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# Sneak Preview of Cormac McCarthy's Novel-Turned-Film Tonight

Producer Paula Mae Schwartz explores her role on *The Road*

BY CALEB DANILOFF



Paula Mae Schwartz and novelist Cormac McCarthy at the November 16 New York City premiere of *The Road*, which Schwartz (CAS'62) produced. The film is based on McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning book.

The burp belongs to Paula Mae Schwartz.

“The father and son are in this devastated mall, full of debris, and the man, played by Viggo Mortensen, knocks the only Coke left in the world out of this dusty machine. He gives it to the boy, who has never tasted soda. And the boy burps. That was my suggestion.”

Schwartz (CAS'62) laughs as she recalls this moment during the making of the movie *The Road* (Link: <http://www.theroad-movie.com/>), which opens to general audiences tomorrow, Wednesday, November 25. (A special screening for the BU community will be held tonight; see details below). Schwartz and her husband, Steve, backed the celluloid version of Cormac McCarthy's (Link: <http://www.cormacmccarthy.com/>) staggering post-apocalyptic tale and plunged in creatively. “That was one of our requirements,” Schwartz says. From script feedback to casting to set visits, the PR gurus turned film producers had their pockets filled with two-cent pieces.

*The Road* is their major motion picture debut. After several decades of representing high-profile clients, the couple is grabbing their dream with both hands. In 2004, they launched film company Chockstone Pictures (Link: <http://www.chockstonepictures.com/>) and have since ceded to their staff the day-to-day operations of Schwartz Communications, Inc. (Link: <http://www.schwartz-pr.com/>), in Waltham, Mass., the world's largest PR firm for emerging technology companies.

The Schwartzes knew they wanted to create a screen version of McCarthy's 2006 tale about a father and son struggling to survive in a world that has suffered an unnamed nuclear-like disaster of holocaust proportions. They were joined by fellow producer Nick Wechsler (Link: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0917059/>), and the film, starring Mortensen (Link: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001557/>), Charlize Theron (Link: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000234/>), and young Kodi Smit-McPhee (Link: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm2240346/>), was directed by Australian John Hillcoat (Link: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0384825/>) (*The Proposition*). *The Road* took three years to complete, with the original release date pushed back a year. But it's wrapped now, and Schwartz says Thanksgiving is the perfect time to ponder its themes.

“It's fortuitous because very often we don't appreciate and give thanks for what we have until it's too late,” she says. “Cormac presents his view and it's not preaching, but it does have a sense that we need to be protective of our world because it's in a threatened environment.”

**BU Today: What prompted you to get involved in this project?**

**Schwartz:** We feel *The Road* is an important book, on the same level as Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* or Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. It ponders important questions. Because Cormac is a poet in his prose, we thought it would be a challenge to turn this historic, seminal novel into a movie, but we felt it should be recorded and interpreted on film.

**But your background is in PR, not film.**

Both of us had some experience with film. Steve was at Columbia University School of the Arts, and I had done some work after BU teaching filmmaking. We decided six years ago that we wanted to make this dream come true.

**What surprised you most about the filmmaking process?**

That it's collaborative, and it takes a lot of time for the movie to get to the screen. I appreciate the work that goes into making films much more than I ever had.

**What were the challenges in adapting this book?**

It's a thoughtful novel, very emotionally stirring. It talks about the end of the world. And it's a film that features two actors on screen at all times, father and son. It's challenging to make it interesting visually. We did break it up with some wonderful cameo roles: an old man played by Robert Duvall, the wife played by Charlize Theron, and Guy Pearce (*The Proposition*, *Memento*) and Michael Kenneth Williams (HBO's *The Wire*).

**Did you spend a lot of time on the set?**

We read scripts, discussed ideas, went on location. We were with Cormac, who came to visit every once in a while. I asked him what motivated him to write the book, and he pointed to his son John, who was maybe 11 at the time. He talked about wanting to prepare John for survival no matter what the world would be like when he was gone. Cormac is 76 years old now.

**Can you give an example of your creative input?**

We liked the flashbacks with Charlize and wanted to keep those in as much as possible. We also like the ending, which is a little bit different — well, I don't want to tell you what the ending is, but it's hopeful, because Cormac's view is that despite the ravages and devastation of the world, people will survive. There was no sun in the movie, but one thing we did to heighten the hopefulness at the end was to brighten the light — not bring in the sun, but make the light brighter.

**Where was it filmed?**

In Pennsylvania, where there were leftovers of mining, slag heaps everywhere. It was also filmed in New Orleans, where Katrina did her devastation. We took it to Mount St. Helens, in Washington state, so we could see what a volcano could do to the environment. These are parts of our country that have been destroyed. We didn't have to use a lot of special effects, unfortunately.

**How do you feel about *The Road's* Oscar chances?**

We're a contender. Viggo Mortensen is an actor who hasn't had his opportunity for recognition. We thought it was exciting to give him this vehicle to present his range of emotions, his physicality, and theatricality. He schleps the boy around for much of the movie. He should win an Oscar.

**Any other projects on your plate?**

We've optioned the rights to *The Host*, which is Stephenie Meyer's first novel for adults, a sci-fi

adventure about aliens. We're working on another movie based on a script by Paul Schrader, who did *Raging Bull* and *Taxi Driver*. That's a thriller about a CIA agent. We've optioned *Killer Instinct*, which is set in Boston, by Boston-based author Joseph Finder.

### **Did you see the Coen brothers' *No Country for Old Men*, also based on a McCarthy book?**

Yes, I thought it was very exciting. *No Country* was totally action-oriented. *The Road* is a combination of action and thought. There's action, but it's really focused on the love between father and son, which is unusual for movies about fathers. They're not often portrayed in the best light in terms of paternal instincts. But this is the ultimate father. This is what every woman would wish for.

*The Road* will be screened for the BU community tonight, Tuesday, November 24, at 7 p.m. at the AMC Loews Boston Common 19, 175 Tremont St., Boston (Green Line's Boylston Street stop, or walk down Commonwealth Ave. to the Boston Common). Download a free pass here (Link: <http://www.gofobo.com/rsvp>) ; enter BUHEF2 in the code box. It's first come, first served.

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