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Jolie's challenge to bring a real-life drama to the screen

Angelina's 'Heart'

Angelina Jolie at the U.S. premiere of "A Mighty Heart." Inset, Mariane and Daniel Pearl. Photo by Desiree Navarro/Gamma

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From tragedy to triumph

Angelina Jolie brings to life the hopeful message of Mariane Pearl

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

The world was riveted in January and February 2002 when 38-year-old Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl was kidnapped by terrorists in Pakistan and brutally murdered. Footage of his execution spread worldwide via the Internet, giving the tragedy a macabre 21st-century spin.

But the film "A Mighty Heart," based on the memoir of his widow, fellow journalist Mariane Pearl, offers a story of hope rather than hate. Opening Friday, it shows Mariane — played by Angelina Jolie — six months pregnant and surrounded by strangers, people of different faiths and backgrounds, all coming together to try to rescue Daniel after his kidnapping.

Even in despair, Mariane finds something positive — linking her cry of pain at the news of Daniel's death to the cries of pain and happiness while later giving birth to their son, Adam. Even in the darkest moments, Mariane insists on seeing light. That, above all, is what drove Jolie to be involved.

"Mariane, under the most extraordinary circumstances, remained very focused on even having sympathy for the other side, even after they did that to her husband," says Jolie, interviewed at the



In "A Mighty Heart," Angelina Jolie (above) portrays Mariane Pearl, a journalist whose husband, Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, was captured and killed in 2002. Right, Jolie with Dan Futterman as Pearl. The film is based on Mariane Pearl's book of the same name.



Cannes Film Festival last month. "And I'm sure she felt all that we would expect her to feel. But somehow, on top of that, she managed to rise above it."

Jolie and her partner, Brad Pitt, had optioned the book when it was in galleys to develop as a film.

The two have used their lives to further their causes (when Pitt went to Africa, he took Diane Sawyer and ABC with him, deciding that if cameras are going to follow him everywhere, he might as well get them to look at some of the world's problems). After Hurricane Ka-

trina, the couple purchased a home in still-devastated New Orleans. The decision by Jolie to give birth to her daughter, Shiloh, now a year old, in Namibia, made worldwide headlines.

Now they're turning their art toward life with "A Mighty Heart." Yes, the film will remind Hollywood that, despite "Alexander" and the 2005 summer hit "Mr. and Mrs. Smith," Jolie is a serious, Oscar-winning actress — but she has higher goals.

"I hope [people] read Mariane's book, first of all," says the 32-year-old actress. "I hope they basically get to know her and I hope they look up

Jolie says the story has 'a bigger message.'

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A mighty friendship

Before the movie of "A Mighty Heart," and even before the book, actress Angelina Jolie and reporter Mariane Pearl reached out to one another. Pearl's story — a woman in Pakistan pregnant with her first child suffers the nightmare scenario of watching as her journalist husband is kidnapped and publicly murdered — had riveted people across the globe. Daniel Pearl's beheading was a flashpoint of politics and inhumanity, cruelty and terrorism.

Jolie saw a single mother clinging to hope amid despair. "Their friendship predates the film and the book," says "Mighty Heart" co-producer Dede Gardner, who runs Plan B, Brad Pitt's production company. Pitt had bought Mariane Pearl's book as a movie project prior to Jolie's first meeting the actor on 2005's "Mr. and Mrs. Smith."

"They share similar [views] about how they live their lives and how they parent their kids. And they were both single moms [at the time, Jolie had a year-old adopted son, Maddox]; it was a very natural union. And that got reinforced as they got to know each other better."

Director Michael Winterbottom saw Jolie embody her friend on-camera and off.

"Angelina seemed to have the same relationship to the other actors on the set that Mariane had to the people in the house [in Pakistan]," says Winterbottom. "Everyone in the house with Mariane said to me that Mariane really brought together the team and made them feel good about what they were doing. That's what Angelina did on the set. We had a lot of nonprofessional actors from Pakistan, people from India, Britain, America — and she always behaved like she was absolutely one of the team and created a really friendly, family atmosphere on the set."

Watching Jolie and Pearl side by side when the movie premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, it's evident how protective and proud Jolie is of Pearl and her ability to send out a message of hope and compassion in the wake of her husband's murder. And when the two women are together, as they were at Cannes, their similarities become clear.



Mariane and Adam Pearl with Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt (whose company bought the film rights to "A Mighty Heart") in France at last month's Cannes Film Festival. Photo by UPI

"They seemed to trust each other, which was crucial."

"When I first met Angelina, it was with Mariane," says Winterbottom. "We spent two or three days talking. I saw how close they were, and how clearly Mariane wanted her to play the part. They seemed to trust each other, and that was a [crucial] starting point."

In terms of her physical performance, perhaps the trickiest aspect of the role for Jolie was Pearl's accent, which combines Cuban, English and her native French into its own unique sound.

"I studied her accent," says Jolie. "It's a really hard accent. And the way she speaks — she has a rhythm. It was strange because I

was breaking down the voice of a friend."

But Jolie did much more than simply mimic Pearl (and in fact admits she's too shy to do the accent in front of her); she got to know her emotions, her way of seeing the world. And Pearl's approval of the film, Jolie says, was the most important aspect of it all for her.

"I do see more her than me now," says Jolie about watching the film. "But maybe that's because Mariane told me she thought it was good. She has given me her blessing." ♦

Michael Giltz



Pearl, with son Adam, during the 2002 Courage in Journalism Awards in New York. Photo by AP

Danny's old articles and read about him.

"But also I think there is a bigger message in this. We are at a time in our lives where there is so much fear and there is so much anger. And it's hard for people to calm down enough to focus on having a dialogue and understanding the full information, and trying to have a real comprehensive approach to find solutions. And I think Mariane is a great example of that."

For director Michael Winterbottom ("Welcome to Sarajevo," "The Road to Guantanamo"), the goal was to have a documentary-like focus on the facts of what happened in the tense days when Daniel might still have been saved.

"We talked to other people who were [involved]," says Winterbottom. "But Mar-

iane did a great job of telling the story in the book. She gave us the story inside her house of this small group of people who became friends, and just enough of the investigation and what Pakistan was like."

As for Jolie, being faithful to Mariane's story was easy.

"The book is beautiful," she says. "Danny was very much in love with Mariane, and Mariane was very much in love with Danny. They both would have been great parents together. He spoke to her tummy [and their soon-to-be-born child] probably every day she was pregnant, and not just the day he left."

Jolie sincerely hopes the film's bluntness about the facts of the case won't impede her desire to continue humanitarian

efforts in the Middle East. Long before the film was in the works, she and Pitt visited Pakistan after a devastating earthquake, in the hope of refocusing media attention on that country's plight.

"I think it's a very balanced film, and I don't think there's any reason to feel that any one group is going to be so upset about this and feel that way," says Jolie. "It does make me want to go back there all the more, and I miss it. I've been there three times and have a deep love for that part of the world, and I'm very saddened to see how every day it seems to be breaking more and more apart." ♦



Mariane and Daniel Pearl. The two had met at a party in 1998, and married a year later.