

Renfro's death pains director who helped make him a star

'Client' filmmaker looked upon late actor as member of his family

By Betsy Pickle
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Brad Renfro's death came as a blow to the director who launched the young actor's career.

Joel Schumacher, who cast Renfro in his first film, 1994's "The Client," always looked upon Renfro as a member of his "family" and thought highly of the Knoxville novice who held his own with co-stars Susan Sarandon and Tommy Lee Jones.

"I had to call Susan Sarandon and tell her (the news), and that was really rough because of course we all loved him so much," said Schumacher.

"I remember Brad coming up with (grandmother) Joanne (Renfro) for the first meeting at Warner's in his Megadeth T-shirt and how great he was and how great he was to work with. It's so tragic. I can't get my head around it."

The 68-year-old New York native, whose own father was from Knoxville, had not been in contact with Renfro recently but always felt concern for him.

"It was very hard to get hold of him," Schumacher said by phone from Los Angeles. "I find that sometimes when you want the best for people they run away from you because they sort of know what you're going to say."

The director was impressed with Renfro from the beginning, when casting director Mali Finn recommended him.

"I was determined to have a real kid from the South and not some child actor trying to do an accent," he said. "Mali went to nine Southern cities and saw 6,000 little boys, and she found Brad. There was just no contest that it was Brad."

Schumacher believes Renfro continued to prove his talent in his films after "The Client," but he doubts that the actor ever knew how good he was.

"I sometimes think the only people who think they're really talented are the ones I know who aren't," he said. "I think that Brad was always gifted with great looks and an incredible ability to tap into his complex emotions from a very early age as an artist," said Schumacher. "I mean, if you look at 'The Client' again he's just extraordinary, and believe me, it has nothing to do with me or John Grisham. It's Brad.

"He's there holding his own with Susan Sarandon and Tommy Lee Jones and Mary-Louise Parker and Ossie Davis and Anthony Edwards and Brad Whitford — all these incredible actors that had years of experience and awards. And he's the star of the movie and also takes down Tommy Lee Jones, which no one else seems to be able to do in a movie — except Batman maybe.

"And he's the star of the movie. Here's a boy who literally came on the screen and you can't take your eyes off him. And I think he was equally brilliant in 'Apt Pupil' and 'Bully' and 'Telling Lies in America.'

"I always feel when someone's that age and they have the depth that Brad has that it's all ahead of them because a lot of great roles are not written for people that age. They're the bad boy or the pretty boy and the girls are the sexy girl or the pretty girl. And then as they get older, the roles get more interesting.

"So you never think that somebody who's done that much work at an early age isn't going to get the right part someday."

Renfro began facing legal repercussions from alcohol and drug use in 1998, and few of the films he made after that had the impact of his earlier movies. Yet Schumacher believes the actor had a solid career in front of him.

"Many actors ... at all ages go through cycles where there are films that get wide release and films that sort of get ignored and films that are box-office hits and films that are little art-house movies or don't have enough money to be distributed," he said. "We all expect that, in a sense, if you're going to have a long cycle, if you're going to have a long career, it goes up, down, up, down, up, down.

"There are very few people that are just up all the time. It's pretty rare. And if you look at any actor's resume, they've always been in movies you've never heard of or didn't really get to see or didn't get that much distribution.

"But also, when you're an actor you work. You work. Then the control of the movie, you have nothing to do with it. You just are happy for the job most of the time."

Schumacher, whose films include "The Number 23," "The Phantom of the Opera," "Falling Down" and "Flatliners," sympathizes with Renfro's struggles with substance abuse.

"I didn't get sober till I was 52," he says. "I started drugs and alcohol very young. It controls you. You don't control it.

"I identify with Brad a lot because I was a very wild kid myself. My father was dead by the time I was 4, and my mother worked six days a week and three nights a week, and I had no brothers and sisters. I was out on

the streets, on my bike, on my roller skates. And so I started smoking and drinking and fooling around sexually very young, very young. ... You get very independent.

"Brad was at 10 already hanging out with kids much older, and I did exactly the same thing. I think one of the great gifts that Brad brought to his role in 'The Client' is that he's playing a very independent, self-willed, self-determined little boy very much like himself. That's part of what his strength was, but it can do you in. Self-will can also do you in

because you are always in charge."

While the cause of Renfro's death has not been determined yet, media speculation immediately focused on his past drug use. Those who know Renfro insist that he had been steadfast in his sobriety for the past 18 months, and Schumacher hopes that's the case.

"If he died sober, he died a happier young man than if the alternative is true," Schumacher said.

News Sentinel film critic Betsy Pickle may be reached at 865-342-6442.



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