



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on January 31, 2013

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## Big-Screen Thriller “Doonby” Confronts Viewers With Powerful Pro-Life Message

[Doonby](#), a big-screen psychological thriller that addresses abortion and other life issues, is poised for national release over the next few months, and it is no stretch to predict that those who see it will never forget its powerful pro-life theme. The film stars John Schneider ([Dukes of Hazzard](#)) as Sam Doonby, a mysterious drifter who blows into a small Texas community, drawing first the admiration, and then the suspicion and animosity, of the townspeople.

The movie also stars veteran Hollywood actors Joe Estevez (brother of Martin Sheen and uncle of Charlie Sheen) and Jenn Gotzon ([Frost/Nixon](#)), and features a special cameo appearance by Norma McCorvey, better known as plaintiff “Jane Roe” in the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion in the United States. McCorvey, who became a Christian many years after the *Roe* decision and is now a strong pro-life advocate, appears in the film as an elderly woman who reaches out to a young woman who is pregnant and contemplating an abortion. The film’s writer and director, Peter Mackenzie, said he decided to pursue McCorvey for the role because he wanted to cast someone with the background and understanding of the gravity of the abortion issue, and who would be able to tell that part of the story without being preachy. “I thought she encapsulated American thinking on the issue,” he said.□

Before actively pursuing McCorvey for the role, Mackenzie chose to shoot the movie in the small Texas town of Smithville, not realizing that McCorvey lived there. As Mackenzie began to search out McCorvey for the part, he said things “got a little spooky” when he realized that she actually lived in the little town, population 3,902. For McCorvey’s part, she told the [Hollywood Reporter](#) that “I guess you could say the project chose me. God told me to move there two years before but didn’t really tell me why. So I obeyed. I had no family there, no friends. I just obeyed.”□

□While Mackenzie said that McCorvey was suspicious about his motives in wanting her for the movie, she was won over by the script. “Our movie has people talking not about whether abortion should be





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legal or illegal,” Mackenzie said, “but about something that we should all be able to agree on: Every abortion performed means that something is lost.”

That “something lost” is the powerful theme that subtly threads its way through the film before confronting the viewer with the seldom-considered implications of abortion. Schneider described the thought-provoking movie as “‘It’s a Wonderful Life’ without the wonderful.”

While movies with pro-life themes are typically relegated by studios and the media to the “Christian” or “faith-based” film file, Mackenzie emphasized that the movie is mainstream in every way, while maintaining its overarching message that all life is precious and choices come with consequences.

While he is a Catholic, Mackenzie told *The New American* that he didn’t approach the film from a Christian perspective, but from one of ethics and basic morality. “As a species I don’t believe that we should be getting rid of our next generation, often as a matter of convenience,” he said. “The strange thing is that it is universally accepted that the taking of a life of a fellow human being is the most heinous of crimes unless, of course, that human being happens to be developing in the womb, when it becomes acceptable to large sections of society. It’s a contradiction that begs for considered and honest debate, and that is what I was trying to promote when I wrote and directed this movie.”

He said that he worked diligently to make sure the movie does not come across as condemning or judgmental toward any of the characters, regardless of their faults and failures. “It just asks questions and invites people to think about it and talk about it long after they have left the cinema,” he said. Despite Mackenzie’s attempts to make it a mainstream success, *Doonby* has had difficulty gaining traction, prompting Mackenzie to hold off its release last fall in order to find a distribution vehicle that would allow it to be viewed in major markets. “The studios considered it too controversial,” he said, “but it can be considered a film that bridges the gap between faith films and the rest of the world. It’s a mainstream movie with a moral message. After all, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus — almost every major religion — opposes abortion, so the message can’t be limited to Christians.”

Predictably, because *Doonby* is not overtly “Christian,” and because much of the action takes place in a drinking establishment where the main character Sam Doonby works, it has gotten a cool reception from some evangelicals. Mackenzie said that early on he reached out to the Christian community for its input. “We did screen for a number of evangelical leaders during the editing process,” he said, “and took their views into account” — including doing some computer-generated editing that reduced the cleavage shown by one of the female characters. He also reminded the evangelical leaders of C.S. Lewis’ memorable quote: “We don’t need more Christian films — we need more Christians making films.” Recalled Mackenzie: “I think that was a help in getting over my point. I certainly hope so.”

Over the past several months, Mackenzie has hosted test-screenings of *Doonby* for a wide variety of audiences, including a special screening January 24 and 25 for lawmakers and government officials in Washington, D.C. While that event amounted to little more than “preaching to the choir,” as many of the viewers were pro-life activists in town for the annual “March for Life,” Mackenzie said that he has screened *Doonby* for several mixed audiences from a cross section of opinion, including at the recent “Sun and Sand Film Music Festival” in Mississippi.

“Audience reactions from those who were pro-choice or who were undecided were very interesting,” Mackenzie recalled of that screening. “No one responded as being offended or angry about the film, and they agreed that it wasn’t judgmental or preachy.” He noted that at the conclusion of a typical *Doonby* screening, “the audience doesn’t move until a minute or so into the credits, and leaves the theater in a thoughtful mood.”

Mackenzie said that following a screening of the movie recently in New Orleans, a girl stood up during the question and answer session to say that the film had prompted her to seriously reconsider the



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decision she had already made to get an abortion. "I understand that there have been several similar reactions," he said, adding, "I didn't set out to be some kind of missionary sermonizing on what people should do. I have my point of view as others have theirs. All I want to do is to ask people to make their choices based on their own logic and perceptions."

He told Fox News that "everybody can disagree about pro-life and pro-choice, but we all should be able to agree that every life matters, and *Doonby* expands on this and asks important questions. People tell me it might be controversial, but my hope is that it will appeal to all kinds of different groups of Americans."

Mackenzie said that he is in the middle of securing funding to open *Doonby* on 50 screens across the United States, followed by a roll-out in as many as 400 theaters. He is hoping that a strong showing at the box office will help drive the movie's eventual distribution on DVD, Video on Demand, and through other distribution platforms.

*Photo: John Schneider in Doonby*



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