

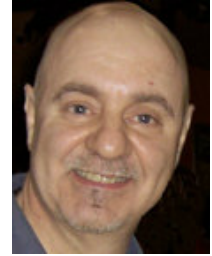


## Interview With John DeBellis

by Jef Burnham

### 30 Years of Craziiness

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On April 3, 2008, I spoke with former **Saturday Night Live** and **Politically Incorrect** writer, John DeBellis, whose award-winning film, **The Last Request**, is coming to DVD on April 22 from MTI Home Video.

**The Last Request** won Best Feature Film at *The New York Independent Film and Video Festival 2006*, as well as the award for Best Director at *The Drake International Film Festival in Naples, Italy 2007*.

**Jef:** You mentioned in our correspondence that **The Last Request** took thirty years to get made. What's the story behind that?

**DeBellis:** It's a long story, but it's an interesting story... It's changed a lot over the years, but originally I wrote in like 1980. I was working for **Saturday Night Live** at the time and it wound up that the first person to option it was Sean Cunningham. He did **Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>**. He optioned it two times and it didn't happen.

Then I got involved with a company, who at the time was called KMS... I was sitting there and the guy, Gabe Sumner, who used to be with Orion before it was Orion—he was there when Woody Allen was there—and he said, "Your stuff is very wild, in that Woody Allen vein. I think you're the person who should direct it." All of a sudden now, I'm going from a writer to a director. I was going to become their first film and they were going to raise \$53 million for their films and this was going to be \$1.2 million. They had this bond thing they were raising and they already had \$9 million. So even if they didn't raise the 50, the \$9 million would be enough. So they had raised \$11 million, but then, the bank that was guaranteeing the loan... Wells Fargo Bank-- fell out during corporate tax season.

Now we get involved with a company called Kings Road... It was this very strange guy, Steve Friedman... He had wild hair... And he didn't believe in one writer. He believed in 11 writers. He did all this crazy stuff... They said, "Okay, we're going to do this film, but we want to bring somebody in to punch up." Now I know I can write funny. I don't need anybody to punch up, so you know, I was against it. But someone said, "You're going to direct it, so what's the difference? You can change everything anyway..." They brought in Pat Proft [**Airplane**] and he was going to do some rewrites and he was supposed to be finished by August... So I called him up and he kept saying, "Yeah, it's fine. It's fine." What happens is, he calls up the first week in August or the end of September, and says, "You know, I really couldn't punch it up. I couldn't do anything. I'll give you the money back." \$65,000... So, at this point we get in

another argument with Friedman... Even though we were all set to go, we didn't need rewrites, so it falls through again.

Well, KMS became Odyssey, and... There was a company called Vista, and Odyssey was gonna put in a quarter of the money and Vista was going to put in three quarters, and we had to secure an actor of some sort with a name.

At the time, Piscopo was a name. I was the one who basically got Joe on **Saturday Night Live**. I was working there and they had passed him up, and I said... "You have to watch him again." They auditioned him again and I lobbied like crazy and Joe got on. Joe and I go back since playing softball together at The Improv... So [the producers of the film] try to get him, but they can't do it, and this thing is going to fall apart. So I get on the phone with his agent, and we work out a deal. So now... we're going to shoot the film in New Orleans. Everything is ready to go. The day after Thanksgiving I was supposed to leave and I get a phone call from one of our partners and he says, "John, hold onto your hat."

I said, "Well, wait. What's going on?"

He said, "Well, we're on the telephone [with Vista] and one of our guys made a joke to one of their guys..." And they realized through the joke that we thought... that our quarter was like a solid one quarter, no matter what the budget was, and they thought it was a sliding percentage or something like that. And they got in a giant argument over the phone, screaming and cursing each other out... And that blew it out. How many times am I at now? Four or five?

**Jef:** Yeah.

**DeBellis:** So then we have another company... They get the script and it gets there on a Thursday. That Monday, they call me in for a meeting and say they want to do the film. So they ask me what the budget was and I'm honest, so I told them it was \$1.2 million. Meanwhile, they're bringing the producers in and the producers say it's \$5 million. They get in a fight over the amount of money, and as they're fighting, trying to agree on the budget, the Writer's Guild goes on strike [laughs] and blew it out of the water there.

Then, we were supposed to do it another time in Canada with Canadian money. Now, we're really close. We had meetings and we're ready to do it, and something fell through with the funding when one of the guys couldn't do it. He was Canadian, and without him on it, they couldn't do it percentage-wise or something. So it blew out again there...

Now I get it optioned by a company called Chrysalis Films, which is a subsidiary of Canal Plus. Now, they're going to do, and they're going to do it in France. Moving along, I get a phone call the day of the big earthquake in Los Angeles. Nobody could get through, you know. Somehow... I'm in a tent in the back yard because I couldn't go in my house. So I go out and I answer my phone and it's the people from Chrysalis and they had just been bought out. So then it killed the film again. [laughs]

At one point I just said to Hell with it. It's crazy. I'm going nuts trying to get this done, you know? Of course, now Joe's [Piscopo] too old to play the lead at this point, and he said, "What's happening with this film?" And I said, "You know, it's still available." So I sent it to them and they said, "Yeah, we can do this." They went about raising the money and that was a crazy story in itself, since we went in and really didn't have the money. We didn't have all the money we said we would and we wound up raising most of it while it was happening.

We did a crazy shoot. It was a 19 day shoot with two cameras. The DP fell out the week before. I was really lucky because I got a Director of Photography who had won two Emmy's. His name's Dean Karlok... the first day I was out with him scouting a location with the shot list, we come back and he had locked his keys in the car. It was sort of fate, you know...

T.R. Knight [**Grey's Anatomy**] fell into our hands. We were seeing him for another part and he was so good we said we've got to use him for the lead. He was great. He was in a Broadway show at the time. It was a nutty schedule. We had to get him back to get to the Broadway show every day. We were literally throwing him out. Sometimes he would want to stay and do other takes and we would literally grab him and put him in the car, saying, "Go! Get out of here!"



We've had offers for theaters, and for whatever reason, and... I'm not saying this in a bad manner, but for some reason, our partners didn't take up on it. I have a friend who owns the largest independent theater company in the country and they wanted to put it in a bunch of theaters. And I know the guy who used to own Clearview, and he was going to put it in one of his cinemas in the city. He even offered us a 5:30 premier thing at the Ziegfeld. So it was a lot of craziness...

**Jef:** How much did the script change over the years?

**DeBellis:** It changed a LOT. I was a standup comic for a long time, you know, and then I wrote sketches... This was the first screenplay I ever wrote... My personal manager at the time—I was his first client—was Chris Albrecht. He used to be the CEO at Home Box Office. And I was essentially ordered by my therapist to write a screenplay... So I went home and I had a couch that I bought from Larry David because me and Larry are real close. I bought a couch from Larry David for \$70 and I just remember sitting on that couch, trying to write this thing and not knowing where it was going. And finally, I actually had something... I called up Chris at The Improv. I called him between shows and he came over after the last show. He came over and Chris and I beat it out.

At that time, instead of an old age home, it took place in an aquarium. A lot of the opening scenes were different. The Jesus phone wasn't in there... That Jiffy Pop birth scene was actually from a sketch that I wrote for **Saturday Night Live** that they didn't use... Then I had an old friend who could do a really good Godfather [impression], so then I figured... I could actually write a scene that would fit in there if I had [Jeff] go in to this Godmother... We had a scene

where the priests and nuns were gonna dance—the priests were dancing with the nuns, the nuns with the priests, the nuns with the nuns—it was this crazy dance scene, but we couldn't get the location. So we're sitting at this church and all we had was this altar, because we had shot some scenes at the church. On the spot, I had to figure a scene out and thank God for the television training, because you learn to work fast. I came up with the idea of [the priests] betting with communion wafers. That was written right on the spot...

The scene with Mary Birdsong with the... hand puppet thing. I had a different scene and I didn't like it, so one night I went to the track with one of the producers, my friend Buddy [Mantia] who got most of the talent actually, and I wrote that while he was betting on the track. I wrote it on the back of a betting card...

The first day we went to shoot—it was a therapy scene in the office where I had my first therapy session, so it was kind of strange. And the town tried to shut us down because they said we didn't need any permits and then we needed permits. We had to hide the generators. We had to take all the lights inside. We had to actually shoot that scene with available light from the outside, hoping it wouldn't get dark...

The night before we were going to shoot the [first] brothers' scene... the guy who was supposed to play the brother calls us up from California and says he can't do it... We didn't know what to do. We were reading people and then somebody said they knew Nick Scotti. He had done... **Kiss Me Guido**. That next morning he said, "Yeah, I'll do it." He came in and he did it without ever seeing the script. [laughs]

We almost didn't get Mario Cantone. My partner Buddy knew Mario... and we ran into him at a movie. Buddy said, "We're doing this movie," to Mario. He said, "We'd love to send you a script." He said, "Don't send me a script. I'll do it."

Robert Loggia was supposed to play [Pop]. I love him. He's one of the nicest men. He has to cancel because he has some sort of a pilot deal. So now we're ready to go but we don't have a father any more... So we called Danny [Aiello] up and said, "We're coming over—we got something." We marked off the pages and we knew that if we could get Danny to read the pages in his house, he would be in. So we got there, and Danny has a large family, and all his family members are running around and Danny's reading this piece and laughing. He committed to it...

The part that Vincent Pastore played was supposed to be Tony Sirico. Tony Sirico's a friend of ours, but he got ill. So we had to bring Vincent Pastore in.

**Jef:** How did you get Gilbert Gottfried in there with a non-speaking role?

**DeBellis:** Gilbert I've known since he was 16. He's the cheapest person that ever lived. You can put that in there. He loves being called that. There's no cheaper person in the world. We went to the opening of an AMC theater one

time in 25 floors on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, and it was all free concessions stand stuff. He gets one of the guys to get him a big black garbage bag from the basement and he went to every concessions stand and he filled it up. I had to take him home with it in the van—a big garbage bag full of candy. But we got him and Gilbert said yes, so we decided since everyone knows Gilbert by the voice, we'd have him not talk...

**Jef:** Did you ever date any of the sorts of women Jeff ends up dating?

**DeBellis:** I don't know. I think a lot of it is probably the fears in my head. It's like Larry—Larry David—and all that crazy stuff he does in **Curb Your Enthusiasm**, he says, "These aren't things that I do. These are things that I think about, but I don't do." With me, these are what I think I'm going to end up with but I don't. Sometimes I do, and I've wound up dating some pretty crazy women. During my standup time period there was a bunch of guys and we all hung out together. There was only about 30 or 40 of us in the city at that time, and Bill Maher and his guys would get the girls, then me and Larry David and our guys would never get the girls. We'd end up alone, hanging out, commiserating and watching a ball game...

One point I'm forgetting to mention, you know who we auditioned the first time for the lead? He was an unknown then: Johnny Depp. He was the first person we auditioned. We hadn't even told him yet. He auditioned and out of all the guys we auditioned we liked him the best. Isn't that odd?

*From a subsequent email from DeBellis on April 6, 2008:*

I forgot to tell you about a few more times when it fell through. One time was with these Phone card guys who supposedly had the money and it fell through the last second because of something that happened at NASCAR. But the funny part was my partner met an attorney Alex Murphy, great guy. He was supposed to help us raise money. I'd never met him so I had to send him a resume and bio. I was subletting an apartment and I couldn't find a new folder so I went in to the closet and pulled out an old mailing manila envelope (from the former tenant) and stuffed the resume in. Alex gets it and pulls the stuff out of the envelope and pulls out not only my resume and bio but these Nude centerfold pictures. Alex is with his wife when he does this. All he can think of is that this guy wants these women in the movie. My partner knew I was spacey and figured out it had to be a mistake, and we straightened it out.

We even used to go to after hours places where mob guys hung out. Two guys tried to convince us to get Larry David to put one million in the bank and they could make it ten in a month. I think those guys wound up serving one to ten.

We'd be sitting at this place trying to raise money and guys would pour lumps of cocaine on our hands. My partner and I never did drugs so we'd have these strange noses sucking stuff off the tops of our hands.

We even had Larry David call up one of our partners who was disagreeing with us to yell at him. The following week, as appreciation, I legally willed Larry my

body parts. Then the next week to get back on me on Bill Maher's first HBO show, Larry tells Bill that I was dying with pancreatic cancer. The next day I was getting calls from relatives...

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