



The Last Request (2006)

by Jef Burnham

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Winner of The New York Independent Film and Video Festival Best Feature Film 2006, as well as the award for Best Director at The Drake International Film Festival in Naples, Italy 2007, **The Last Request** took writer/director John DeBellis nearly thirty years to get made. DeBellis, a standup comic and former writer for **SNL**, wrote the screenplay in 1980, and the film was optioned and nearly made some ten times, getting as close to actual production as being cancelled the day before shooting was to begin. To put the length of DeBellis' struggle in perspective, the first person they chose for the lead was a then unknown Johnny Depp.



DeBellis' predilection for one-liners, experience in sketch comedy and examination of the absurdity of sexual relationships coalesce into a style that brings to mind Woody Allen's early comedies. The film opens with the main character being chased through water by a giant pair of floating breasts, which immediately brings to mind Allen's



Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex *But Were afraid to Ask. DeBellis has often been compared to Allen, which is, in fact, how he came to direct the film, but the major difference between their styles of filmmaking is that DeBellis' film has a lot more heart than Allen's early comedies, such as **Take the Money and Run** or **Love and Death**. Don't misunderstand, I adore Allen's early films, but the characters are often difficult to empathize with.

The story of **The Last Request** follows Jeff (T.R. Knight, **Grey's Anatomy**), who has to leave the seminary in order to fulfill his father's (Danny Aiello) last request, which is that he get married and have a child to carry on the Natale family name. Jeff quickly discovers that not only are there indeed plenty of fish in the sea, but some of them want to tie you up and fold you into a hide-a-bed or molest you with hand puppets. The story sounds straight-forward enough, but it's the nuances of the



story that make it hilarious. The seminary Jeff leaves is more of a priest boot camp, his grandma, who falls down the stairs the first time we see her, remains crumpled on the floor for the remainder of the film, and his therapist, played by DeBellis' long-time friend Joe Piscopo, can only relate through shoe analogies. DeBellis' standup character also makes an appearance as one of Jeff's fellow patients, a man named John who prefers to be known as Mr. Pitiful.

The cast is phenomenal. T.R. Knight, who I have admittedly never seen in anything else, is perfect for his role, showing amazing physicality-- his facial expressions alone provide constant laughs. Gilbert Gottfried makes a cameo in a non-speaking role. Sabrina Lloyd (**Sliders**) is very funny and very pretty as the love interest waiting in the wings. But Danny Aiello dominates his every scene as a dying comedian, who views his terminal disease as just another piece of material for his act.



Jef Burnham is a film critic in Chicago.

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