

'Uprising's' secret star

The Hollywood recluse who discovered Tom Cruise pops up doing (gasp!) TV

By MICHAEL GILTZ

FOR savvy movie buffs, the most surprising aspect of the NBC miniseries "Uprising" — which concludes tonight at 9 — has not been the involvement of filmmaker Jon Avnet as co-writer, producer and director.

Avnet garnered some of the best reviews of his career for this stirring tale about Jewish resistance fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II. But other Hollywood heavyweights have turned to TV before for prestige projects.

It wasn't the appearance of movie stars like Donald Sutherland, Jon Voight and Leelee Sobieski. Actors rarely worry these days about crossing back and forth from TV to film.

It wasn't even the unexpectedly robust performance from actor Hank Azaria.

No, the most surprising part of the film was one tiny credit. The screenplay was cowritten by Paul Brickman, the acclaimed writer and director of "Risky Business" and "Men Don't Leave," and a man who gets involved with projects about as often as J.D. Salinger publishes books.

He launched the careers of Tom Cruise and Chris O'Donnell, but hasn't made a movie in 11 years. (He simply can't find something worth making.) That makes Brickman the most elusive major director in Hollywood since Terrence Malick disappeared for 20 years between "Days of Heaven" and "The Thin Red Line."

No surprise that Avnet would be the one to get Brickman excited about a project.

"We're really close friends," says Brickman.

"One of the things that is satisfying about this project is because it's been such an obsession for Jon to get this thing done," says Brickman.

"You have to ask where perseverance and commitment and all that crosses the line into obsession," he laughs, "because he would not let go of this."

"There were times when it looked like it was out of business and wasn't going to happen. But he just kept going and going and put himself out there. He did take risks on this



both personally and professionally. There was a point where his wife was so concerned about his state of mind that she stopped calling it 'Uprising.' She was referring to it as 'that damned film.'

Typically, for the 52-year-old filmmaker — who lives in Chicago with his wife and has a

"Well, it is. But in the scheme of things I felt it was a tough, sad story. I guess it's two guys who are looking at half-full and half-empty."

And Brickman, who doesn't see much that inspires him in current movies, is obviously "the half-empty guy," he laughs. "Sometimes I'm completely

Hank Azaria brandishes a pistol in "Uprising" to show others in the Warsaw ghetto what is required to fight the Nazis. The script's co-author, Paul Brickman (below), was a surprising choice.

they come by to see what it is. But I rarely go back ... After a couple of times I feel I've gotten it and I don't know what more there is to get.

"The funny thing is I didn't feel that way as a kid. As a kid, I loved series television. Okay, this is going to really date you. I was in fourth grade and there was this show called 'Peter Gunn' with Craig Stevens. I also loved '77 Sunset Strip,' 'The Twilight Zone' and 'Naked City.' I would not miss an episode. It would kill me to miss an episode. I feel completely different as an adult."

But for a man who has used the success of his rare projects to "buy time rather than things," it's no surprise that the weekly grind of TV holds no appeal.

"The life of television is not a life I would want," says Brickman. "That would mean living in Los Angeles, which I would not want to do. I kind of like the rhythms of my life ... It would interfere with my weekly basketball game."

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daughter at Princeton and another forging a career as a modern dancer in New York — his first response was to say no. But he got excited about doing the research and finding the right balance between the despairing true facts of life in the ghetto and the stories of heroism.

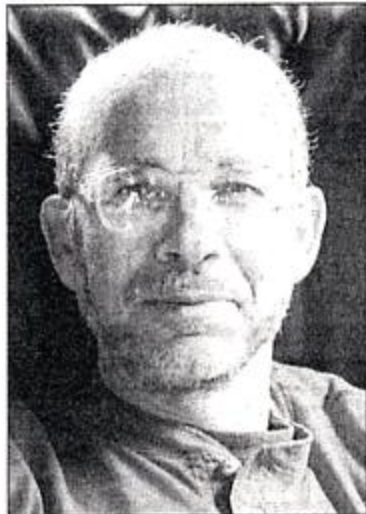
"Frankly, I always thought it was a very sad story," says Brickman. "Basically, the ghetto was obliterated and there were very few survivors. But Jon felt the fact that there were survivors that came out of that resistance and that they went on to do great things and procreate is a real positive, ennobling thing.

empty. Half-empty is good. That's a good day."

This isn't the first time Brickman has been approached about TV work (though he wrote the "Uprising" screenplay when it was still conceived as a feature film). Bizarrely, someone wanted to turn "Risky Business" into a weekly series. ("It's a good title; but what would it be about?" he wondered).

He's also often asked if he wants to shoot pilots. As expected, Brickman says no, especially since he rarely watches network TV.

"I don't know why," says Brickman, who describes him-



self as a news junkie and thinks Fox News' Bill O'Reilly has a certain obstreperous quality but deserves credit for pinning down his guests and not letting them "weasel out of answers."

"I will sample [new shows] as