



# Making “Master’s Tree”

The Mississippi-based Palmer Home for Children will join Memphis’ famed Peabody ducks (as well as some well-known talent like Selena Gomez) on the big screen this Christmas season. Filming now, “Master’s Tree,” based on a screenplay by Germantown’s Jim Walker and actor Tom Wiggin, follows a group of teens on an adventure from Palmer Home to Memphis.

TEXT Alex McAdams | PHOTOGRAPHY courtesy of, Palmer Home for Children, Peabody Memphis

If you’ve lived within 10 hours of Memphis, you’ve no doubt heard about or seen the swanky ducks at the Peabody Hotel. Aptly titled the “marching ducks” by the Peabody itself, these red-carpet-accustomed mallards will stride in style alongside a well-known cast of actors this Christmas season.

While it may seem relatively arbitrary to write a screenplay based around the waddling Peabody Hotel ducks and their duckmaster, Germantown resident Jim Walker made it possible, not only with clear reason but also with purpose. The “Master’s Tree” movie script revolves around a small private Mississippi organization with a big public purpose: the Palmer Home for Children, an institution which houses children whose parents are unable to further care for them.

Acting as the director of fundraising from 1990 through 1996, Walker looked to the children in his Bible study group for inspiration. “Through that period of time I also worked in youth ministry, and I lived in an apartment adjacent to the gymnasium,” Walker says. “Every Tuesday night, I had a Bible study with the high school kids; they came for an hour, and we’d order pizza, have a 30-minute study and [in the remaining time] watch the ‘Little Rascals’ or the ‘Three Stooges.’”

It was at this time that Walker began to concoct his story line. According to Walker, the kids’ favorite Rascals episode was “Mushin’ Milk,” in which the characters run away from their 1930s-era orphanage. “I started developing an idea—a story running through my mind—about the kids,” he says. “I never really planned on doing anything with it.”

It wasn’t until Walker met up with “As the World Turns” and “Law and Order” actor Tom Wiggin at a charity event in honor of the Palmer Home that the project began to take off. “One breakfast I shared my ideas with Tom about the kids,” Walker says. “We sat down over a week and hacked out a screenplay, which, 14 years later, seems easy.”

The real nuts and bolts of his model, Walker said, lie in the children. “It was basically through the experience I had,” he says. “There is so much humor around children. You take 80 kids living on a campus, and it’s comedy. Some of the things they get into are really hysterical, but it’s painful too; there are life lessons learned.”

The inevitable question is why Walker and Wiggin chose to use Memphis as a backdrop to tell the story of a Mississippi-based organization for children in need. “The basic storyline is that three of the older children run away to Memphis,” Walker says, adding that

given the proximity of Memphis to the Palmer Home campuses, the feat is not impossible.

“Once they get there, the kids befriend an elderly gentleman—the Peabody’s first duckmaster. We just made the role of the older gentleman as a high-profile recluse,” he says, adding, “Of course the story we wrote around the first duckmaster in the movie is fictional, but it makes a great backdrop for the story. That’s the canvas to make the story richer. If you’re going to create a story, it should be in a culturally rich environment. We took a rich place of Tennessee history and helped make it a canvas around these young kids.”

As for the Peabody, it’s a “rich, great way to value Tennessee. It’s a beautiful picture of a small tradition, almost done as a joke—it started small and became a major production.”

The kids’ shenanigans take on a deeper meaning when it’s revealed that the duckmaster, slated to be played by *Star Wars* celebrity James Earl Jones at the time of publication, was a former resident of Palmer Home as well.

Without revealing the entire plot of the film, the story continues when a tree is planted by the duckmaster and his brother, which becomes the principal moral priority in the film.

“Great things start small and

take lots of nurturing," Walker says. "This is true of every child. The tree becomes the central focus of the children at the orphanage."

Other notable celebrities tied to project include The Disney Channel's starlet Selena Gomez and Nickelodeon's latest heartthrob James Maslow.

The Palmer Home for Children was established in 1895 by Presbyterian minister Benjamin Morgan Palmer and a group of women from his church in Columbus, Mississippi, says executive director of the Hernando, Mississippi Palmer Home campus Robert Farris.

Although the Palmer Home started out as an orphanage, "we don't serve any true orphans anymore," Farris explains. "All the children who live here have parents who can't take care of them in cases like addiction and incarceration."

The outfit is no longer considered Presbyterian either; it is now considered non-denominational, although the roots of the Presbyterian beginnings are still a motivating force and emphasis among the campuses in the mission to provide aid to less fortunate children.

The Palmer Home is a non-profit charitable organization and receives all of its funding through private donations from benefactors and Presbyterian churches throughout the state of Mississippi alongside its heavy donations from patrons located in Memphis.

The primary reason for building a campus in Hernando, Mississippi, was to extend its arm closer to the Memphian patrons without leaving the established jurisdiction of Mississippi, Farris explains. "We're hoping the movie will expose the plight of children that a lot of people don't really see," he says. "We're excited about it, and we think it's going to provide publicity."

Walker echoed Farris' sentiments. "People who don't understand children's homes thinks it's a terrible place," he says. "Think about the alternative ... But thank God they're there."

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1737



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