

Writer behind 'The Two Popes' on journey to seek the truth

Anthony McCarten wants the truth and nothing but the truth. To get at the truth, he has made up a fictional dialogue between the Church's two living popes.

McCarten's *The Two Popes* is a sweeping project manifested in a stage play, a book and a movie playing theatres in limited release since Nov. 29 but available on Netflix beginning Dec. 20.

Variety magazine reports the movie is "riding a groundswell of Oscar buzz, including speculation of acting nominations for (Jonathan) Pryce and (Anthony) Hopkins."

McCarten is an astonishingly successful writer (he has won BAFTA and Golden Globe awards for his screenplays, his books have been translated into 14 languages and topped best-seller lists, his plays have been staged around the world) who stumbled into this project while walking around St. Peter's Square with all the other tourists not long after Pope Francis was elected in 2013 in the wake of Pope Benedict XVI's surprising resignation.

"I Googled a question: 'When was the last time a Pope resigned?' When the number 700 years came up, the writer in me woke up," McCarten said. "I thought, 'There's a story here somewhere.' "

The 58-year-old McCarten began his career as a journalist for *The Taranaki Herald* in his native New Zealand. From his script for *Bohemian Rhapsody* to his book *Darkest Hour: How Churchill Brought Us Back From The Brink*, McCarten is an artist with the soul of a reporter. He wants to get at the essence of what's going on.

"I was drawn to a single question: Whether sin disqualifies you as a leader, or whether – if you can come to terms with it and atone for it and learn from it – perhaps it even recommends you as a leader," he said.

McCarten's original title for the play, which preceded both the book and the movie, was *The Confession*. The drama comes to a head in the form of sacramental confessions and absolutions exchanged between the popes. As Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio absolves his Pope, he says, "May God grant you His pardon and peace and I absolve you of your sins. But remember, truth may be vital, but without love it is also unbearable."

"Just because it didn't happen doesn't mean it's not true," explains

McCarten. "We can get very tied up in literal fact and so forth. There are other artistic ways to represent truth."

For those who want the "literal facts and so forth," McCarten has *The Two Popes: Francis, Benedict, and the Decision That Shook the World* out in paperback, audiobook, etc. with Flatiron Books. McCarten scoured all the encyclicals, interviews, biographies and commentaries produced by and about his subjects before ever putting pen to paper. His book rescues all that research and puts the movie and play into context.

"It's to show that none of the ideas, even the most far-fetched ideas you might see in the film or the play are flippant," he said. "They are drawn from some source, some source material. ... You have to make so many cuts and decisions with films and theatre. There's so much you leave out that you would clearly love to put in. The book gives you the chance to put them in."

The author grew up in what he calls "an intensely Catholic family." He may not these days be at Mass every Sunday, but he recognizes how the Church has formed him.

"The themes in this story turned out to be in the bloodstream," he said. "There were issues that I had been living with subconsciously for a long time and they found expression in this story."

The first draft of the play went straight to McCarten's eldest sister, Marlena Hoeft-Marwick, who happens to be the president of the St. Vincent de Paul Society in New Zealand.

She's also the sort of Catholic who is in church on Sunday morning and whom McCarten calls his "spiritual conscience." Her seal of approval was very important to him.

"It gave me great comfort and a sense that we might be able to say something useful here," he said.

By useful, McCarten means to suggest that the two hours of watching actors Jonathan Pryce and Anthony Hopkins – respectively dressed in black and white cassocks and intensely speaking to one another about their lives, their faith and their failures – amounts to much more than ecclesiastical politics.

"In the Church, I found a kind of perfect analogue to the world," he said. "The Church is one of the great global institutions and its fate is linked to that of the world in general. So it has re-awakened my interest in the Church. I think, if the Church can work out how to find a way forward that brings everyone with it, then there's hope for the rest of the world as well."

McCarten doesn't find that hope in an idealized, unchanging Church that poses as a refuge from the world. The alluring myth of our own innocence is done away

with right off the top as Pope Benedict and Cardinal Bergoglio begin their conversation in the pretty and orderly garden of the papal palace at Castel Gandolfo.

In no time, the two men have accidentally wandered out of the garden and into a wilderness.

The heat and the sound of crickets become intense as both men appear lost and Benedict admits he has never been in this part of the garden. It's impossible to sit through the scene and not think of Adam and Eve after the apple.

"Intellectually and spiritually, they are venturing into some unknown and quite dangerous territory," said McCarten. "It's moving away from order, into chaos, where suddenly you're not so sure of your footing. Where it's wild."

But as the camera follows Bergoglio back to the disorderly slums of Buenos Aires, we learn not to regret our fall but to find joy in how human beings make lives and discover truth within that very chaos.

What McCarten loves about the film version of his project is how human it is, particularly in the hands of two great actors. Hopkins as Benedict is the bigger star (the riveting Hannibal Lector in *Silence of the Lambs*), but the versatile Pryce (known for his stage acting, as well as playing High Sparrow in HBO's *Game of Thrones* and Cardinal Wolsey in the BBC series *Wolf Hall*) has more lines and the weight of the plot.

"Through the camera work and the use of human faces as utilized by (director) Fernando (Meirelles) and his cinematographer César (Charlone) there's a great humanity actually that's presented," he said. "A human face can tell a thousand words. The close-ups in this movie are terribly unforgiving. They're almost merciless. It's as if you are seeing into the souls of these people."