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## Mardik Martin

A new documentary  
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Ask Mardik Martin how tall he is, and the rumpled, white-haired, barrel-chested USC screenwriting professor replies good-naturedly: "5 feet 4. I used to be 5 feet 6 but had back surgery and they shortened me. I'm not joking. I lost a couple of spine rings, or whatever they call them. Look," he pauses, "short isn't exactly the end of the world."

Nor, one might add, loss of fame, fortune and having your name on the credits of big Hollywood movies.

It's been decades since he wrote "Raging Bull" (sharing screenplay credit with Paul Schrader). Yet today, while virtually everyone knows that Martin Scorsese directed the classic 1980 boxing movie starring Robert De Niro, few outside of a certain generation in Hollywood or in the rarefied world of academic cineastes have ever heard of Mardik, the name he is affectionately called by his students and friends.

Now 70 and light years from the era when he and his New York University film school buddy Scorsese collaborated on "Mean Streets," "New York, New York" and "Raging Bull," Martin is not bitter seeing the great heights to which Scorsese has ascended in the intervening years. In fact, watching Scorsese finally win the Academy Award for best director for "The Departed" this year made Martin very happy.

"He has kind of been waiting for it for years," Martin told The Times. "He's still a good friend. Unfortunately, he's in New York most of the time. I'm not too crazy about New York, so I don't go there that often. But I think Marty is great. I think, visually, he's without peer."

Today, Martin will receive his own moment in the spotlight when a new documentary titled "Mardik: From Baghdad to Hollywood" is screened at 5 p.m. at the ArcLight in Hollywood as part of the Hollywood Film Festival. The 82-minute film by producer-directors Ramy Katrib and Evan York and producer Jeff Orsa chronicles what the filmmakers note is Martin's unlikely journey from Iraq to NYU film school, from busboy to writing "Raging Bull," from being the hottest writer in New York to losing it all in L.A., and from forsaking his craft to becoming a favorite screenwriting teacher at USC. The film features interviews with Scorsese, director Amy Heckerling, producers Irwin Winkler and Gene Kirkwood, author Peter Biskind and others.

"We couldn't believe that this man who was living in this normal apartment [in Studio City] was the writer of 'Raging Bull,'" said Katrib, the founder and CEO of DigitalFilm Tree, a Hollywood production and post-production company. "We would just go to his house and hang out. He was a wealth of information. He would usually start by screaming at us saying, 'That was a dumb question!' He wouldn't terrorize us, but he'd say, 'Just get to the point!' Most teachers tend to be flat. He was dynamic. He would always use a real-life story to illustrate a point."

Raised in Baghdad in an Armenian family, Martin said his love of film was inspired by American movies.

"You have to understand," he said, "Baghdad, even then, was filthy, dirty, disgusting, with dust and sand. Then you see Betty Grable in unbelievable Technicolor and the beautiful scenery in the background. It's like another dimension, it's like finding paradise."

At 18, he was sent to America by his father so he wouldn't have to join the Iraqi army and also to get an American education. But not long afterward, his father lost his business when revolution swept Iraq in 1958. Martin supported his schooling by working as a busboy and then as a waiter at Toots Shor's famous restaurant in Manhattan.

It was at NYU that he met Scorsese. "We spent a lot of time together aside from writing," he noted. "We had like 15 ideas, a lot of ideas. 'Let's do this, let's do that.'"

"Everything [Scorsese] did coming out of NYU is basically Marty and Mardik," Katrib said. "They were like a team."

They made a documentary about Scorsese's parents called "Italianamerican." Martin did the pre-production interviews. "I put the answers down on paper," he recalled. "You don't ask questions if you don't know the answers already."

But it was 1973's "Mean Streets" that catapulted their careers. Audiences marveled at the gritty dialogue. "They think it's all made up on the screen, which is untrue," Martin said, noting that he achieved the realistic dialogue by reading what he had written into a tape recorder until the

lines were just as he envisioned the actors doing them.

"Mean Streets" changed not only their careers but also those of the movie's stars, Robert De Niro and Harvey Keitel.

"The whole situation became suddenly a different world for us," Martin said. "I stopped teaching and moved to L.A. I got a couple of jobs, did some documentary-style writing for some people. I signed with Chartoff/Winkler" (the producers of "Rocky").

He reteamed with Scorsese on "New York, New York" and recalled how "they had to shoot whether the script was ready or not. That was the problem." But he adds: "Right now, I think it works better than it did then. Years have done justice to it."

Still, it is "Raging Bull" that he will be most remembered for. He spent a year and a half researching the life of boxer Jake LaMotta. "De Niro wanted to make 'Raging Bull,' but Marty didn't [because] he hated boxing and sports," Martin said.

"Bob and I sat down and watched every boxing movie ever made -- not to copy, just the opposite, not to do what other people had done," Martin recalled. They convinced Scorsese there was a movie in it by having him visualize scenes, like fighters' blood spraying the crowd.

But Hollywood was changing. "Star Wars" and "E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial" highlighted the new world of computer wizardry in films. "I can't write that kind of stuff," Martin said. His scripts were, after all, rooted in realism, not fantasy.

As is so common in Hollywood, he found himself unable to get his projects up and going.

"He was the original writer on 'Carlito's Way' and then he made fun of one of Al Pacino's movies and ended up losing the account," Katrib said. "He was nitpicking 'Scarface.' When he talked to us about it, he said . . . he didn't think it was a good story."

There was another project he hoped to make about a famous photojournalist of the 1930s known as Weegee, but somebody else beat him to the punch with a similar movie. "When it bombed, nobody would touch my story."

Along the way, Martin had become hooked on cocaine. He used the drug, he said, not to party but "only to keep me up" at night so he could keep writing.

"He speaks out about it to his students," Katrib said. "What teacher says, 'Hey, kid, don't do that?'"

Martin eventually lost his house and his personal belongings. One of the movie's poignant scenes has Martin expressing regret that he never fathered any children. He was married for six years, he said, but writers and marriage do not make for stable relationships.

He is in his 11th year of writing a book about screenwriting. He said he likely will have to take time off from teaching to finish the work.

On Nov. 4, Martin will be honored with a lifetime achievement award at the 10th annual ARPA International Film Festival at its gala awards banquet held at the Sheraton Universal Hotel.

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