

Los Angeles Times Calendar Section, January 7, 2007

# No Hollywood ending

**The true-crime 'Alpha Dog' becomes a part of the teen murder case it depicts.**

By Gina Piccalo, Times Staff Writer

Los Angeles, California - The elements of the murder case seemed tailor-made for Hollywood's "true-crime" treatment: As the summer of 2000 waned, a band of affluent friends in the San Fernando Valley, bored, unsupervised and stoned, kidnapped a teenager over his half brother's drug debt, partied with him for two days, then shot him to death in cold blood so he couldn't turn them in, leaving him in a shallow grave near a hiking area called Lizards Mouth.

Making the case even harder to ignore, the alleged mastermind of the crime was a 20-year-old named Jesse James Hollywood. In the events that led to the death of 15-year-old Nicholas Markowitz, filmmaker Nick Cassavetes saw not just a cinematic tragedy, but a cautionary tale of modern parenting, the worst-case scenario that results from an undisciplined adolescence. And there was a personal connection: His daughter attended El Camino Real High School a few years after Hollywood and Markowitz did and the crime resonated with him for years afterward.

With Jesse Hollywood nowhere to be found, and four of his friends already in prison, one on death row, Cassavetes had few qualms about teasing out the details of the story from those young men convicted in the crime, interviewing and befriending the principals, having his actors study interrogation footage and poring over documents from the case. He even brought one of his stars, Justin Timberlake, to prison to meet the man he'd portray in the film.

But his venture into the world of Markowitz and his captors didn't just evoke the case -- it altered its orbit. Hollywood, arrested in Brazil in March 2005, is in solitary confinement in Santa Barbara, charged with kidnapping and murder and facing the death penalty. And Cassavetes' movie "Alpha Dog," a picture opening Friday that's thick with tattoos, rap and bong hits, has become a central plot point in his trial. It's an odd case study in how the movie world's hunger for "material" can exacerbate the real-world complexities of the people who supply it -- especially when the prosecutor on an open case gets involved with a filmmaker, and the filmmaker befriends the father of a criminal who's on the lam.

## Gathering the stories

Cassavetes and Michael Mehas, his researcher and childhood pal, cut a wide swath in amassing the details that would give texture to the script, which sticks closely to the devastating story. (Cassavetes says the film is "95% accurate" -- though names, dates and locations were changed for legal and insurance purposes.) They contacted the imprisoned men -- Jesse Taylor Ruge,

William Robert Skidmore, William Graham Pressley and Ryan James Hoyt -- as well as witnesses to the crime (there were dozens). Accounts they didn't get firsthand were pulled directly from court records.

The film is stylish and at times hyper-realized, with electric green marijuana bushes and cerulean swimming pools. Documentary-style interviews are interspersed with the film narrative, and every scene is placed in the timeline of the murder, which police believe was set in motion when the victim's half brother didn't repay a drug debt to Jesse Hollywood.

Much of the film takes place in scenes of teenage debauchery -- a raucous pool party, a late-night romantic tryst. And that makes the excruciating murder scene even more difficult to bear. Cassavetes has shaped the movie, with 19-year-old rising star Emile Hirsch as Jesse Hollywood and Timberlake as his best friend, not just as a chronicle of kids gone wild but as a look at the dark side of suburban affluence. Indeed, the most despicable characters are many of the parents -- pot growers and Ecstasy-users so consumed by self-indulgence that they completely miss the fact that their kids are party to a kidnapping.

"When I started tracking people down, nobody was excited about me talking to them," Cassavetes says. "It was a very tough chapter in all of their lives. Nobody was really excited about the prospect of turning that story over to me [or] having it rehashed in their own minds, maybe because it reacquainted them with some of their culpability and maybe just because it was safer for them to tell their story to themselves without having an objective look at it."

But some weren't so reticent. Jack Hollywood, Jesse's father, became a close advisor to the film. So did Santa Barbara prosecutor Ronald J. Zonen, a 27-year veteran who had recently won convictions of Hollywood's four friends. Those alliances proved tricky.

Zonen gave researcher Mehas invaluable access to everything from witness addresses and autopsy photos to interrogation footage and his trial notebook. But all that goodwill did not go unpunished. Mehas, who is also an anti-death-penalty criminal defense lawyer, came to see prosecutor Zonen's tactics as "misleading" and "ruthless." So a week after Hollywood's capture, he offered Hollywood's attorney James Blatt some helpful tips, including the fact that Zonen let him borrow confidential case files. That detail ultimately got Zonen booted from the case.

"I don't want Jesse to die," said Mehas. "I know his father very well. I know his story completely. I am at the center because I got all the information.... Beneath a gruff gangsta wannabe exterior is a human being that loves his family, who is loved by his family and who doesn't deserve to have his life taken from him."

In affidavits, prosecutor Zonen comes across as a bumbling amateur, joking that he wanted to be portrayed in the film by "somebody really handsome," and so star-struck that he jeopardizes the very case he hoped to leave as his legacy. Zonen didn't respond to calls for comment, but in an October 2005 affidavit he said that everything in the script comes from public record and that he cooperated with Cassavetes strictly in the interest of justice.

"I saw this as the last opportunity to get the kind of widespread publicity necessary to locate defendant Hollywood and bring him to justice," he stated. Ultimately, the state court of appeals wrote that his action "allowed 'show business' to cast an unseemly shadow over this case." For a time, the legal system cast its own shadow on the film -- Blatt tried to stop its release, arguing it would taint the jury pool, and a federal court decided only in December that it would not. By that point, the film's release had been delayed a year. Jesse Hollywood's trial is expected to begin this summer.

Cassavetes himself has landed in an awkward position, teetering between his filmmaking vision and the wrenching aftermath of murder. Some of his and Mehas' film research has been turned over to Jesse Hollywood's attorney. It's now evidence that already seems to have helped the defense.

### **Different kind of project**

At nearly 6 feet, 6 inches, with broad shoulders, neck tattoos and an acute sense of his surroundings, Cassavetes could be a character in "Alpha Dog." He grew up privileged in the Hollywood Hills, the son of acclaimed independent film director John Cassavetes and actor Gena Rowlands. On a recent morning, he towered over the wait staff at Chateau Marmont and even discreetly reprimanded a waiter for driving him to distraction by repeatedly clicking the lighter on an outdoor heater.

"Alpha Dog" is much edgier than the director's previous films, which include the 2004 tearjerker "The Notebook" and the Denzel Washington thriller "John Q" in 2002. And he said it was by far his most problematic. Early on, "Alpha Dog" was plagued by issues of financing. Then, after Hollywood's March 2005 capture, the ending had to be re-shot and the legal wrangling with Hollywood's lawyer began. Last summer, the film's distributor, New Line, decided on a limited release for the film. Cassavetes took the picture to Universal, which is releasing it wide.

Cassavetes sees the film as a tribute to Nicholas Markowitz, a way to bring the teen back, "if only for a few minutes." At the same time, he wants parents to pay attention to his underlying message.

"Kids are supposed to make mistakes," he says. "That's how they test their limits when they become teenagers. Unfortunately, as parents, even though it seems uncool and a bit of an imposition, we must impose limits so when they do get in trouble the results aren't disastrous."

But in making the movie, he left Jack Hollywood, a close ally on the film, with a sense of betrayal. "Alpha Dog" serves as "the prosecutor's opening statement," Hollywood says, and gives his son far too much credit for the crime and making him out to be a kingpin -- the "alpha dog" of the group -- when he was just in a "horrible spot." Originally, he'd hoped to influence the script, to reclaim his son's story from the media's portrayal. He gamely offered his two cents on dialogue and setting and each time, he said, he was gently reminded that this was a feature film, not a documentary.

Still, as a film consultant, the elder Hollywood (played by Bruce Willis in the film) tagged along to various locations in the Valley and helped guide some of the performances. The young actors who bring this story to life all sound torn between being deeply pained by the murder and weirdly star-struck by their contact with the real Jesse's father.

"He really tried to remind me that I wasn't just playing a monster," says Hirsch, who plays Jesse Hollywood. "This is his son. When I first met him, I was a little hesitant.... He said, 'You're playing my boy.' The way he said it, you know? This is his dad."

Cassavetes developed an affinity for the man. The two are roughly the same age -- Cassavetes is 47, Jack is 52 -- but they exist in very different worlds. In court records, Jack is depicted as a longtime drug dealer, savvy enough to skirt the FBI's wiretaps, who supplied his son with marijuana, then helped him evade capture and even funded his life in Brazil.

But he and Cassavetes grew so close, Cassavetes says, that Hollywood told him how he helped his son escape the U.S. (Jack Hollywood denies this.) At the time, Jesse Hollywood was secretly living in a tiny beach town outside Rio de Janeiro.

Cassavetes would offer details strictly hypothetically. Jesse Hollywood, he said, may have stayed in a safe house for six weeks after the murder, and then may have been driven to Washington where he may have taken a boat to Canada. Later, Jesse may have grown frustrated with his handlers and used fake identification to fly to Mexico, then Brazil.

The director says that in some ways, Jack's choices aren't too far from his own. "If it were my kid and he were facing the death penalty, I might just grab him and get him out of the country," he says. "I think it speaks to the very essence of right and wrong and love. It's what makes the story interesting."

### **Parents still in pain**

Cassavetes' dramatic memorial to her son has so far brought no comfort to Susan Markowitz (played by Sharon Stone in the film), who by her own count has attempted suicide 13 times since her son's death. She has scheduled half a dozen private screenings of the movie and canceled every one. Still, she says, she will see the movie.

"I'm sure it's going to freshen the pain," she said, "but it's like another step." Unlike Jack Hollywood, she and her husband Jeffrey weren't hired as consultants because they'd already sold the rights to their story to a TV producer who never used it. Over the years, Susan has dutifully attended the seven trials in her son's case, often carrying his leather jacket to court. Nick would have been 22 years old by now, and Susan still sees him everywhere, in grocery aisles, in the light through the trees, in the empty cereal bowls in her sink. His case ends with Jesse's trial and it's bittersweet for her.

"I'm kind of afraid of the ending because that's when I'm really going to have to accept it," said Susan. "Right now, it's unfinished business." For Jack Hollywood, bitterness and desperation

manifest differently. As he recounts the last years, he sounds tired of the scrutiny. He recently served 18 months in an Arizona prison for attempting to buy marijuana and was found with the ingredients and recipe to make the date-rape drug GHB. He was released in September. Now he's biding his time in Flagstaff, Ariz., waiting to have his parole transferred to California. He visits his son every few weeks, speaking to him through a glass wall.

Hollywood says the film glamorizes his son's lifestyle to an absurd degree. "My son lived in a 1,200-square-foot house in a lower middle-class neighborhood," he says. "In the movie, he lives in some mansion in Palm Springs. I thought, you know, it's Hollywood. So they make it pretty glamorous. And they kind of blew it out of proportion to make him look like he was a real kingpin."

In reality, he says, his son was "just under a lot of pressure." "I don't think that the story that they tell is true at all," he adds. "I'm sure when it gets to trial people will see that." Despite the legal headache and controversy, Cassavetes says he isn't worried that his movie will jeopardize Hollywood's chances of a fair trial. How could it, he asks, when each side believes the film benefits the other?

"A story like this makes your judgment glands start secreting all kinds of stuff," he says. "You start judging all over the place. And what I tried to do was just calm myself and say, 'Nick, if you're going to do this, just tell the story and let the audience judge how they want to judge.' "

gina.piccalo@latimes.com Credit: Times Staff Writer