

O N T H E S E T



# honey, let's make the kids famous

*A miniseries about the rise of the Jacksons' musical dynasty has family members struggling with the facts. By Tom O'Neill*





**P**ittsburgh — *There is a presence here, felt but not seen, a larger-than-life, surgically reshaped force inhibiting every thought and*

action on this set in a converted warehouse 2000 miles from the place *he* calls “Neverland Valley.” Lending a fragile, though absolutely necessary, air of authenticity to these proceedings are manifestations of *him*, tendrils of the beast, if you will, in the form of the woman who begat *him* and the brother (of all the brothers!) with whom *he* has had the stormiest relationship. ■ On this, the thirteenth day of shooting the ABC miniseries, *The Jacksons: An American Dream*, Mrs. Katherine Jackson, matriarch of the clan, progenitor of the

*Dream*, emerges from son Jermaine’s trailer “to watch the children dance.” ■ Entering the warehouse, the stout woman with long red nails and a purple Lakers cap circumvents a relic so far removed from her life it might never have existed: Rising on the soundstage, entangled in moviemaking equipment, is the re-created house from 2300 Jackson Street, Gary, Indiana. Two bedrooms, one bath. Five hundred dollars

down. Purchased by newlyweds who, she says, “never thought we were going to have all those kids.” ■ An interior set only, there are no ceilings and the plywood walls move, but the “home” has been designed so specifically to her recollec-

tions that it breathes the life of the family — from the reproductions of Joseph’s landscape paintings (a hobby he abandoned when the boys won their first talent show) and the braided rug she threw down to protect her floor from kids who loved dancing to the triple bunk bed in the boys’ bedroom that harbored five

brothers and a thousand dreams. ■ Moving slowly, with the limp retained from a childhood bout with polio, Katherine bypasses a director’s chair with her name on it and, finding no room on the crowded set, joins a clique of stage mothers peering through a fake picture window into her past. ■ Beyond the hunched shoulders of the camera crew are the children, dancing in the living room. The year is 1957, and Joseph Jackson

*Previous page, clockwise from top left: cast members Angel Vargas, Jacen Wilkerson, Terrence DaShon Howard, Jason Weaver and Jermaine Jackson Jr.; Katherine Jackson and Suzanne dePasse; Margaret Maldonado, Jermaine Jr. and Jermaine Jackson; actress Angela Bassett gets a hug; background musicians; Angela Bassett surrounded by her TV children; Lawrence-Hilton Jacobs and Angela Bassett; Jermaine Jackson and his son.*



(played by Lawrence-Hilton Jacobs) has roused them from their sleep to perform for his friends. Watching in a nightgown, cradling infant Marlon, is Angela Bassett, the actress portraying Katherine.

"He always did that," sighs the sixty-two-year-old grandmother in the soft, trademark voice of the family. "Pull the kids out of bed at all times of night to dance." The mothers of the mostly unknown children crane to hear this oracle of stage-mothering.

Michael Peters, choreographer of Michael Jackson's "Beat It" and "Thriller" videos — and of all the dance sequences in the miniseries — brings her a chair.

"No," she says, nodding at the others, "they can't see."

"We can see," they respond in unison.

"No, I'm all right," she says, returning her attention to the children. "They were really good dancers at that age."

"Yesterday," says Peters quietly, "we were filming Bosie Thompson [the dance double for the nine-year-old who plays Michael] and Mrs. Jackson was just sobbing. I said, 'Really takes you back.' And she said, 'Not only that, but you can tell how much he loves it. Michael loved it and that's what it takes.'"

WHAT IT TOOK TO GET THIRTY-NINE years in the life of the world's most successful performing family into a four-hour package for ABC (airing on November 15 and 18) was, according to coproducer and second wife of Jermaine Jackson, Margaret Maldonado, a lot of pleading within the family's fractious ranks. The seed was planted, she says, "when all LaToya's nonsense came out."

As a way of coping with her daughter's tell-all book (which included allegations of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her parents), Katherine Jackson would sit for hours in front of the television set with Maldonado and talk about the early days of the family's life together. "Pretty soon, watching TV was of no interest," recalls Katherine Jackson, "and I started telling her things that I've never even told my own children."

Maldonado, who moved into the family's Encino estate with Jermaine and the child she bore him (while he was still married and having a third child with his wife) was "fascinated by the love story" of Joseph and Katherine Jackson and of their Horatio Alger-like pursuit of the American Dream. She kept Katherine talking while reporting the details back to Jermaine.

"Finally, one day," recalls Katherine, "she and Jermaine came in and said they were going to make a miniseries about my life and I thought, Oh, my God."

From the outset, the budding producers were determined to keep Joseph and Katherine at the center of their story. They wanted to show how his fierce discipline, coupled with her unyielding love (and a *little* help from the kids' talent), enabled the family to rise from its lower-middle-class background to a

world of riches and superstardom beyond even their own wildest dreams. While not entirely ignoring the turmoil that accompanied their success, the miniseries would culminate with the launching of 1984's Victory Tour — the last time they performed together as a family and before, as Maldonado admits wryly, "things get really crazy."

But, despite having published an autobiography, Katherine was reluctant, insisting "nobody's interested in my story."

"We should do something as a family," implored Maldonado (by now her daughter-in-law), "to set the record straight." She and Jermaine went ahead and formed a production company (Katherine Jackson Films) to keep "it in the family's control." Then they put together a crack team of miniseries specialists, beginning with

executive producer Stan Margulies (*Roots*, *The Thorn Birds*), director Karen Arthur (*Fall From Grace*) and coexecutive producer Suzanne dePasse (*Lonesome Dove*). In fact, it was dePasse who, as a twenty-one-year-old assistant to Motown's Berry Gordy in 1968, arranged the Jackson 5's audition and went on to manage their career, before becoming president of Motown Productions.

Although they finally received Katherine's blessing, the couple still needed someone else's approval — and it wasn't Michael's. "My husband wasn't too ready to agree," admits Mrs. Jackson, "because he had been thinking about doing it, too."

That, coupled with the sticky problem of how to depict Joseph Jackson — LaToya wasn't the only one to make accusations against a man who had fathered a child out of wedlock and almost been divorced by his wife on more than one occasion — made it seem like a nearly impossible task. So how did they persuade him? "Well," sighs Katherine, "we just told him that we think it's time to do it. We finally talked him into saying yes."

"People like to hear negative things," says the woman who knows whereof she speaks. "I hope this comes off positive enough to let them know that all the lies they're hearing, especially from my daughter [LaToya] and this crazy guy she's running around with [husband-manager Jack Gordon], are not true."

BEFORE THE CLEFT, THE CHIMP, THE HYPERBARIC CHAMBER AND A wedding for Liz, there was a five-year-old boy standing alone in front of a PTA meeting in Gary, Indiana, singing for the first time in public. The scene was restaged here just last week.

"I was there," says Jermaine softly, "Michael sang 'Climb Ev'ry Mountain.' That was our first time seeing him really, really sing. That was when I knew that he had it."

Until that day in 1963, nine-year-old Jermaine Jackson was the lead singer of his father's still-unnamed band. From then on, he stepped back into his brother's shadow, emerging later in futile attempts at a solo career (usually orchestrated by his then



*The executive producer, Suzanne dePasse, met the Jacksons in 1968.*



father-in-law, Berry Gordy) and finally departing the band altogether, leaving the family, it's been said, with a broken heart.

The unspoken irony (around here anyway) that Jermaine, of all the brothers, is the force behind this production, is just another twist in the relentlessly strange saga of the Jacksons. Only last year he released a song denouncing Michael, entitled "Word to the Badd."

When questioned about the degree of Michael's involvement, Jermaine, like everyone else, is evasive. "He's been very cooperative and when we're finished, we're gonna throw a big party at his place. The champagne," he adds rather unconvincingly, "is going to be flowing."

Joyce Eliason, the seasoned docudramatist, has traversed this emotional minefield before. Among the many based-on-fact miniseries she's authored was the high-rated *Elvis and Me*; in other words, she's adept at writing a script pleasing to a public who *knows*.

Beginning with Mrs. Jackson, Eliason interviewed *most* of the family members. "Joseph didn't really want to talk to me," admits Eliason, so he answered questions submitted in writing. LaToya wasn't approached, nor was Janet because, claims Eliason, she's too young to remember the time covered. Michael, however, granted a four-hour interview. "I was obviously nervous," recalls Eliason, "but he put me right at ease. He was charming and sweet."

Eliason's script steers clear of sensitive areas like Michael's well-documented peculiarities and the issues raised in LaToya's book. Instead, it's an almost benign rags-to-riches story of a family held together by a strong mother and a driven father, a father who, at worst, physically reprimanded the kids and got caught cheating on his wife — more than once.

"There are things that I maybe would've liked to put in," admits Eliason, when questioned about constraints the family might have put on her. "But people have their privacy. I don't want to hurt anybody, that isn't what this is about. It's not mean-spirited. It's about peoples' lives, and you have to treat them with respect."

JOE AND KATHERINE JACKSON ARRIVED IN PITTSBURGH ONE WEEK into production, striking, well, at the very least, nervousness into the hearts of not just a few people on the set.

"Jermaine kept telling me everyday," recalls a still worked-up Jacobs, "THEY'RE COMIN'! THEY'RE COMIN'! THEY'RE COMIN'!" But the actor, who's known the family for years and even worked as a session musician for Joseph once, was determined not to let it interfere with his work.

Angela Bassett, on the other hand, was petrified. "I couldn't look at her," shudders the actress who had never met her analogue. "But from my peripheral I could see her in her purple outfit across the street." Bassett has been through this situation before, having recently played the very much alive-and-watching

Betty Shabazz, widow of Malcolm X, in Spike Lee's movie on the slain leader. *Jacksons* director Karen Arthur, aware of her star's discomfort, gently coaxed her through a difficult scene in which Katherine arrives home lugging bags full of Salvation Army clothes only to meet Joseph in the driveway with a van full of musical equipment — and a depleted savings account.

When they finished, Bassett allowed herself a peek across the street and saw Mrs. Jackson in tears. "I caught her eye," recalls Bassett. "She said, 'It was good.' That calmed me down."

"It's kind of funny, but we didn't talk anything about it," says Jacobs of his time with Joseph on the set. The thirty-nine-year-old, who skyrocketed to sitcom stardom in the Seventies as one of the *Welcome Back, Kotter* Sweathogs, has maintained a "respectful" though distant relationship with the elder Jackson over the years. "I asked him if he was interested in seeing the dailies," says the actor. "He just looked at me real straight, as Joe can do, and said, 'Hey, man, I already lived this stuff. What do I need to see it for?'"

In the miniseries, Joseph is seen beating his children with a belt and showing them virtually no affection. Pretty rough stuff, though nowhere near as terrible as the kinds of abuse alleged by LaToya and some of the unauthorized books about the family.

"I hope this doesn't come across misunderstood," says Maldonado. "We're portraying Joseph as very strict because he *was* very strict. But it wasn't an abusive strict. It's just that he had a vision and he knew how to make it happen. Living where he was living, he had to act and treat his kids a certain way."

Casting the miniseries became a Hollywood nightmare for Jaki Brown, who, despite having cast Boyz 'N The Hood and Juice, couldn't possibly have

been prepared for the logistics of finding three different age groups of Jackson kids who could sing, dance, act *and* look like siblings.

"I started in January and I'm just finishing now," confesses a weary-looking Brown in May. The real Michael had to approve the actors who would play him by viewing their audition tapes. For the youngest two, Alex Burrall (Michael, age six to eight) and Jason Weaver (Michael, age thirteen to fourteen), word didn't come from the Neverland Ranch until a day-and-a-half before production started — relayed via a phone call from Jackson's attorneys. Suzanne Burrall, Alex's mom, cut short a camping trip to get her son to Pittsburgh on time. But she's not complaining: "It was like living in a dream to have someone of that magnitude looking at my little boy on a home video."

An on-the-set visit by the self-proclaimed "King of Pop" has been ruled out. Admits a disappointed Margulies, "I thought knowing how much Michael loves children that he would be involved in the casting or training of the children, but his schedule does not permit it." Rumors about visits to the set had the local



*Jermaine Jr. gets a few tips from his famous father between scenes.*



papers checking in almost daily but to no avail. "The kids really deserve it, they've worked so hard," sighs Mrs. Burrall. "Alex tells Jermaine Jr. everyday how lucky he is to be Michael's nephew."

"I don't talk to my uncle," says fifteen-year-old Jermaine Jackson Jr. when asked if he received any advice from Michael. He then adds, in the soft voice of the family, "That much."

"IT'S NOT AS BIG AS A TWO-CAR GARAGE!"

"Yes it is, it's about that large."

"No, mother, I was just there."

"It is, Jermaine."

"You can't park two cars in there, I'm telling you."

"Yes you can."

"No, no, no, mother. Imagine this! She don't remember!"

In the posh trailer provided by ABC, with its queen-size bed and kitchenette, Jermaine teases his mother about the size of a house that for the first time in years doesn't seem so far away. Listening quietly are Jermaine Jr. and Margaret. Within arm's reach of Mrs. Jackson, as always, is her Jehovah's Witness Bible. On a counter is an autobiography of Sammy Davis Jr.

As the conversation meanders from whether or not the house should be relocated to the parents' estate in Encino (Katherine: "That would cost a lot of money." Jermaine: "Just put it on a big, wide truck.") to whether the boys fought in school (Katherine: "This is the first I've heard of it." Jermaine: "The brothers want it in the movie because it shows that they're tough." Katherine: "Well, I don't."), the wall of privacy so carefully constructed by the family finally begins to crack.

"If I had to live my life over again," Mrs. Jackson muses, "I don't think I'd change it very much. I really appreciate the days that I had back then. It makes me appreciate what I have now."

"My favorite part in the story is before we become popular," says Jermaine. "When we were practicing — when we were just a local group trying to make it."

When asked if he'd do it all over again, he thinks a moment before answering. "Yeah, but there are certain things I'd probably hold on to, like being able to go to the high school prom. I've never been to the high school prom or to high school parties."

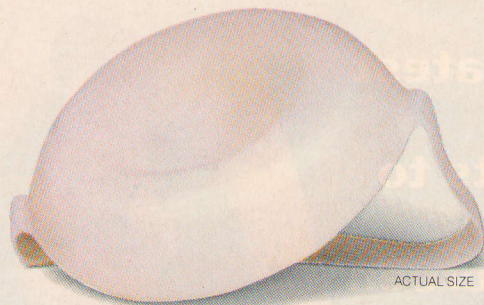
MUCH LATER THAT NIGHT, IN THE WAREHOUSE, THE LAST SCENE OF the day is being shot. In it, Katherine receives a phone call from Joseph, who is on the road with the boys. He tells her that everything they've been struggling for is about to be realized — they have an audition in the morning at Motown.

The Jacksons — Jermaine, Margaret, Jermaine Jr. and Katherine — departed the set hours ago. Only a skeleton crew remains for what is supposed to be a simple shot of Bassett on the phone in the kitchen, young Janet in her arms and Rebbie and LaToya watching in their pajamas. It is a summer night in 1969.

With the director's call of "Action!" Katherine hears Joseph's news and sits down clutching the telephone. The stage directions instruct her to close her eyes and say, "The boys are gonna audition for Motown." She does, and seconds later, to the crew's surprise, tears stream down her face. ■

*Tom O'Neill's last article for 'US' was on 'Saturday Night Live.'*

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