

Neale Sournas Paris Qualles Interview

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Neale Sournas -- [Enter](#) PRESS KIT / PRESSKIT

PARIS QUALLES

Screenwriter & Executive Producer

Paris has written and/or produced for:

"Quantum Leap", "Sequest DSV", "Lois & Clark", "Law & Order", "M.A.N.T.I.S.", "The Cape". TV movies ("The Tuskegee Airmen", "The Ditchdigger's Daughters", "Paper Moon: The Natalie Cole Story") and feature movies ("Brothers", "The Inkwell"), and "Hannibal" (in pre-production).

Is it Qualles or Qual'-les?

Qual'-les. (kwal'-less)

And, your basic childhood background?

Well, I was raised in New Jersey. Born in New York. Lived in Harlem for about seven years or so. Went from Harlem to a farm in Kentucky. Talk about culture shock. Then we moved to Jersey for pretty much my formative years. As they say, the "wonder bread™ years" were spent in Long Branch, a small medium-sized community. A seaside resort.

Rutgers College. Undergrad. My major was English; Minor was Photography. Got into theatre there and became ultimately the Artistic Director of our group, The Paul Robeson Ensemble, and toured up and down the East Coast.

From Rutgers, I went to UCLA...Graduate school. I got a directing scholarship for theatre directing and I really wanted UCLA fairly badly, great program, it only accepted two applicants a year in the program.

I worked for the Los Angeles Theatre Alliance, a consulting organization comprised of about 40 or 50 small theatres. I was, I guess, a...Management Consultant for lack of a better title. A good group and fun. Theatre people are just fun people anyway.

The Mark Taper Forum (theatre in Los Angeles) was looking for a Director for one of their productions. They somehow called the Chairman of the School of UCLA Film and Theatre who recommended me. And (I) found they also needed a writer, as well. And figured, oh, what the hell!

(I) had never written really much at all (mostly class assignments). Writing was not really an interest of mine. It was always directing. That was where I felt the vision and the control was really held by the directors; for the most part it is. When I graduated from UCLA, (I) decided to see if I could make my mark as a director in television or film. That was how naive I was.

It became clear quickly that it's real difficult; pretty much a closed shop. But, there are various routes to get there. One of the surest, was as the writer. Typically, if you own the material then you have a bit more clout. So, I figured, "Okay, I'll write something."

So, that's how the naivete continued. That's where my head (was) when (the period play "A Song For My People") came along at the Taper. They wanted me badly enough as a director and since it was based on prior material they probably figured I couldn't screw it up too badly as a writer. They went ahead and said, "Good. Fine."

One night after one of the runs, a person came up to me and said...an agent...said, "Are you represented?" And I was delirious, my break as a director. And she said, "A director? No. Writer." Eight years of school down the tubes. That was the spark. My head was turned somewhat. But, I had no sense of the craft. Never taken any classes. So I started to study the form.

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How'd you do that?

(By watching and analyzing) television and film. Primarily, television because growing up I was never a big fan of TV or a film buff. Back in Long Branch we didn't have a whole lot of movie houses around. (Just) one good drive-in.

This was the ...?

...'50s-'60s. I just wasn't a big film buff. And television, when it worked,....

Physically?

Yeah. We had an old Sylvania(TM) that just worked when it felt like it, and it wasn't often. So, (I) got into the habit of not watching. I spent my childhood reading and fell in love with science fiction and comic books early. And that translated to more serious sci-fi and (I) found the public library and its science fiction section and nature section.

I immersed myself in that kind of imaginary world. So, when we got a TV that worked all the time, I wasn't much interested. And to this day, I find myself at a handicap in a casting session, particularly in series (TV production) when we try to come up with show and casting ideas. And people will say, "Remember that 1948 film with, y'know..." and I'm staring blankly. And some (TV episodes and films) are, you know, classics and I'm sort of playing catch-up now.

What did your parents do?

My father was Air Force and they divorced when I was about nine or ten. He was a Tuskegee Airman and so he traveled awhile until he retired and my mother was a Domestic. Worked in homes over in the "good" side of town and she worked in this resort spa called Harbor Island Spa, which was like Mafiosa haven.

Tipped real well. And she would just ignore the bodies in the corner. That's a joke. Although, she did have some great stories. The old resort was a good money maker, kept the family fed and clothed, and me in stories.

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What was your firstwriting assignment for a show?

A half hour sitcom called "Amen" (starring Sherman Hemsley). I was hired as a researcher (because) the show was produced by Ed Weinberger who is a fanatic on details and the authenticity of the show. Weinberger was adamant with his writing staff and producers that the cases this (Philadelphia lawyer) worked on be real and the decisions and opinions in his court arguments be based on something.

I did that for a few months before I got bored and decided to make a move toward writing the show. One of the producing consultants sent me something like -- "can a minister marry himself?" For a comedy, it's a pretty good question. On this particular project, I said, "I'm bored, I'm tired, I don't want (to do) this (research) work anymore and I want to make some money. I want to be a writer."

Instead of (merely) sending the research back as I (had), I took the story, figured out what he wanted the research for and wrote a scene and sent that along with the research that he asked for. He liked what I'd written and told Weinberger. I did that for (three) years, and they were coming back the next year and I decided to get out...because there are basically no Black dramas, Hollywood has a tendency to think if you're Black all you can write is (limited). It's less prevalent now than it used to be, but at the time it was just comedies if they were Black shows. And that was all you did, all you could do. As difficult as it was for people whatever your color, it was doubly difficult for Blacks.

There were only two hour long shows that I wanted to do at the time. One was "Equal Justice" (starring Joe Morton) the other was "China Beach"; and I decided "China Beach" since I knew more about the military because of family. I had a brother and brother-in-law both in Vietnam and I had a better sense of what that was. So, I wrote a spec "China Beach" (a spec is a volunteer script used to showcase a new writer's talents).

They hired me on the show. It happened to be their last year.

(It was) my start in doing drama (scripting and/or producing episodes for: "Quantum Leap", "Seaquest DSV", "Lois & Clark", "Law & Order", "M.A.N.T.I.S."). Once I was able to break the half hour shackle, it broadened other things for me then so I could actually see some sort of realistic option. One hour is less of a hurdle to long form -- TV movies ("The Tuskegee Airmen", "The Ditchdigger's Daughters", "Paper Moon: The Natalie Cole Story") and feature movies ("Brothers", "The Inkwell").

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Have you had a chance to direct anything for television or film, yet?

Not really, although the opportunities are starting to come now. I'm being fairly careful as to what that first project is ... a small Independent. Or a TV movie. Something I can sink my teeth into.

For "The Cape" (with Corbin Bernsen), you were the executive who developed it, what does that mean?

...I created the show as well as developed. But, the original concept was not mine. The original concept of a one hour series based on shuttle astronauts in training came from a couple other guys before I came on the project. Their idea happened to be "Bay Watch" or "Melrose" space. Ironically, as it turned out, maybe that's the show that would have succeeded. But, I don't know how to write that.

If the show had turned that way, would you have stayed?

Probably not. No. (However,) with my sci-fi background it was made to order.

(NASA gave us) access that no one had "ever" had. We were on orbiters as they were being prepared, on the gantry when they're (preparing) within a day or so of launch. We were using their personnel (even) the actual Launch Director (Jim Harrington, who) sends the shuttles up and is head of the Firing Room (and allowed it to be used as a "Cape" set). He wouldn't let Tom Hanks and the "Apollo (13)" people in there.

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What would you like to write that you haven't written yet?

My passion is American History. I love period pieces that have a social core. I'm developing a few projects now for both television and features. One deals with the only (successful political) coup in the history of the United States Government in (the 1800s). Another is the Indian take over of Alcatraz. Great (historical) period, San Francisco in 1969.

Do you have a project coming to screen soon (July 1997)?

I'm in development (researching or writing) a project called "Amanda America" (starring Sam Waterston and Jennifer Beals) for Showtime™ and "Drew" for Family Channel™. I'm also researching a spec feature for kids.

How many kids do you have?

Two girls, eight and fifteen.

What does your wife do?

She's a housewife now. Not long ago she worked as an adoptions worker. She worked for L.A. County and also private adoptions services.

Some more stories.

Yes. Real fascinating, depressing. That's reality. That's real life. I can't deal with that.

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Who would you like to work with?

John Lithgow. I've worked with him twice. Let's see...Lithgow, John Hurt, (Laurence) Fishburne. Let's see...Larenz Tate...he will grow into, unless he sidetracks himself, into a brilliant actor.

What ... came to play when rewriting Trey Ellis' film story "The Inkwell"?

A whole new world. "Inkwell" was interesting because growing up sort of poor on the Jersey coast, I'd never...Martha's Vineyard? "The Inkwell"? I'd never heard of that. It was pretty much the middle and upper middle class Black folks, Trey Ellises, (who) really knew about this vacation enclave. Just finding (out) about that lifestyle was fascinating and just immersing myself in a whole different, almost, culture was interesting at least to me about that story.

And also, I had a social agenda as well. Around that time you had a spate of "gangsta" movies, and that was pretty much all you saw. And here came an opportunity to tell a nice little sweet story that was anti-gang. It was totally a different kind of movie. A period piece, mid-'70s, which for me was prime time in terms of the music and partying; (my) college years. Combining what the piece was with my own social agenda made "The Inkwell" attractive for me.

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(What about your adaptation) for the screen, (of)Dr. Yvonne Thornton's novel, "The Ditchdigger's Daughters"?

It was a problem early on. The book was one big love letter about the father and I knew better. For one thing, even from her own book, I could read between the lines and see there were some tensions in this household (centered on) the father, and also between some of the daughters. He was the sparkplug that pushed those girls to succeed; but, there was a cost. The cost was what fascinated me and attracted me to the material.

But, as coincidence would have it, the book is based in Long Branch, New Jersey, where I grew up. And I knew these people, so I knew sort of the real story that's spoken between neighbors. So, I was able to bring some things to the story that were new. And, in sitting down with Yvonne, and explaining this, it became difficult. I'd have to fly back and spend five hours going through the script explaining choices that I made, and explaining the realities of the business; why certain choices are made for dramatic reasons in order to

make a story that works, that someone wants to produce (\$\$\$). When you're dealing with live people that's the problem.

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(How did you get to script "The Tuskegee Airmen"?)

When HBO decided to do it, they had a script that was based on a, it actually wasn't based on, it was an entirely new script based on the Bob Williams' story. (Williams was) the Tuskegee Airman of which most of the other (many unproduced) scripts were also based. He probably was the one Airman who had the drive. There were a number of surviving Tuskegee Airmen, who had the idea of doing a movie; but, none were organized enough or close enough to the machinery of Hollywood to really get it anywhere. Bob Williams was. He lived in Pasadena and actually (did) some (film) Extra work. He align(ed) himself with key people that pushed it through.

That's when they brought me in. I was the last one. I guess it was just a combination of my father being one so there really wasn't a lot of research I needed to do. I knew the history, the structure of the military, and had a passion for the story and flying.

As a child, I had a social studies teacher who said there were no colored flyers because you had to be officers, and it just didn't happen (Blacks as officers) in World War II. I knew better. And I was Given the opportunity to do this and to say some things and also to make some statements about the state of race in America fifty years ago, which has parallels to today. I was especially pleased that it was HBO because they allowed some of the things I wanted to say to be said and to remain. Whereas, if it were network television, I'm sure....Andre (Braugher) ("Homicide: Life on the Street", "Glory") and Larry (Fishburne) would have gotten a few of their speeches cut or altered.

"Or altered" pretty much.

Knowledge and information is important. There are a lot of well-intentioned White folks who just don't know because the information has been kept from them. There were (WWII) White bomber pilots in their seventies and eighties (in 1996) who...had experience with the (Tuskegee) Red Tails in the air (still ignorant of the Red Tails' true identity).

We screened "Tuskegee Airmen" for the convention of Airmen from all over the country. (When) the lights came on, (there) was not a sound, and I was looking for a door. They stood and applaud(ed), literally in tears. That was really the defining moment for me. That's when you've done your job (as a story writer), and after that, if you can educate the public, it works real well.

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Neale Sourna is a dramatic screenwriter, researcher, a novel and short story writer, a former National Writers Union UAW Local 1981 AFL-CIO member, and on the Advisory Board of "Creative Screenwriting Journal".

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cover**"TRISTAR TAKES A WAGON RIDE**

TriStar(TM) has purchased a pitch from Red Wagon Prods.for mid-six-figures for a biopic on the legendary general-statesman Hannibal. Paris Qualles is set to script the epic, and rightly so--he brought the idea to Doug Wick at Red Wagon. It will chronicle Hannibal's crossing of the Alps into the heart of Rome. Qualles, who has written for Touchstone and HBO, was repped by agent David McIlvane of Major Clients Agency and his attorney, Nina Shaw."

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