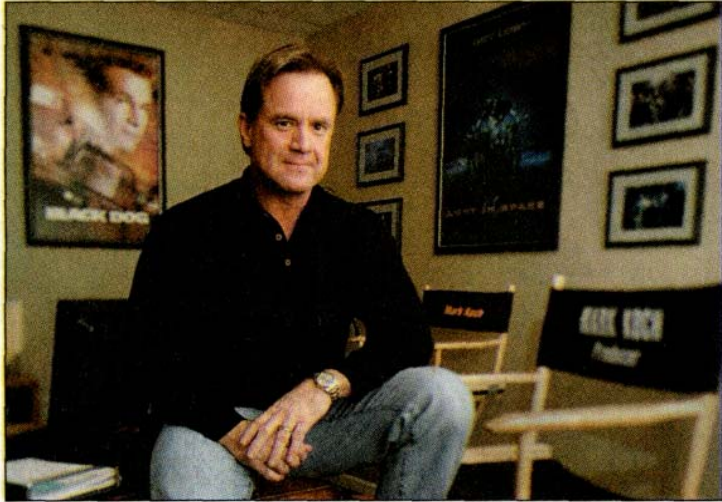


The Palm Beach Post

Sunday, April 16, 2006

West Final* PalmBeachPost.com

\$1.25



RICHARD GRAULICH/Staff Photographer

A HIGHER POWER: Mark Koch, producer of the 1998's *Lost in Space*, left the business and thought he'd never make another film. He was wrong.

A ministry of film

'Lost in Space' producer Mark Koch reaches heavenward in the latest phase of his movie career

By HAP ERSTEIN
Palm Beach Post Film Writer

Most film producers would kill to do the sort of business Mark W. Koch of West Palm Beach did in the spring of 1998.

Early that April, he released his \$90 million big-screen version of television's *Lost in Space*, taking in \$20 million in its first weekend, on the way to a \$300 million-plus take worldwide. Less than a month later, he premiered *Black Dog*, an action picture starring Patrick Swayze as an ex-con truck driver, to a hefty, if less sustained, box office.

And what did Koch — pronounced "cook" — do for an encore? He walked away from the film industry for almost eight years. "I was out of control. My marriage was on the rocks, I was always traveling, I was on the road to self-destruction," he says candidly.

Instead, he followed the road a few miles north to Christ Fellowship Church in Palm Beach Gardens, where he learned how to get control of his life by becoming a Christian. "I left Hollywood, shut my office down at Paramount and I went into full-time ministry work," says Koch, sounding like a fire-and-brimstone preacher.

Koch, 47, channeled his energies into Place of Hope, a local children's charity, promising himself and his family that he would "never do another movie as long as I live."

But as even James Bond knows, you never say never again.

For when Mel Gibson made a little film called *The Passion of the Christ*, he called on Koch and his Prelude Entertainment to reach out to church groups and faith-based organizations, designing and implementing a promotional campaign for the movie as its exclusive advance ticket agent. And suddenly Koch saw how he could fulfill his religious calling and pursue his first love — movies.

"I was at the point where: 'Do I continue on with the ministry, spreading my faith and sharing my faith, or do I get back in business and maybe use my talents to promote faith-based entertainment,'" explains Koch. "I sat down with one of my mentors and he said, 'Y'know what, Mark? Maybe God is trying to tell you that your ministry is film.'"

Rough start

Born in Detroit, Koch followed a circuitous route to South Florida and to the movie business. "Quite frankly, my dad wanted me to be a doctor, but I always had the dream of making movies. I don't know why," he says with a shrug.

When his grades were not good enough for medical school, Koch got a degree in automotive marketing and made a beeline for California, where he worked at a Volvo-Saab dealership in Orange County. "I tried to break into the movie business, but at 21, I had a rude awakening, that they were not eager to have me."

When his father opened an art gallery at the Esplanade on Worth Avenue, Koch moved to South Florida in 1983, "and I've been here ever since." Here and Hollywood, that is, for Koch is not one to give up easily.

"When I tried California again in the '90s, I ended up at Paramount and used my name, telling them I was (producer) Howard Koch's grandson, which got me through the gate at Paramount."

Through the gate and into a producer's chair. His first film was 1994's *Judicial Consent*, a steamy, R-rated courtroom drama, followed by the one-two punch of *Lost in Space* and *Black Dog*. Koch was a success as a movie man, but he felt unfulfilled. "All of a sudden, all of these things that I've ever dreamed of had come true. And now, I'm sitting there empty, on top of the mountain," says Koch. "My marriage is a mess, I'm a mess." He realized that the key to getting his life under control was taking a break from Hollywood.

"So here's where it gets good," he says. "I stayed out of Hollywood. I felt like it almost destroyed my life. I love my family now, my marriage is restored, my relationship with my kids is just great. Sure, I'm not making the huge dollars like I was, but, man, I'm loving life."

Koch, who left movies for ministry, pools passions



RICHARD GRAULICH/Staff Photographer

'When I tried California again in the '90s, I ended up at Paramount and used my name, telling them I was (producer) Howard Koch's grandson, which got me through the gate at Paramount.'

MARK KOCH

BEAT GOES ON: Movie producer Mark Koch (right) moved to Florida in 1983 to work for his father in a Worth Avenue art gallery. Here, he shares a joke with his son, Blake, 20, who is a drummer in a band.

Now, Koch is where he never expected to be, back in the film business in a big way, having signed a producing-distribution partnership deal with Mandalay Integrated Media Entertainment to mine the family-friendly feature film market.

David Salzman, president of Koch's corporate partner, Mandalay Integrated Media Entertainment, is high on his spiritual fervor. "I think that when people have a change in life and a change of perspective of what they want to do, they should pursue it. His pursuing what he's doing with the ministry certainly is in my opinion at least as important as filmmaking, if not more so."

As to Koch's strengths as a producer, Salzman cites, "Incredible enthusiasm. A passion, a commitment to make the best product that he can possibly make. I just find him really fun to work with. He does have the experience of making these big budget films in traditional Hollywood fare. He knows story, and he knows what's going to be good for the audience we're trying to reach."

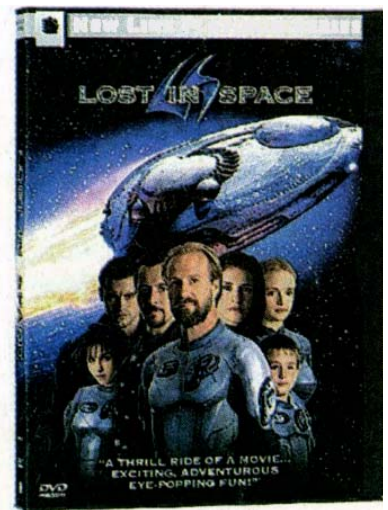
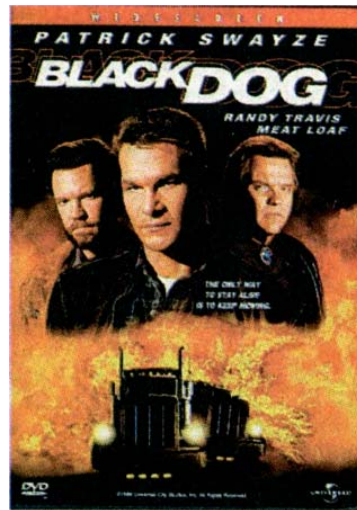
Candy project

Koch not only has several high-profile films in the works, but intends to keep his base of operations in West Palm Beach, where he has a suite of offices, and perhaps bring some of these movies here for principal photography.

Koch plans to produce a screen-play he bought in 1992 for \$300,000 called *Our Father*, the story of a wayward priest transferred from Beverly Hills to Detroit. It was written by John Candy, who was slated to star in it when he died within days of the start of filming. "I spent several months with him in Jamaica, working on the script and the story," says Koch. "It will honor John Candy. We'll get a lot of his *Saturday Night Live* guys. Steve Martin and others are showing interest in doing cameos."

Positively jumping ahead of *Our Father*, though, is a somewhat more faith-based film called *The Third Miracle*, about a Little League team from Monterrey, Mexico, that won the 1957 World Series.

"It's all about faith, hope and baseball," beams Koch. "It's like *The Bad News Bears*. They can't hit, pitch, do anything, but a priest blesses the team and they end up in the World Series finals. It's such an inspiring story. It's a film we can do for our grass-roots audience and the Catholic Church will eat this up."



PINNACLE: Producer Mark Koch released two movies in a one-month period in 1998, *Black Dog* with Patrick Swayze, and *Lost in Space*, based on the TV hit, that put him near the top of his profession.

Already attached to the project is director William Dear (*Angels in the Outfield*), with casting just begun.

Perhaps the most religiously oriented film on Koch's plate is *Rabbi Paul*, an adaptation of Bruce Chilton's biography of Saul of Tarsus who turned his life around through divine intervention and founded Christianity.

"*Rabbi Paul* will very possibly be (filmed) where they shot *The Passion*," says Koch of the Biblical-looking locales of Italy. "The John Candy film will very possibly be shot here in Florida. It doesn't have to be Detroit, because most of it has to look like Beverly Hills. My hope is to film it right here."

Salzman sees no downside to Koch producing from his home base and staying connected to Hollywood from afar. "With cell phones and Blackberries, no one is out of touch. Being in Florida is no different than if he were here in L.A. and only 20 miles away," he says. "We can watch dailies online, we can send DVDs, and we can do conference call meetings with the group."

"I really want to make films here," says Koch. "This is my home. I love Palm Beach County."