

# WELLESLEY LIFE

## Changing the script

By Lawrence Fahey  
TOWNSMAN STAFF

**T**he road to filmmaking has always had a tendency to be circuitous. Howard Hawks was a pilot before becoming a director. Robert Evans sold women's pants before moving into acting and then producing. Tom Cruise studied to become a priest.

And so it is for two Wellesley-raised filmmakers, each of whom began their post-college careers with much different goals in mind.

"I was moving to New York to be this great dancer," remembered writer/producer Melissa Miller, 28, whose short film, "The Wedding Bout," will have its world premiere at the Palm Beach International Film Festival in April 2003.

It was 1998 and Miller had just graduated from American University in Washington, D.C., with a major in sociology and minor in dance. The world of professional dance she found in New York, which she called "ultra-competitive," was not what she expected.

"It's a really weird scene. You pretty much have to look like Carmen Electra to succeed," Miller said, referring to the surgically enhanced former "Baywatch" actress whose notoriety seems mostly rooted in her physics-defying proportions.

Perhaps it was a blessing in disguise, then, when consistent knee problems meant the end of her dancing career.

"I've had two knee operations," she explained. "I have really bad knees."

In lieu of dancing greatness, Miller, who knew she wanted to work in the entertainment industry in some way, landed the ultimate foot-in-the-door job: receptionist for an entertainment management company.

"I learned how to deal with agents," Miller laughs, explaining the value of her experience at Three Arts Entertainment, where she rubbed elbows with clients like Todd Barry. "That was a great insight."

It was also the first of several jobs Miller has held that, taken together, read like a classic resume of a filmmaker waiting for her big break. She helped cast "Stepmom," the 1998 melodrama starring Susan Sarandon and Julia Roberts; she worked as a story editor with Roberts' production company, Shoebox Productions; she did publicity and promotions for New Line Cinema ("That was really not for me," she said diplomatically), and she spent time as a personal assistant to James Gandolfini.

These are just the sort of assignments a young filmmaker hopes to land, the sort that allow her to make the ever-important "connections." And while they did provide Miller with networking opportunities, they did not provide the big break she'd been looking for. When it came, in fact, it may not have been immediately recognizable.

It was at the New York premiere of the Giovanni Ribisi film "The Boiler Room" on Feb. 14, 2000. There, Miller met her boyfriend, Russell Costanza, 28, himself an aspiring filmmaker. It was the right date for love — Valentine's Day — even if the movie itself was not especially likely to induce a romantic swoon.

"Yeah, it's kind of a creepy movie to meet your boyfriend at," mused Miller of the moody suspense thriller in which Ribisi unspools himself in the criminal underbelly of a disreputable financial firm.

Despite the less-than-ideal conditions, Miller and Costanza hit it off — and Miller discovered a talent she hadn't fully realized she had.

"When I was younger, I liked to write short stories for school," she explained, "and I really enjoyed it. But I couldn't understand how to write dialogue. Then all of a sudden I found myself writing with Russell and writing all this dialogue, and it was just something that came easy to me."

For "The Wedding Bout," which tells the story of a Jewish-Italian wedding and the humorous turmoil that results, Miller was able to land canon from boxing commentator Max Kellerman as well as real-life referee Randy Neumann. They appear once the story's turmoil has morphed into a metaphorical boxing match between bride and groom.

Miller said that the film she most wishes she could have made is "The Big Chill," and named several other favorites — all character-driven ensemble films, like "Magnolia" and "Sl. Film's Fire." The interest in character-driven stories can be seen in her next project, a feature film script she and Costanza are working on which will adapt Miller's brother's unpublished novel, "The Strange Effect of Everett Singer." It's the story of a failed medical student who discovers his own apparent healing powers.

Miller understands that if a former dancer can wind up writing and producing films, almost anything can happen. She points out the recent example of Dylan Kidd, the writer/director who happened to see Campbell Scott in New York and handed the actor his first script. Scott liked it so much that he

agreed to star in and produce the film, "Roger Dodger," which won wide critical praise and the Tribeca Film Festival Best Feature Film Award in 2002.

But Miller said that, even barring such fortuitous turns of events, she's glad just for what she's accomplished thus far.

"To be able to still be in film, with this economy," said Miller, "I'm really kind of thankful."



Writer/producer Melissa Miller in her New York City office. Since moving to New York six years ago with the intention of becoming a professional dancer, Miller has found her way into film. She and boyfriend Russell Costanza have made their first short — "The Wedding Bout," which will premiere at the Palm Beach International Film Festival in April — and started their own production company, Shoebox Pictures.

COURTESY PHOTOS BY STEPHEN WELLS