

How Paso resident Josh Brolin became one of Hollywood's best character actors and a SLO Film Fest honoree

Description

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Apparently, becoming a Hollywood movie star isn't quite as glamorous as people think. In fact, to hear Josh Brolin paint it, the acting profession is a long series of rejections marked by occasional small paying jobs and maybe, if you're one of the rare ones, you luck upon a film that changes your career.

Next Saturday, March 18, Brolin—who was nominated for a 2009 Best Supporting Actor Oscar for his role as Dan White in the 2008 film *Milk*—will receive the SLO International Film Festival's King Vidor Award for Excellence in Filmmaking in a special ceremony at the Fremont Theater.

The 23rd annual San Luis Obispo International Film Festival takes place Tuesday, March 14, through Sunday, March 19, in various locations throughout SLO County. Learn all the details and purchase tickets and festival passes at slofilmfest.org. Josh Brolin is this year's King Vidor Award for Excellence in Filmmaking winner, and he'll receive his award on Saturday, March 18, in the Fremont Theater, beginning at 7 p.m. Turner Classic Movies host Ben Mankiewicz will chat with Brolin about his career after the award ceremony, followed by a brief audience Q-and-A.

According to Festival Director Wendy Eidson, Brolin seemed like the perfect selection for this year's King Vidor Award.

“Back in 2008, I met Josh when he came to the festival as a filmmaker with a short film called *X*,” Eidson said. “He was refreshingly down-to-earth, friendly, and fun, and I immediately asked him to be on our advisory board so we could keep him involved in our growing festival. Since then, he has done one fantastic role after another, worked with many of the greatest directors of our time, and leading actors as well, and has really earned his distinction as one of the top actors in Hollywood today.”

“His career has spanned more than three decades and even though he is possibly the youngest person to receive the King Vidor award in our festival's history, we feel he is more than worthy of this honor,” Eidson continued. “King Vidor is famous for having the most prolific career as a director, so it's important that we honor his legacy by giving the award to someone with a similarly long and successful career. As an added bonus, King Vidor and Josh Brolin share a passion for the Central Coast and both were/are owners of a ranch in North County. Josh is an exciting choice for this award, and I look forward to honoring his past, current, and future success as an actor, director, and producer.”

As for Brolin, who spoke to *New Times* by phone, he couldn't be happier about the accolade.

“For me, it’s really an honor,” Brolin said. “It’s almost weird. I’m just a little ranch kid, and the odds of my doing well—or anyone doing well—in my profession are slim to none, so it’s surreal to me, and I love being a local. I tried to move to different places and was always sucked back by Paso, the solitude of it, how mentally grounded I feel because of living here. It’s nice, man. I just feel very honored to be part of this place I love. It’s nice to be a local.”

The early years

Born on Feb. 12, 1968, in Santa Monica, Brolin, 49, moved to a ranch in the Adelaida area of Paso Robles when he was an infant, and he grew up there, attending elementary and middle school in Templeton.

“We lived on what was Route 1, now called Vineyard Drive,” Brolin recalled. “It was very different back then. There were a couple of wineries, but it was real ranch living. We had a 230-acre horse ranch, and I had to feed those horses every morning.”



RANCH DAYS

Young Josh Brolin on his Paso Robles-area family ranch with a canine.

Around age 11 or 12, he moved to Santa Barbara, where he eventually attended high school.

“When I went to high school,” Brolin quipped, making reference to his ne'er-do-well younger years that purportedly included a stolen car, heroin use, and a gaggle of rough surfer and skater friends, most of whom ended up dead.

“There’s nothing more to write about it—it’s all been written,” Brolin laughed about his well-documented wayward youth.

The story circulating online about his foray into acting began with an improv class in his junior year of high school, and then the role of Stanley in his high school’s production of *A Street Car Named Desire*. Did it happen that way?

“Sort of,” Brolin admitted. “A lot of that stuff was me fibbing to get work later, so some of it was true—I did have a really great improv teacher—but some was made up. Now I can talk about this, but there’s this perception that because a member of your family is in acting [Brolin’s father is the actor James Brolin], people immediately assume you can get jobs. Well, a family member might be able to get you a job, like a guest role on *CSI* or something, but they can’t give you a career. When I first started out, I auditioned constantly, but I wasn’t great. I didn’t come out of the gate a talented actor.”

In fact, in his younger years, Brolin had no interest in acting. He didn’t spend much time on his father’s sets, and they didn’t have a lot of actors up to the ranch.

“My mom was much more apt to invite country singers to the ranch. Actors, on a respect level, were not very high in my mom’s point of view. It seemed like a very insecure profession to me. At that age I was interested in law.”



RANCH DAYS

Josh Brolin with his mom, Jane Cameron Agee.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOSH BROLIN

When he did finally take that improv class, the acting bug hit.

“I wasn’t one of those kids who at 4 years old says, ‘I want to be an actor.’ That wasn’t me at all, but when I first started, I got it. I had a lot of fear and a lot of stage fright, but I found when I played a character, that fear went away, and I had an excuse to act and react to the character, and it was great, like a drug—I finally could let go and not think about all the consequences of what was going on in my life and be this other person.”

Catching the acting bug and suddenly having an acting career are not the same things, of course. Yes, Brolin scored the role of Brand, the older brother, in *The Goonies* (1985).

“I’m gonna hit you so hard that when you wake up your clothes will be out of style,” Brant famously threatened in the cult classic.

The following year he got the lead part of Corey Webster in *Thrashin’* (1986), a story about rival skateboard gangs. When he saw the film, however, Brolin thought his performance was terrible. He nearly quit, but instead he kept auditioning.

By 1989, he’d scored the role of James Butler Hickok in the TV series *The Young Riders* (1989-1992), and the job and a friendship with co-star and character actor Anthony Zerbe (*American Hustle*, *Papillon*, *The Dead Zone*, *Cool Hand Luke*) changed his life and career.

While his castmates were spending their three-month annual hiatus trying to score film roles, Zerbe encouraged Brolin to do theater.

“Anthony Zerbe, who’s still my best friend, told me to get my ass to Rochester, N.Y., to do a play on my hiatus, and that’s what I did for four or five years. The natural trajectory was to use your hiatus to do a film, but theater work turned out to be the best thing that ever happened, and he [Zerbe] turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me. During that time, I found the ability to lose myself in a character and to understand the bigger psychological and sociological implications of each role.”

The big break

If you look at Brolin’s pre-*No Country for Old Men* filmography, it looks as if he was working constantly, but he paints a different picture of his early years.

FIRST FILM

Josh Brolin’s first role, filmed when he was 16, was in the Richard Donner-directed “*The Goonies*,” with a story by Steven Spielberg and a screenplay by Chris Columbus.

“It looks like a lot of work, but it wasn’t. There were a lot of small roles, and I wasn’t being paid a lot because I didn’t have a lot of value as a commodity. For instance, *Flirting with Disaster* [1996, with Ben Stiller and Patricia Arquette] was an art film and it wasn’t very profitable.”

After his foray into TV, he went on to roles in films such as *Nightwatch* (1997, with Ewan McGregor), *Mimic* (1997, with Mira Sorvino), *The Mod Squad* (1999, with Claire Danes), and *Hollow Man* (2000, with Kevin Bacon).

He also had a pivotal role in *Into the Blue* (2005, with Paul Walker and Jessica Alba), and an important part in the “Planet Terror” segment of *Grindhouse* (2007, with Jeff Fahey, Michael Biehn, and Bruce Willis), and then *No Country for Old Men* (2007, with Tommy Lee Jones and Javier Bardem) became a surprise hit.

“You never really know what’s going to work. Did we think *No Country* was going to be a hit? Not in the least. They hired a Spanish guy that American audiences didn’t know, and Tommy had been doing a lot of movies but he wasn’t exactly a big star anymore. Javier I knew from some small art house films, and who am I? Nobody. It all should have gone horribly wrong, man. I had the same experience on *Sicario* [2015, with Emily Blunt and Benicio Del Toro]. After we wrapped filming, I was

talking to Benicio and director of photography Roger Deakins, and we were like, “Oh well, we tried.” Then we saw the movie.

DESPERADO IN LOVE

In “Labor Day,” a depressed single mother falls for a wounded and escaped convict played by Josh Brolin.

The film about an idealistic FBI agent (Blunt) who’s enlisted to help a secret taskforce trying to disrupt the Mexican drug trade was a surprise hit, and Brolin and Del Toro recently wrapped filming a follow-up in New Mexico and Mexico, called *Soldado*, scheduled for release later this year.

“You really never know,” Brolin admitted. “Movies you think are good don’t go anywhere and one’s you think are a flop – they hit.”

No Country for Old Men, the 2008 Academy Award-winning Best Picture, suddenly made Brolin into a hot Hollywood commodity, and all you need to know about his long-lasting affinity for the Central Coast is the scene in which Brolin, as Llewelyn Moss, wears a Templeton High School jacket. Brolin lobbied directors Joel and Ethan Coen to include the jacket in the film. You can take the man out of the Central Coast, but you can’t take the Central Coast out of the man.

The Brolin spread

After Brolin’s parents – James, now married to Barbra Streisand, and his mother Jane Cameron Agee, a wildlife activist – divorced, he lived on the ranch with his mother, who passed away when he was in his 20s, when he took over running the ranch in 1995.

“My mom didn’t have a lot of money, and the ranch had heavy liens on it. I learned a lot from running it. I’ve always been a numbers guy, and I started doing some stock trading. I raised my kids there, but in 2004, I sold it. It was the top of the market, I wasn’t acting a lot then, and it seemed like a smart thing to do.”



MAN ON A MISSION

*In **Sin City: A Dame to Kill For**, Josh Brolin plays Dwight, a private detective who keeps falling for the wrong woman.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALDAMISA ENTERTAINMENT AND DEMAREST FILMS

Brolin used the proceeds of the sale to invest further. He made a killing in the stock market, and that coupled with his *No Country* success put him in a position to reacquire the property, which he did in 2010.

"I overpaid for it, but I don't care," Brolin confided. "The place is special to me."

Brolin truly feels connected to SLO County. When he's not on location working, it's his home.

"We're really tucked back into a corner of Adelaida, and we're surrounded by old-school Paso families whose roots go way back. We're sort of the newest of that gang, but we're very much a part of the gang, which I appreciate very much. I've tried to leave the area a couple times, but I always get pulled back, like the mafia. They pull you back in."

Brolin now shares the ranch with his new bride, model Kathryn Boyd, whom he married last year. Judging from his Instagram account, they're madly in love.

"We are, man," Brolin said. "It's not a bullshit presentation. We're really happy, and it was a really wonderful wedding."

Becoming a consummate actor

Brolin used to dismiss vocal coaches and the trappings of "serious" acting—he was more of a "just do it" guy—but these days as he's stretched himself into more challenging roles, for instance as Hollywood fixer Eddie Mannix in the Coen Brothers' *Hail, Caesar!* (2016) with George Clooney, he's realized the importance of preparation. In the film, he changed his voice, his mannerisms, and his walk. He was like a person transformed in the role.

“Now, every role I take on, I think of it like going back to school. Right now I’m preparing to play [country singer] George Jones [in the 2018 film *George and Tammy*, directed by Taylor Hackford and co-starring Jessica Chastain], so I’ve been taking guitar and singing lessons. It’s like going to college and getting a degree.”

THE FIXER

In his third collaboration with famed directors the Coen Brothers after his star turn in “No Country for Old Men” and his role in the remake of “True Grit,” Josh Brolin played Eddie Mannix in the “50s-era Hollywood homage “Hail, Caesar!”

Frequently typecast as a tough guy, Brolin is landing increasingly different roles.

“Look, you have a certain physicality, you know? You don’t look at me and think, “He’s definitely a rom-com kind of guy.” Physically you have a certain niche, and as an actor you try to stretch yourself away from that look that fills a certain archetype. I’ve been lucky to do comedies like *W.* [2008, where he played George W. Bush in a film directed by Oliver Stone] and a Woody Allen film [*You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger*, 2010].”

He’s also started to forgive himself for some of his early performances.

“I just think that every role requires something different. Even with *Thrashin’*, which I saw at 18 and thought, “Get out of this business and save people from the horrible pain of your bad acting,” I’ve had people come up and say, “Dude, you changed my life. I grew up with drug addict parents and watching that film got me into skateboarding and changed my life,” so I don’t judge anymore. Different films speak to different people.”

He’s also found he loves the hard work of really digging into a role.

“I’m lucky to have a good voice and I’m good at mimicry, so with Eddie Mannix, he was a different kind of role and doing his voice wasn’t easy. It was New Jersey and Abbott and Costello. I actually rented a theater in LA and treated the script like a play. Even before we began working with the Coens, the other actors and I would rehearse, and I have to say, this part of the process I enjoy more than anything. It’s like building a house. Planning to build your house is amazing, and living in the house after it’s built is amazing, but building the house is a pain in the ass. Acting is a lot of work and a lot of trial and error; it can be an embarrassing thing, things can *not* be working, but you keep going, and you find the magic in that *not working* and the reaction to it. It’s like painting a

pictureâ??sometimes an accident is the best part. But acting is truly a profession of humiliation.â?•

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