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Kenneth Lonergan's Thwarted Masterpiece

By JOEL LOVELL

Think back on the last time you saw Kenneth Lonergan's 2000 film, "[You Can Count On Me](#)." Do you remember how good it was? The intellectual and emotional complexity of the script? Those remarkable performances by Mark Ruffalo and Laura Linney? That scene — to choose one among many — between Terry (Ruffalo) and his 8-year-old nephew, Rudy (Rory Culkin), in which the drunk Terry sits next to Rudy's bed late at night, smoking a cigarette and telling Rudy why his dad is such a jerk and why the town he lives in sucks so much? ("Fortunately for you, though, your mom is like, the greatest. So you had some bad luck, and you had some good luck.") It was a modest story of a brother and sister whose parents die when they're kids and whose lives are blown in different directions and who, years later, come to some almost-peace about what they can and can't be for each other. But there was such intense *realness* about it, the way people really talk, the way lives are actually lived, that was unlike anything else on screen, radical almost, in its attention to the genuine messiness of human lives.

You may have wondered why Lonergan never made another movie. Or you may know that he did: a film called "[Margaret](#)," which might be even better than "You Can Count On Me." The cast included Anna Paquin and Matt Damon and Mark Ruffalo and Matthew Broderick. Among its several credited producers were a couple highly respected Hollywood veterans: Scott Rudin and Sydney Pollack. So when Lonergan began shooting the film in 2005, after taking two years to write the screenplay, "Margaret" had a lot going for it. When it was finally released six years later, in late 2011 — after a brutal and bitter editing process; a failed attempt by no less a cinematic eminence than Martin Scorsese to save the project; and the filing of three lawsuits — several serious film people called it a masterpiece. And almost no one saw it.

Beyond the matter of who breached what agreements, though, the question that has loomed over the film is what happened to Lonergan. How did the guy who wrote and directed "You Can Count On Me" — and who, moreover, has been arguably the most important American playwright of the last 20 years — get so lost in the forest of his own film? And if the process was as acrimonious as it is said to have been, what did that do to him, personally and creatively? How does an artist recover from that? Does he recover at all?

This spring, Lonergan returned to the New York stage with a new play, "Medieval Play," a funny, foulmouthed comedy — about the Great Papal Schism of 1378 — that's nothing like the contemporary realism Lonergan is known for. In his review, the Times theater critic [Ben Brantley wrote](#), "If I had watched this play not knowing who wrote it and been asked to guess who did, Mr. Lonergan's name wouldn't have made my shortlist."

The play offered a chance to talk with him about where he is now in his life and his work, about whether the difficulties of "Margaret" had faded or if he was still in the grip of the experience — even though he is legally prohibited from discussing much of the process, given that a lawsuit against him is still pending.

A few days before I went to meet him, an old theater friend of Lonergan's told me to prepare myself not to be liked. "Kenny's a famous crank," he said. "It's kind of his thing." For what it's worth, that wasn't my experience. The only time I caught a glimpse of the famous crankiness was at a tech rehearsal for "Medieval

Play.” Lonergan was suffering through the flu and had been up late revising the script and was seated at a makeshift table in the darkened theater, watching the actors walk through a scene that they messed up a few times.

Josh Hamilton, who has acted in three of Lonergan’s full-length plays, was onstage in full armor. At every break, he took off his helmet and picked up his camera and took shots of the cast, until Lonergan called out of the darkness, “Josh, if you could remember what you’re doing rather than taking pictures, that would be helpful.”

“You’ll be happy later when we have memories,” Hamilton called back.

“They’re all going to be bad memories,” Lonergan said. “Please just get it right.”

Later, when I mentioned Lonergan’s disposition to Hamilton, he laughed. “He has a sweetness that’s not always apparent,” he said. “He definitely has a cranky side, but I think it’s there to cover up a true sensitivity. A friend of ours does an imitation of him that goes: ‘I don’t care what anyone thinks. [Shifts to gentle, searching voice.] Do you think that’s O.K.?’ ”

The office where Lonergan writes is above his apartment in Greenwich Village, in a building his grandmother bought in 1947. It’s a half block from Washington Square Park, around the corner from a small art gallery — or what used to be a small art gallery — that she ran for nearly 30 years, until dementia set in and Lonergan and his mother had to care for her until her death. For a while, until she became too sick, Lonergan lived in an apartment in the back of the building, and his grandmother lived in the front. His 2000 play, “[The Waverly Gallery](#),” is about that time, the exasperating and occasionally funny and devastating last years of her life.

“If you want to know the story, it’s all in there,” he said of the play. “It’s completely autobiographical.” A nice late-afternoon light filled the room and washed over his stacks of books. He gestured toward the floor below us, where his grandmother’s apartment had been and where he now lives with his wife, the actress J. Smith-Cameron, and their 10-year-old daughter. “It’s all just like it happened.”

It was a few weeks before the opening of “Medieval Play,” which concerns itself with ecclesiastical hypocrisy and the degradation of chivalry. It also expresses what I suspect is Lonergan’s healthy disdain for institutions. “They were so greedy and outright awful,” he said — meaning, in this instance, the late-14th-century Catholic Church. “And yet they were the controlling religious force in the entire Western World. How unashamed they were of the venal lives they were living is just amazing to me.”

He talked in similar tones about the Central Park Conservancy. “You can’t walk anywhere,” he said. Then he took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes and exhaled abruptly through his nose. “You can’t sit anywhere. There are signs everywhere telling you everything you can’t do. Yes, it looks prettier than it used to look, the grass is green and nicely mowed, but who does it belong to?”

Lonergan, who’s on the brink of 50, grew up near the park in the West 90s and attended the somewhat famously liberal Walden School, whose alumni include Barbara Tuchman (her book, “A Distant Mirror,” was the inspiration for “Medieval Play”) and Matthew Broderick, whom Lonergan calls “my very best friend in the world.” There’s a scene in “Margaret” in which the main character, a high-school girl named Lisa Cohen, sits on a boulder in the park smoking a joint with a friend (and griping about the signs), when their teacher (played by Broderick) comes by and ineffectually implores them to stop. “That was me and Matthew,” Lonergan said. “We spent a lot of time getting high in Central Park.”

In one sense, Lonergan’s long battle over “Margaret” is a familiar filmmaking parable: art versus money; a clash of creative visions; a promising project mangled in the gears of the Hollywood apparatus. The only

question is where the tale of “Margaret” falls on the continuum of famous Hollywood debacles, which ranges from, say, “Heaven’s Gate” — the bloated, massively expensive 1980 Western that essentially ended the career of its director, Michael Cimino, whose previous film “The Deer Hunter” won five Oscars — on one end to, say, “Apocalypse Now” on the other, the bloated, massively expensive Vietnam film by Francis Ford Coppola, which is now universally regarded as a masterpiece.

Lonergan’s history with Hollywood began, oddly enough, when, as a promising but unknown playwright, he made a very cleareyed, even craven, business decision — which wound up paying off very well. In his mid-20s, he wrote a screenplay that would eventually become the mafia comedy “Analyze This,” a film which, to this day, he has never seen. “I wrote it to sell it,” he says now. “I knew what that meant.” The film went through nearly a dozen different screenwriters before finally being released and spawning a successful franchise. “I was aware that it was very likely that it would be rewritten to death by others, which isn’t something I’m comfortable having done to work I’ve written for love, as opposed to for money,” he says. “And while I make a living off that system, I disapprove of it, and I don’t take any pride of authorship in something that’s been rewritten by 14 other people.”

One happy byproduct of that script was that he met Martin Scorsese, who would later bring Lonergan to Rome just before shooting to work on the script for “Gangs of New York.” Another happy byproduct is that the money Lonergan earned bought him time to write “[This Is Our Youth](#),” a 1996 Off Broadway hit that starred two unknown actors, Josh Hamilton and Mark Ruffalo. As described in the Times review, the play is about “the desolate, dead-end universe of young Manhattanites with rich parents and no direction. They are at that peculiar moment of life, their late teens and early 20s, when dissoluteness has not yet calcified into hopelessness.” In other words, it’s the kind of play that might stamp a young playwright, which it more or less did for Lonergan, with the label “voice of his generation.”

He has written five plays since then, including “The Waverly Gallery” in 2000 (a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize) and “Lobby Hero” (which [Jason Zinoman in The Times called](#) “the best new American drama of the first decade of the century”). His screenplay for “You Can Count on Me” and his work on “Gangs of New York” were nominated for Academy Awards. Which brings us to September 2005, when he began shooting “Margaret” in New York City from a script that ran to roughly three hours of screen time. Of course, if you want to make a three-hour movie in the current cinematic climate, it better have either superheroes or eight-foot-tall aliens. It’s nearly impossible to release a three-hour domestic drama about a high-school girl in New York City and the gradual unraveling of her life after she’s party to a horrific event, and all the various people she encounters along the way, and the complex and harrowing interactions of all their tangled stories.

Then again, many great films started with overly long, even unfinished, scripts. And Lonergan had been assured he would have complete control over the finished film — the one stipulation being that it could run no longer than 150 minutes. The cost of this production was being split by Fox Searchlight and a financier and producer named Gary Gilbert, who produced “Garden State” and is a co-owner of the Cleveland Cavaliers along with his brother, Dan Gilbert, the chairman of Quicken Loans.

Lonergan finished the shoot in November 2005 and went into the editing room to confront his reams of footage. He cut a three-hour version but struggled to get it down to 150 minutes. Why he couldn’t finish the edit is in part a mystery of the creative process and in part the subject of the lawsuits. But Ruffalo and Hamilton each talked about the complexity of the script itself. “One of the reasons it was so difficult is indicative of what his great talent is,” Hamilton told me. “I remember doing a reading of that screenplay in his living room years ago — it must have been 500 pages. I mean, it was *all day*. But it was one of the greatest screenplays I’d ever read in my life.”

Ruffalo said that Lonergan asked several people he trusted to look at a three-hour version of the film and to help him find cuts. “And I said: ‘Kenny, you made a masterpiece. Unfortunately it’s in the wrong decade and

the wrong country,' ” Ruffalo said. “I’m pretty merciless. . . . I’m not precious about this stuff. But it was like trying to move a house of cards a hundred yards in a windstorm. Once you pull out a single thread, the whole thing falls down.”

This process dragged on: Lonergan cutting and recutting and requesting costly extensions. At some point, he borrowed what was reported to be several hundred thousand dollars from Broderick in order to keep working. “I don’t want to say how much it was,” Broderick told me. “I just wanted to help him get it done. It wasn’t a carefully thought-out thing. He’s my best friend, and if he’s really stuck, I would always try to help him.”

Some of the producers were growing increasingly frustrated, especially Gilbert, who paid out of his pocket to keep the editing bay open after Lonergan ran out of money, but who also became a constant and, according to several people close to the film, toxic presence in the editing room.

In an e-mail response to a list of questions I sent him, Gilbert wrote: “All Searchlight or I ever wanted was for Kenny to finish the film on his own, which he never did. We were investing in a film by Kenneth Lonergan, an auteur writer/director and critics’ darling. When he didn’t deliver the film on time, I did everything in my power to get him to finish, and I was the sole reason he had the last year of additional time in the editing room. I thought he would eventually get there, but unfortunately I was wrong.”

Scott Rudin told me that he had also been very involved in trying to get Lonergan to finish the film, “until it became clear that no amount of pushing was going to get it done.” The backstage drama was “incredibly distracting,” Rudin said. “Kenny’s not a guy who takes distractions well or easily. He’s somebody who is *highly* concentrated on the work and not at all interested in the politics. So when the politics started to become noisier than the work, that was hard for him.”

In the fall of 2007, Dylan Tichenor, who edited “Brokeback Mountain,” was hired to cut a two-hour version of the film. Gilbert was pleased with the results; Lonergan was not. What resulted was the classic “I have giant piles of money and am paying for you to make your ‘art,’ but I’ve lost all patience with you and have therefore hired another guy to cut the movie even though you have the implicit authority to reject that cut, and now everything has turned to poison” Hollywood standoff.

Lonergan did deliver a completed version of the film, at just under two and a half hours, which Searchlight accepted in June 2008. At which point, you might think, the troubles would be over. But Gilbert refused to pay his half of the \$12.4 million production budget, prompting Searchlight to sue him for the money. He countersued and also sued Lonergan. In the complaint he filed in the fall of 2008, Gilbert said that the studio and Lonergan obstructed his efforts to complete the film; he also accused Lonergan of having “failed to keep regular hours” and being “unprofessional and irrational.”

A motion to dismiss filed this month by Lonergan’s lawyer, Mathew Rosengart, includes statements from a deposition by Rudin, who, when asked to summarize the role of a film’s investor, said, “The guy who pays for the movie is not supposed to be [in the editing room]. . . . He’s a guy who wrote a check.” He went on to say: “Mr. Gilbert badly hurt the movie. Mr. Gilbert going in and working in the editorial department was a very destructive act.”

Rudin told me: “If you’re making a movie with Kenny Lonergan and you sign off on the script, he’s the director, that’s the compact you made. Because you decide that you’re anxious about your investment, that doesn’t give you the right to completely recalibrate your relationship.”

For three years, give or take, as the various suits were filed, “Margaret” languished. Eventually, someone floated an idea that might end the standoff. What if they brought in Martin Scorsese to do a cut? As one person

close to the film told me, “Marty already saw a version he said was a ‘masterpiece.’ ” But a Scorsese cut, it was assumed, “would be good for the movie, good for Kenny, presumably good for Gilbert.”

It took another year and a half for Gilbert to agree to that plan. Then Scorsese — who was busy finishing “Hugo” and working on the HBO George Harrison documentary — agreed to do an edit, free of charge, and completed a version that was by many accounts similar to Lonergan’s, weighing in at just over two and a half hours (160 minutes, to be exact). “Kenny’s own process as he found the final form was long and painful, but sometimes that’s just the way it is,” Scorsese wrote to me in an e-mail. “When you’re as exacting in your vision as Kenny is, it can get that way.”

So now there were three cuts of the movie: the Lonergan cut; the two-hour Tichenor cut (referred to as “the Peggy cut,” after the name of one of Gilbert’s production companies, Peggy Productions); and the Scorsese cut. By that point, Searchlight and Gilbert had settled their respective suits about payments. There was still a possibility for everyone to sign off on Scorsese’s cut, slap “Presented by Martin Scorsese” above the title and submit it in time for the Toronto Film Festival in August 2011.

But Gilbert refused to sign off on Scorsese’s cut. One theory offered by someone close to the film is that he wanted to force Searchlight to use the Tichenor cut and that, by then, all decisions had become personal, a suggestion Ruffalo agreed with. “There comes a point where people cut off their nose to spite their face, and I certainly witnessed that,” Ruffalo said. “Whatever bad blood went down between them, I never felt like Gary ever got over it and actually tried to ensure that the movie and Kenny would be harmed.”

That’s where things remained until September 2011, when Searchlight finally released the Lonergan cut — in exactly two theaters, one in New York and one in L.A. With almost no promotion, a movie that cost more than \$12 million grossed \$46,495.

In one last twist of the saga, the critic Jaime Christley, who writes for Slant.com, decided it was insane that he and most other critics didn’t even have a chance to see what he guessed might be an excellent, or at least noteworthy, film. So Christley started [an online campaign](#) that became a real phenomenon, urging Searchlight to release the movie in a few more theaters, which it did. The studio also sent out screeners for awards consideration (though too late, really, and with no additional publicity to generate any traction). Some critics saw the film as a thwarted mess. Others saw a masterpiece. As The New Yorker’s movies editor, [Richard Brody](#), wrote: “It will be remembered, years and decades hence, as one of the year’s, even the decade’s, cinematic wonders.”

During all this, Lonergan gamely supported the film, attending question-and-answer sessions at screenings of “Margaret” and deflecting questions about the movie’s tortured history. (“Buy me a drink sometime,” he joked grimly to one person who asked about the long delay.) Each time it came up in our conversations, he seemed genuinely pained, either by the events themselves or the fact that he was legally prohibited from addressing what he said was “a lot of misinformation.”

Ruffalo, who has known Lonergan for 20 years or so, said: “God bless him, the guy tried in every single way that he possibly could. There wasn’t a moment that went by where he wasn’t suffering trying to figure out how to make this thing work and fit Gary Gilbert’s request and fit the studio’s request and fit Scott Rudin’s request. The guy bent over backward. He’s my dear friend, and I watched this thing nearly destroy him.”

On July 10, the DVD of “Margaret” will be released, including two different cuts of the film: Lonergan’s theatrical cut and a longer, three-hour-plus extended cut. “It’s not the happy ending one hopes for,” Rudin said. “But it’s a happier ending than it looked like it was going to get.” It may be that this DVD release will right various wrongs. The performances of Anna Paquin and J. Smith-Cameron (who plays Paquin’s mother, in one of the more realistic and movingly rendered mother-daughter portrayals on-screen) may finally get their

due. The studio may recoup some fraction of its investment as recompense for endeavoring to make this film in the first place. And, theoretically at least, the Platonic version of “Margaret” — Lonergan’s version — will finally be revealed to the world.

I doubt this last part, though. What exists isn’t that film. What exists is, I think, a better film. There’s something in the very conception of “Margaret,” in the themes it most ambitiously pursues, that defies perfection. If “You Can Count On Me” was a sublimely wrought depiction of a fragile dynamic between two siblings, “Margaret” is that writ large — played out not in a single family or a small town, but among ever-widening and interconnected circles of lives, their private dramas constantly thrumming and colliding. Yes, it’s a big, messy, problematic film. And it’s one that, with a precision and insight and empathy and large-heartedness you almost never find in movies anymore, captures the bigness and messiness and problematicness of life, and does it in a profound and lingering way.

Despite that — because of that — you have to wonder if Lonergan has it in him to endure this whole process again. When I asked him if he would be making a film any time soon, he said that there were some things he was working on. “I’ve just tried to do what I like to do and hope someone will be willing to pay for it and stake it, or stake me,” he said. “That’s really the only way I know how to function.” For now, he’s happy to be back in the theater. “Some people love movie sets. I have nothing against them. But I like the feel of the theater. It’s more my cup of tea.”

I suggested to him that the finished “Margaret,” the one that exists in the world, couldn’t have emerged without the long, drawn-out, brutally exhausting process by which it came to be. That the biggest and most important ideas in the film were inextricable from his own struggle and the flawed process itself. Lonergan considered this. “Maybe,” he said. “I guess I’ll take that.”

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This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: June 22, 2012

An earlier version misidentified the DVD release date of Kenneth Lonergan’s film, “Margaret.” It is July 10, not July 9.