

'The Deal' for a Dealmaker

By Arlene Graber

You haven't heard of *The Deal* yet, but one of the soon-to-be-released movie's producers, Art Allen, has spread his wings from Wichita to New York to South Africa. William H. Macy, star of *The Deal*, has dubbed Allen one of the film's "dealmakers."

Allen recently returned to Wichita and his regular life as a New York Life Insurance Agent from location shooting in Cape Town, South Africa. The movie, which has just been selected for Robert Redford's Sundance Film Festival, will be released in either February or March, according to Allen.

"Dealmaker" refers to the cohort of investors who made the film possible. "It was the most incredible experience," said Allen when interviewed in his East Wichita office. Allen, who is also president emeritus of The Atlantic Theater Company in New York, isn't star struck. He's used to rubbing elbows with celebrities like Macy, Meg Ryan, LL Cool J, and Elliot Gould, who star in *The Deal*.

The investment wasn't without serious thought and planning, with Allen waiting and wondering if the film will be a hit? Or will it be a gamble, gone bad.

"Contrary to popular belief that movie making is always profitable, in actuality, six out of ten movies never recoup their original investment in their domestic run," according to the Motion Picture Association.

Hard Work, Accountability

Allen grew up on a farm at 109th Street and North Oliver. He was in 4H, attended Valley Center schools all 13 years, and is a Kansas State University graduate just like his entire family. Allen says his parents, Dale and Mabel Allen, laid the foundation. Not that he would invest in films, but that their children knew the importance of hard work and the virtues of a good business deal. They also introduced their five children to the arts—a good combination that Allen has made work for him.

After college, it would have been easy to pursue a career in the theater or film. "I've always had the creative side," he said. "I was always the kid that was in all the plays and musicals in school, but I didn't trust it as a career choice. I thought business a better career path."

He followed in his father's steps into the life insurance business, and is now a 26-year veteran with New York Life.

"Farel Tibbitts hired me and taught me that we don't sell life insurance, the product sells itself. Our responsibility is to help people solve issues, said Allen"

The 'Method'

"Art is a unique exceptional individual that excels in communication skills, but more important, he is genuinely interested in helping people," Tibbitts said. "He has the rare ability to understand a situation before acting, and accomplishes this by getting to know a person first. He listens to their needs before he offers to help."



Art Allen, above, leads a double life—mild mannered insurance agent from Wichita and off-Broadway-off-Hollywood 'dealmaker.'

His methodical approach to business has earned Allen, the luxury of living where he wants, extensive travel, and the ability to rub elbows with celebrities and financiers. "Now, I have a book of business and due to technology, I'm able to manage the business from anywhere," he said. His clients range from blue collar workers to the likes of Glenn Close and those who live in Europe, Israel, as well as across America.

While establishing his career, he began to travel regularly to New York City. "Those were the days when you could buy a standing room only ticket, so I would go to Broadway plays three times a week. Straight theater is so amazing—it takes you away from everything you came in the door with. The experience is like nothing else."

It wasn't long before he saw a window of opportunity. He moved to New York for a management job at New York Life. It was the best of all worlds, building his business and living where he wanted. For the next 20 years, he was foremost a businessman, but also heavily involved in the theater.

The Atlantic Theater

Through a friendship with a college buddy, Allen became a board member of The Atlantic Theater Company, an off-Broadway venue, and was president for 10 years. The Atlantic was co-founded by Macy (*Fargo*, *Door to Door*, and *Wild Hogs*) and author, playwright, screenwriter, film director, and Pulitzer Prize winner, David Mamet, along with Felicity Huffman (*Desperate Housewives*, *Transamerica*), who are all still involved in the theater. Allen became immersed in the daily operations of the company learning what was needed, and observing the strong and weak areas.

A smile crosses his face as he remembers those first

years when the main topic of the board meetings was how to meet payroll. "You know," he told them, "besides casting a play, putting it on, you have to be solvent. It's great to do good work, but you have to pay for the seats, rent and publicity and can't run in the red. The board can't keep writing checks."

In conjunction with New York University, the theater has an acting school that guides students through the process of learning while training in one of the most rigorous courses, Practical Aesthetics, of actor training in New York. "Students are able to grasp what the real theater world is like by learning in an actual theater," Allen said.

Under Allen's tenure, a new school was built. Where did the money come from? "Well, that was a real coup," Allen said. "Developers wanted to build a 50-story apartment building, where the school was and offered us \$500,000 to break the remaining two-year lease, and relocate. The board negotiated a deal that ended up in the area of \$7.5 million, which gave us a newly-built school, and renovation of the theater."

Today, the theater is solvent and the box office is huge. This year, they produced a gritty rock musical, *Spring Awakening*, that won eight Tony Awards, and went straight to Broadway within six months. In addition, the school has expanded by offering a spring program, limited to 15 students, in Los Angeles, with a faculty that includes, Huffman, Macy and Mamet.

The Deal & the Movie

In 2006, Allen, and his partner, Jacquie Corbelli, decided to invest and become one of the producers for *The Deal*, a story about Hollywood film making, how it's marketed, and how studios take a script, and it becomes a whole different thing than what the writer wanted.

"We had spent five years looking, reading scripts and helping connect people for other projects," said Allen, "and we decided that this one was our Deal. So we wrote checks and invested."

"Writing checks," Allen said, "is not what most producers do. In the producing world, a good producer has a lot of connections and can put a consortium group together to fund and take the risk. You don't invest your own money in it. And, from a business standpoint, you need to look at commercial ability, which we think is good, but also we so believed in Macy as the star and so believed in the script. We may not ever get our investment back, but we think we will."

It wasn't a cake walk. All the casting was completed, including set designers, directors, and various other personnel, when the largest investor backed out. "Lisa Kudrow was lined up to play Macy's counterpart, and was our "catch" for investors, but she couldn't wait on us to come up with new funding." They lost the filming site, due to scheduling, and things got dicey.

Art Allen

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and especially Bill Macy,” said Allen, “so after some heavy scrambling we were ready to begin shooting again.” Meg Ryan would replace Kudrow, and Cape Town, South Africa, where over 14 movies were filmed in 2006, became the shooting location.

“Since the story takes place in Los Angeles, the setting there was fabulous with palm trees,” Allen said. “[Their] Atlantic Ocean coastline with houses on the beach is much like Malibu.” He explained that it’s far too expensive to film in the U.S. these days.

Allen treated this investment much like his others. He spent 20 years getting to know the industry, then after selecting an investment became immersed in it by watching the entire process. He traveled to Cape Town and spent six weeks on the set watching and learning.

“I spent time with the grips, (people who move the sets) catering people, drivers, traffic control, and I sat in the chair behind the director, watched the process of how rain or delays in arrivals impact filming. I didn’t understand the budget before immersing myself in the actual physical making of a film. How union rules must be followed with the actors, and do we really need that many drivers,

that many trucks etc.”

“That’s what makes Art a natural for this business,” said Lela Meadow-Conner, Tallgrass Film Festival director. “He wants to understand everything and is willing to do anything to help. It’s funny, for us at the festival, Art always seems to show up at the right time, to help out with all the last minute details, whether it is running errands or decorating a party venue. This quality about him is exactly what I think makes Art so successful with his career in the arts thus far, and what will ensure his continued success.”

Allen hopes to arrange a special screening of *The Deal* in Wichita as a fundraiser for the Tallgrass Film Festival this summer.

“And guess what,” he said, “I was an extra in a couple of scenes.” Laughing, he rolls his eyes saying “Yes, I’m a producer that paid a lot of money to be an extra.”

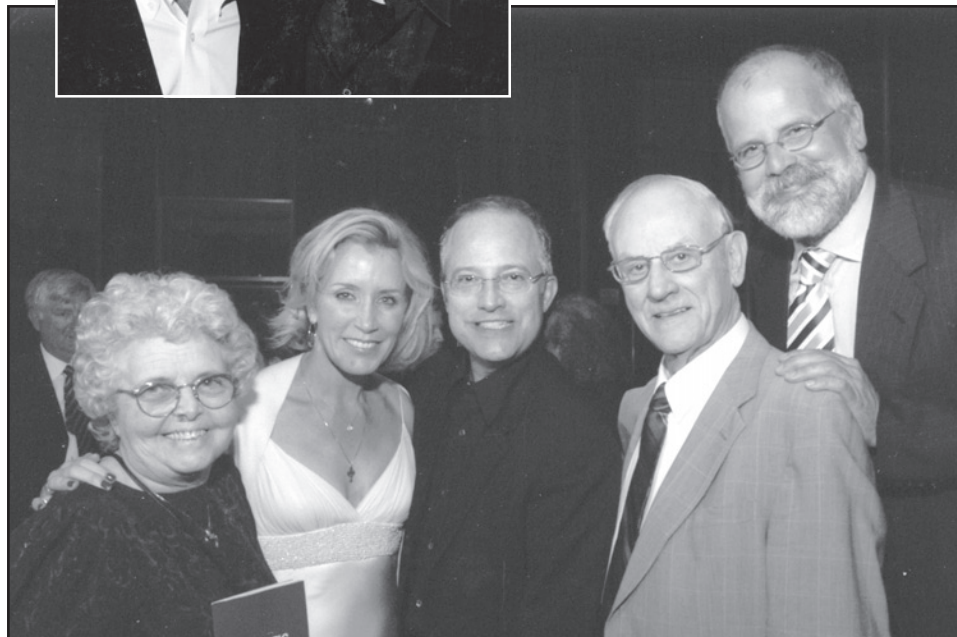
These days, Allen splits his time between New York and Wichita, with homes in each, but stresses that he will always be tied to Wichita.

“I have this dream of shooting a film in Wichita, using Wichita talent. Script? “Well,” said Allen, “the women of Wichita have always fascinated me.



Opening night for the off-Broadway show ‘Spring Awakening’ at The Atlantic Theater in June, 2005 was a hit for the new production. William H. Macy, left, and Art Allen, both members of the Atlantic’s Board of Directors. The play eventually opened on Broadway and won eight Tony Awards.

BELOW: The Allen family joined Art at an Atlantic Gala at New York’s Rainbow Room in 2006. From left: Beth Allen Felicity Huffmann, Art, Dale, Dale and Kenny Allen.



Women like Gladys Weidemann, Velma Wallace, Mary Koch, Olive Ann Beech, Jean Garvey—they have kept the legacy going for their husbands. The things they did for this city is phenomenal. Wouldn’t

that make a great film? It’s all about the story, you know.”

Investing in films? Allen says, “Risky, yes, but the experience has been one of the best in my life.”