Why would we conceal anything? The filmmakers are just kind of on the frontlines in service of the viewer. It would be an injustice to the story to kind of shelve stuff. Certainly the Enquirer has a 50 year history. So we had to make some decisions. We're not going to go into John Edwards when we're going into Gary Hart. That's just

redundant. You have a very precious amount of real estate in a feature film. You can't waste time and you can't really repeat the same thing twice. If the audience gets the gist, why bang them over the head with something else? You know, somebody can Google The Enquirer and they can find out that they busted John Edwards. That's fine. It didn't feel relevant to our story. Our story was about, okay, what are the real benchmark moments, the milestones? You know, that said something about us as a culture. You know, that's the thing. I mean, the Enquirers is this unusual mirror that really is just a reflection of who we were at. At any given moment in time.

Scott Tallal: One of the things that struck me in watching the film is that you don't come at it with any particular viewpoint or judgment. It's just very fact based, straightforward, this is what's happened over the course of the evolution of this publication. Why did you make that decision not to have that kind of a viewpoint?

Mark Landsman: Well, I would argue that we absolutely have that kind of viewpoint.

Scott Tallal: Oh, you do?

Mark Landsman: Oh, absolutely. Look, any filmmaker and I think even any journalists these days who tells you they don't have a point of view is lying to you. How do you not have a point of view as a human being? Your brain is a filtration device and you're impacted by your life experience. You're impacted by all kinds of things you're impacted by facts. But you're impacted as a storyteller. In fact, the catalyst for telling a story comes normally from a few base emotions. For me, oftentimes it's outrage. I can't believe it. Or astonishment, right. That's why we make films. Why else would we dedicate two years of our lives to a pretty rough and thankless pursuit? You know, documentary filmmaking is not a walk in the park, and filmmaking period is not a walk in the park. It's tough. So we absolutely have a point of view. But that's not to say that it's not balanced. But even balance is tricky, Scott, like so, the film presents the facts, but the facts themselves tell a story. What we're not interested in being is pedantic. I'm not interested. None of my collaborators were interested in beating you over the head with the obvious. You know, we like to think that people who are sitting down to watch a film have a brain and have their own points of view. So maybe what you're perceiving is a more nuanced look. But in no way does the film shy away from its influence on culture and sort of what the culture has become. That's why we have people like Ken Auletta,

Maggie Haberman, Carl Bernstein really giving us some context for what this thing did to journalism, because it did have a very damaging effect on the state of journalism today in America. You know, I don't even think that Enquirer reporters themselves deny that. Some people even admitted in the film.

Jenny Curtis: Hi, this is Jenny Curtis, producer of Hollywood UNSCRIPTED. We hope the show is igniting your passion as much as it is ours. Please subscribe, rate us and leave a review. It really does matter as we bring you more inspiring conversations with the filmmakers you admire. Now back to the show.

Scott Tallal: I want to jump forward a little bit in time. Generosa Pope passes away, but the publication moves into corporate ownership. And at this point, I want to bring in the man behind the curtain. Our CEO of Curtco Media, Bill Curtis, spent almost 40 years in magazine publishing and knew all of the key players from that point forward, So I'm going to ask Bill, welcome.

Bill Curtis: You really want me in?

Scott Tallal: Yeah, of course we do. Come on.

Bill Curtis: Mark, how are you doing? Actually, I was listening to a couple of these chats you were just having, which I found to be so interesting. Do you mind if I go back and ask, as the role of director for a documentary like Scandalous, how involved were you in being in the interviews with the writers and the editors and pulling out all that information? That was really remarkable. You got people to admit things that couldn't have been easy.

Mark Landsman: Well, there's no writer. It's just me interviewing them. I mean, there are editors, obviously, after the fact. But, you know, we , myself and I had two very amazing producers, Kristen Vaurio and Jennifer Ash Rudick and an incredible team of people working together. And we did a lot of research. Months of research and then prepared the interviews. And then I conducted the interviews with everybody.

Bill Curtis: So you found these people and knew that they would be somewhat forthcoming or you just worked through the process and you found yourself in a great spot.

Mark Landsman: You know, in documentaries, you never know how forthcoming someone's going to be until you're sitting in the room with them. I think in the case of the National Enquirer, it was very tricky because everybody is very, sort of, mistrusting how you're going to screw me. What are you going to ask me this that or the other. I mean, look, initially this whole thing started with my wife's best friend's dad. And I had a wonderful rapport with him. So I knew at the very least that Malcolm, who had been an old timer at the Enquirer in the '70s, who didn't have an NDA, he was just going to chat and just be really open. And he introduced me to other people who were legendary reporters who were in the early days. So I knew that some of the old guard would be great. Some of the old guard didn't return my calls. Some of the old guard actually started to cast aspersions upon me and the project very early on. They have a Facebook page and, you know, like, who is this guy and what's he doing? And I'm sure you remember this from your publishing days. It's like a domino effect. You get one person and then there's several other people who agree to do it. Once we got Ian Calder, who was the original sort of consiglieri, he was the number two to Generosa Pope. A number of people said, yes, that was an incredible get.

Bill Curtis: But you also had this remarkable epiphany to bring in one of the most respected writers in the country. You brought in Carl Bernstein to comment about his perspective, which, of course, lended such credibility to the whole process.

Mark Landsman: Yeah. It was really important for us to have context, right. You can let these guys wax on and on all day long and then you have no understanding of perspective. It's like an echo chamber. So it was really important to us that we brought in people who had made a career out of pursuing journalism on a ferociously ethical level. So, Maggie Haberman, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, Carl Bernstein, obviously sort of professor emeritus of American journalism. Ken Auletta, New Yorker writer, author. And Keith Kelly from The New York Post. It was really important to us to have that perspective, not to sort of do a point/counterpoint, but just to remind the audience that this thing was not happening in a vacuum. Really also to understand the effect it was having at the time among mainstream journalists. They were flipping out because

this became an issue of commerce. This was about money. This was about business. This is about the owners of these large media outlets realizing we can't compete with these tabloid guys. So if we can't compete with them, we probably need to start to sort of maybe adopt some of these styles and tactics. And if you look at today's media, Scott, you are absolutely right. There's that aspect of it. You can't deny the tabloidization of our media. It's happened. And Maggie Haberman is particularly amazing because she cut her teeth at The New York Post. She was a New York tabloid writer for years. And now she's probably the most respected journalist in America today.

Bill Curtis: And I thought it was brilliant to bring in Keith Kelly, because, frankly, the million or two people who were in the publishing field have followed Keith Kelley for 30 years.

Mark Landsman: That's right. Media whisperer.

Bill Curtis: And he is the guy who knows everything about media. So I just thought it was brilliant to bring him into the film.

Mark Landsman: Keith was so great. You know, what I love about Keith Kelly is he's a very by the book guy. He's a tabloid guy, but not in a sensationalist way. He's a New York journalist. He's going to give you the facts.

Scott Tallal: So let's set the stage. Bill, it's interesting because you and David Pecker, who eventually took control of AMI, you worked together in CBS magazines,.

Bill Curtis: And I'm not I'm not sure you could actually say that David Pecker worked together with anybody. That wasn't his style. But.

Scott Tallal: Talk to us about who he was.

Bill Curtis: I just want everybody to know who's listening that that actually is his last name as well as perhaps his personality.

Mark Landsman: Well, my favorite, I think it was The New York Daily News, maybe New York Post. My favorite headline of all was, after all, this business with Trump came out was in huge letters on the front page of paper was Hard Times for Pecker.

Bill Curtis: No, I mean, it was very simple. David came up through the finance side of publishing. He was the CFO at CBS magazines and he worked with a guy named Tom Ryder and Peter Diamandis, both of whom are absolute saints and visionaries in content and running a business of publishing. David, who kept track of the dollars and cents, came in at a time where the value of publications was very high and he was a good financial packager of companies. So he helped Diamandis fund the purchase of CBS magazines, which became Diamandis Communications, and then he helped that go to Hachette and Hachette made him CEO. Little different job than CFO. By the time he went to purchase American Media, he became involved at a level in the editorial and the decision making at that organization far beyond what the insight of a CFO could bring.

Scott Tallal: So let's talk about that. Mark, picking up from American Media's acquisition and what happened over the years following and how that changed the ultimate course of National Enquirer.

Mark Landsman: So what I can say, you know, now I'm thinking about your earlier question about sort of what was left on the cutting room floor. And one of the things that I guess I'm remiss about is that we didn't include people's sort of firsthand accounts of the climate change that happened when Mr. Pecker took over in 1999. We have many people in our interviews who describe that moment as pretty stark. It was very, very different. It was very much like there's a new sheriff in town and there's a new mandate in town. And Steve Coz, who was the editor in chief of the Enquirer at the time and was, you know, some could say kind of a visionary. He brought unprecedented legitimacy to this paper that never had that kind of legitimacy before. Coz had ushered in the era of the O.J. coverage which caused The New York Times and David Margolick to call the Enquirer required reading in the O.J. Simpson case. So this is the kind of brainpower and Steve Coz had come from Harvard. And he was really interested in like bringing in some integrity to this paper that people sort of joked about lining their kitty litter with. And when Pecker came in, you know, he really was

Bill Curtis: you fire Michelangelo because he's too expensive. And you hire a different artist to finish the project.

Mark Landsman: Yeah, there you go. Jobs were slashed, budgets were slashed. And there was this idea that the paper was going to go to an advertising model that was become more slick, which was really antithetical to what The National Enquirer was. The Enquirer was Americana mainstream. And also just I think the way that people felt like they were treated was just very different. It was kind of a mom and pop kind of a vibe, even though people were terrified. There was a lot of camaraderie and stuff. It just the climate really changed. And of course, the content changed.

Bill Curtis: Well, he stopped spending money. They stopped buying stories. He fired all the good writers and editors because they were the most expensive. And he felt that it was a financially driven decision machine, which obviously that wasn't. You made it very clear that they were artists. Whether you agree or not with their art is another story. But certainly, as you sat with some of the people that you interviewed and you realized the massive pile of information that you had, 'cause one of the things that I think you did so well in this movie is you actually went from interview to interview, logically finding the story and you created this beginning, middle and end in Scandalous that I thought was absolutely brilliant. You were a little bit nice to David Pecker because it makes it look like he sold the company for a lot of money at the end.

Mark Landsman: He's still involved. You know, the interesting thing about this sale and about the Enquirer is that how do you find an end to a story that's unfolding in the news every day? One of the things that we had to do editorially was decide fairly early on, okay, we're not chasing the news cycle because there is some sort of breaking news about AMI, about David Pecker, about, you know, Dylan Howard or whatever. Every week, I mean, sometimes every day. And, you know, we finish the movie in July. Ronan Farrow's book was released in October. This is like this mushroom cloud that never stops mushrooming. So how do you tell a story like that? And the other thing was that we wanted this thing really to be a reflection on the evolution, origin and impact of the paper leading up to the 2016 election. So we set a framework for it. And that helped us tremendously because otherwise, you get totally overwhelmed. It's such a huge story. People have so many different associations with it. So we had to stay incredibly concentrated. We had to focus in on the stories that furthered the story. It's not that

much different than decisions you make as a narrative filmmaker. How do you continue to keep unfolding and unfolding and you're wanting people to know more until you kind of come to some sense of like, okay, that's all we can tell you. For now, folks. And then to answer your question, I love the sort of Greek chorus, Rashomon style of storytelling in documentaries. I always have. When you get people who kind of went through an experience together, it's like having a bunch of different colors to paint with. And you're making one big canvas but all these different colors bring something else out of it.

Bill Curtis: Did you say to yourself, okay, these are the stories I'm going to focus on. But I have a pile of other information I have to sift through. How did you get to the point where you could put together this compilation in a logical order?

Mark Landsman: A lot of research, hours and hours and days and weeks and months of really researching this. Reading the stories themselves, reading commentary on the stories and really looking at the stories that were seminal. That's really important. Like what were the stories that were really milestones? Because for us, when you're making a movie about an inanimate object, right? A newspaper. You have to make a decision about who your main character is. And for us, right off the bat, we knew it was the monster herself. The National Enquirer was our main character. So you anthropomorphize that character and you kind of think about how does the audience first encounter that inanimate object? This newspaper origin story. Right? Where does the origin come from? What's the inciting incident with this character? And then how do you sort of like arc that story over an ACT structure? And that's the thing that documentarians and narrative filmmakers alike share in common. It is storytelling. You have to engage people. And so you use the same kind of tools that you have in your tool kit to do that. And luckily for us, with a story like the National Enquirer, the stories that were these kind of pivotal moments, they stand out and everybody kind of has consensus on that. So you ask people questions. I didn't know anything about. I was never an Enquirer reader growing up, I didn't care but I was fascinated with it. I certainly was fascinated when it started impacting our world.

Bill Curtis: As director, where you were also doing the fact checking, you had to kind of decide which were going to be your important stories and what was going to be the music behind that moment. So I wanted to talk to you just a little bit about the emotion

that you got out during different phases of the music behind your facts and figures and interviews.

Mark Landsman: I love that you ask that question. So first of all, worked with an extraordinary composer named Craig DeLeon who really understands the power of the music to evoke a tone. I think that we really also worked hard to not have the music be so heavy handed. And I like the way that Craig can be very minimalist. And we also had moments where we wanted to evoke a period. Right? This is a story that starts in the '50s and ends in the current day. I had a brilliant music supervisor, a guy named Carter Little, and we were able to get some really great music that we felt evoked the story and the time period. And that's some of the more fun parts of the filmmaking process, is how you involve music. Enquirer is so kitschy and so campy. You don't really have to work that hard to evoke a tone. The paper itself has a tone. You don't to impose a tone upon it, which made the search for all of our archival material and our music really fun because we're like, OK, what's going to complement this image of Burt Reynolds or whatever it is? And Loni Anderson and you wanted to have fun with it. The paper sort of helped us along with that, the kitsch of it

Bill Curtis: How did you fact check what the writers and editors told you?

Mark Landsman: Well, that's interesting. I mean, a lot of it is sort of comparing people's interviews to each other. A reporter might report, for example, on what went on as she was exploring or investigating an alleged story with Bill Cosby. And then you have the story from her point of view, and then you also have the story from the editor who actually received the materials. So that's really great. Documentation is another thing. Reporter's notes.

Bill Curtis: Did you put any of the editors or writers in the same room at the same time?

Mark Landsman: No, we tried actually. Initially we thought, well, maybe there some verité opportunities with this film. And there's a gathering of all of the former Enquirer employees and AMI employees. This thing called the Tab Bash every year. And we really tried to get our cameras in to film it, but we were declined.

Bill Curtis: I also noted that you reached out to David Pecker.

Mark Landsman: Many times.

Bill Curtis: Tried to get him to come on in.

Mark Landsman: Yeah. In fact, my producer went to their offices in New York and met with them and said, we want to offer you this opportunity. And we were declined. I wasn't surprised, but we definitely did due diligence and tried to reach out to David, you know, made offers available to Dylan Howard, made offers available to Barry Levine. And a number of people and people declined, for obvious reasons.

Bill Curtis: I'd like to know how you felt during the times that you discovered our current day issues, the Trump issues, the catch and kill concept. And what I want to know is when you went home at night and you had the real story, how did you feel?

Mark Landsman: I think you feel a sense of obligation. You're shepherding a story from obscurity into the light. And the intention of the project is to say this is what happened when people are sitting around in journalism classes 10, 15, 20 years from now and they want to look back on this bizarre thing that happened in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. What happened to our media? Hopefully this will be something they can draw upon in the time capsule, but they'll also draw upon Brooke Gladstone's outstanding book, *The Influencing Machine*. They'll go back to Marshall McLuhan. They'll go back to other publications and films and podcasts that tell people, look, you're a consumer of media. And if you're not aware of that, then you're a sponge. And there's a danger in that because you are basically surrendering your ability to process information and make decisions on your own behalf that are for your own good. And much in the same way that we need to pay attention these days to what we eat and drink. We need to pay attention these days to the media that we consume, even the media that we don't overtly consume, but is in our sphere of influence, like a tabloid newspaper. That is eye level every time you go to the grocery store. That is having an influence on you, whether you know it or not. That is tantamount to a billboard on a highway that you pass every single day. You don't totally glance at it because you're going to crash your car. But you see it. It comes into your sphere of influence. And then who knows how that influences you. And Keith Kelly is the one who says this very succinctly in our film. They were subtly influencing opinions. That's what the media does every single day. The whole

idea of this film is to really draw attention to our own accountability. As media consumers.

Bill Curtis: When you sit in one of your screenings and people are leaving and inevitably they're talking to each other about what they just saw. What do you want them to say about Scandalous?

Mark Landsman: I want them to be kind of agitated. I want them to kind of say, can we just go somewhere and talk about this? What they say is not my concern. Martha Graham has this really amazing quote that she gave to artists, young artists, and she said, you know, your job is to be a channel for the story. In her case, it was choreography. Right? But how what's coming through you is received is not your concern. So, yes, I want people to be entertained. I want them to have a good time. I want them to feel like they saw a movie, that they were moved. I'm a cinephile. I love filmmaking. I love films, but I want people to be provoked. You know, we live in a culture where so much of our processing of entertainment is just a sedentary passive experience. I'm not into that. I want you and your friends to walk out and be like, let's go to the bar and talk about this or let's go home and talk about this or and then talk about it with other people and get a conversation going because, you know, people are just sort of off in their camp, no one's talking in America anymore. The idea of dialogue and really kind of connecting to each other and exchanging ideas. Films have an opportunity to do that, particularly films in a theater. You know, I want people to see this movie in a theater, in a collective experience. You hear other people laughing, gasping, kind of like being exasperated or angry. That's the best part of being in a movie theater. You don't get that in your living room or your bedroom when you're watching on your flat screen or your phone or your watch.

Bill Curtis: As you've finished this movie how did you end up feeling about the subject? Did you end up loving the Enquirer or did you hate it?

Mark Landsman: You know, for me, it's never about the thing. It's about the people. The great thing about making movies is that you encounter all kinds of people that you may not have encountered. I mean, I don't spend a whole lot of time hanging out with tabloid reporters from the '70s and '80s and '90s. And what you realize is that people are infinitely more complex than their jobs. And they're more complex. They're more

nuanced. And that's a great thing. I'm going to just say, this guy right now has us all in polemics. It's black and white. And he's got us all thinking about tabloid headlines. It's just inane. It's not the way the humans are. It's not the way that we are organically as Americans. It's horrible. It's a joke. And hopefully it will be fleeting. I'm not saying that there's some halcyon days that we're gonna get back to. America has deep, deep problems. We're deeply divided. But any opportunity to get out there and explore who people really are, which is why I think being a podcaster, being a filmmaker, being the host of a film society, anything you can do that brings people together from different backgrounds. That's where the real interesting, that's where the juice is. If you are just staying there and you're staring at a bunch of people who are all talking about the same thing and and barking at their relatives who think differently. How boring is that?

Bill Curtis: So tell us, Mark, how do our listeners see this movie.

Mark Landsman: First they can go to Scandalousfilm.com. It's a Magnolia Pictures release. We're being released in I think 15 theaters around the country on November 15th and then eventually in the spring of 2020 we'll be on CNN, which we are very excited about as the CNN films presentation.

Bill Curtis: And they were your partner in this process?

Mark Landsman: Thankfully, yes. They're absolutely fantastic.

Bill Curtis: Can you tell us a little about that experience?

Mark Landsman: Just wonderful. I mean, the folks at CNN Films, Amy Entelis, Courtney Sexton and Alexandra Hannibal Hannibal. They're really filmmaker advocates. They ask the tough questions and they put you through the ringer in the best ways possible. They are really ideal partners. And for me, it was a dream to work with them. And yeah, i was really grateful.

Jenny Curtis: Hi, I'm Jenny. I'm a producer since we're all jumping in on this one. The backgrounds for each of your interview subjects were so beautiful. Was it just that was their home? Where were these locations? How did you find them?

Mark Landsman: So the backgrounds to the interviews were, we really took a lot of time to think about it. And it was a collaboration between myself and our excellent cinematographer, Michael Pessah, who have known since our days in film school together. And our producer, Jennifer Ash Rudick, who herself is an extraordinary artist. And she is a writer and editor of these very beautiful books of Beautiful Homes, which just really got an eye for architecture and design. And we didn't want to film somebody with like a bunch of books behind them or a vase with flowers or like do the kind of neutral behind the music background or whatever. We wanted it to feel very cinematic. So we knew we wanted to shoot very wide. We wanted to be able to have the background somehow be a little bit baroque and a little bit over the top because the Enquirer is baroque and over the top. But no, with the exception of only one person, those were not their homes, but they were really extraordinary locations in New York and Palm Beach and Los Angeles that we thought a lot about.

Jenny Curtis: I would really love to know, Mark. Are you changed by each of your films?

Mark Landsman: Yeah, absolutely. The way that people talk about feeling changed after reading a great book, a great movie, great museum exhibition, great play. I mean, yeah, anytime I have an opportunity to just dive deep onto something, I feel like I'm intrinsically changed by it.

Scott Tallal: In what ways?

Mark Landsman: Well, first of all, it's just so great to be able to just kind of settle in and focus on one thing. I mean, look at the culture we live in. It's like, how do you focus on anything? It's just like we're constantly bombarded with so much stuff. So to be able to, like, sink into a story and tell it nothing better. It's like being able to sit down and have a long, amazing dinner with your best friends in the world for like a year. You know, that's amazing. So, yeah. You're absolutely changed by it. And then you also have this whole other group of people and stories and anecdotes and information in your brain. That's that's kind of cool. Had my wife's best friend not been a legendary tabloid reporter and charmed us over drinks at The Cheesecake Factory. I wouldn't be sitting here. And, you know, as a filmmaker, it's like you're sitting there. The ocean is flat and sitting on your board. And then all of a sudden it's like, whoa! And you have a choice, right? It's like I I

mean, I'm either gonna stand up and attempt to catch it. Or I'm gonna get crushed by it or I'm just going to, like dive under and just whatever. Hang out. Hope that another one comes in. You can't pass up too many of them.

Scott Tallal: Does it make you think differently about how you do your job? Given that you've just talked to all of these other reporters and interviewers,.

Mark Landsman: I think it's really important as a storyteller to kind of keep checking your own instrument. I don't think a pilot gets behind the wheel of a plane before, hopefully, she or he checks the instruments before taking off. It's like where your at, where your bias is at, how you telling the story? What do you want? As Bill asked, I love that question, Like, what do you want people to think about or talk about when you leave the theater? That's really important to think about before you take off in the plane, like what kind of ride are you're looking for, you know you don't want to crash.

Jenny Curtis: But so through that, did you have a favorite moment in all of the creating of this film in the year? How long did it take you again?

Mark Landsman: It took just over a year.

Jenny Curtis: Is there a moment that stands out?

Mark Landsman: I've got to think about that. Yeah, I had a lot of really favorite moments, but I think that it's kind of an astonishing moment for me when I'm sitting in an interview with someone who is particularly defensive and guarded and is turning the interview into a sparring match. And you kind of have to get very aikido and very into sort of martial arts and just kind of wait them out. You really do. You just have to wait them out because eventually their humanity will happen. And that for me was really interesting with these guys. One person in particular who I won't mention, but he was tough, really tough. And he just fought me on every single question and wanted to spin it. I mean, these are tabloid guys, so there's no better spin doctors than these guys. And just to kind of wait him out. Now, I know he's going to crack eventually. And he did. That was a really great lesson in kind of just trusting your instincts. Okay.

Bill Curtis: In general, how did they feel about the fact that you were telling this story?

Mark Landsman: The feedback from them has been, you know, you captured something and we'll see. I mean, most of them haven't seen it yet.

Bill Curtis: Scott, thanks for inviting me in here. It was a pleasure to take part in your interview. And Mark Landsman, I think the Scandalous movie is in fact, scandalous, and you should be very proud of what you created.

Mark Landsman: Thank you. I think it's really evident what's been going on. If you have a pulse and you've been alive for the last four years, and I think that regardless of where you are on the political spectrum, if you're curious about this publication, we did our very, very best to present you the story of how that publication unfolded, how it began, the critical moments in its history, and an attempt to bring you to how we got to where we are today and how the particular characters that we're seeing in our politics and our media, how they in some ways got there as well. So the film really goes into that in a more granular way.

Bill Curtis: For those of you listening you have to see this movie either in the theater or if not, in 2020 it will be on CNN. And it's worth your time.

Scott Tallal: And that's a wrap on our latest edition of Hollywood UNSCRIPTED. I'm your host, Scott Tallal with the Malibu Film Society. Thanks to all of our guests today. Thanks to our producers and engineers and everyone who participated. And we'll look forward to having you back for our next show.

Jenny Curtis: Hollywood UNSCRIPTED is presented in cooperation with the Malibu Film Society. This episode was hosted by Scott Tallal with guest Mark lensmen and additional guest Bill Curtis. The score from Scandalous featured as the music in this episode was composed by Craig DeLeon and provided courtesy of Magnolia Pictures. Hollywood UNSCRIPTED is created by Curtco Media, produced and edited by Jenny Curtis. Sound Engineering by Michael Kennedy, recorded at Curtco Media's Malibu Podcast Studios. The executive producer of Hollywood UNSCRIPTED is Stuart Halperin. The Hollywood UNSCRIPTED theme song is by Celeste and Eric Dick. Subscribe to this podcast for more conversations with top industry professionals discussing the movies you love.

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