

The film won its star an American Comedy Award for Funniest Actor in a Motion Picture, and it launched the film career of a then largely unknown performer who would go on to win an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role. In 2015, the Writer's Guild of America ranked it no. 83 on its all-time list of funniest movies. And the American Bar Association Journal rated the film no. 3 on its list of the 25 Greatest Legal Movies.

As fans celebrate the 25th anniversary this month of the release of "My Cousin Vinny," it is ironic that its screenwriter and producer, Dale Launer, didn't initially have high hopes for the film, and at one point thought it was "un-releasable."

Launer put great effort into researching the script for this celebrated courtroom comedy in which a brash, untried New York attorney, Vincent Gambini, and his sassy, classy, Brooklyn girlfriend, Mona Lisa Vito, travel to a small town in rural Alabama to defend his innocent cousin facing murder charges. Renting a car in New Orleans, Launer drove through Mississippi and Alabama, and then down the Gulf Coast. The road trip provided inspiration for scenes that ultimately

Beechum County Courthouse
in Monticello, Ga., site of the
film's courtroom scenes



STILL FUNNY AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

The 25th Anniversary of

MY COUSIN VINNY

By Douglas J. Gladstone

found their way into the film: Launer's car got stuck in the mud; all of the restaurants where he ate had grits on the menu; and he actually experienced a screech owl's "unearthly call."

"It wasn't that I didn't think I had written and produced something that was good," Launer says. "It's just that I'd get the dailies on videotape and I was disappointed. The film didn't play out the way it had played out in my head."

"I mean, I'm happy it's well reviewed and well received by so many people," he explains. "But it was only until I watched it with some friends of mine that I was able to get a sense of how funny it was and saw what worked."

Others knew sooner. "First and foremost, it's just so very, very funny," says actor Ralph Macchio who played

William Gambini, Vinny's young cousin and one of the defendants. He attributes at least part of the film's success to "the fact that it's an iconic American comedy which grew more popular on cable television."

"It pays off every time because it gets more clever and smarter on each viewing," Macchio says, adding that the film "resonates in a weird way to people, which helps explain its staying power. Whether it's two kids who are in the wrong place at the wrong time, or the scene where Vinny is awoken at night by the train coming through the town, we've all been there."

Macchio calls it "a beautifully crafted fish-out-of-water comedy that has withstood the test of time. And that's a credit to Dale's script."

The actual Sac-O-Suds convenience store in Monticello, Ga., where the crime scene in "My Cousin Vinny" was set.



Jonathan Lynn directing Ralph Macchio



"My Cousin Vinny" director Jonathan Lynn with Joe Pesci and Marisa Tomei on the set

Mitchell Whitfield, who played William Gambini's co-defendant, Stanley Rothenstein, agrees that the fish-out-of-water theme was central to the film's appeal. "I am from Brooklyn, and when I moved out to Los Angeles, I experienced my own share of growing pains," Whitfield says. "The thing that stands out is...Vinny was worlds away from what he was used to."

Whitfield also attributes the film's success to the "fantastic" performances of Joe Pesci (Vinny) and Oscar winner Marisa Tomei (Mona Lisa)—neither of whom were available to be interviewed for this article.

Critics agreed their award-winning performances were hilarious. In his Baltimore Sun review, Stephen Hunter wrote that the film "allows

Pesci enough room to let his considerable comic talents explode." As for Tomei, Carrie Rickey, formerly the film critic for The Philadelphia Inquirer, praises Mona Lisa for not just her comic edge but for "having the spunk and native intelligence of Italian American girls, so often undervalued and thought to be airheads when they are anything but."

Launer says the duo's relationship was one of "friendly, playful one-upmanship," and their deft comic interplay was fueled by their great relationship when the cameras weren't rolling. In an interview for the Bravo series, "Watch What Happens Live," Tomei noted that Pesci "actually has a real beautiful voice" and "one of the things that we did a lot is that he

would play the guitar and we would sing standards on the set."

The film also earned accolades in the legal world. While critics have pointed out that defense lawyer Vinny's visit to the defendants' prison cell would not occur in real life, the film is nevertheless praised by lawyers for its authenticity.

"Lawyers love it," says Launer, proud of its ABA Journal ranking. "It has played in law schools all around the country because it addresses court procedures."

Paul Fishman, the U.S. Attorney for the District of New Jersey, reportedly referenced one of the film's scenes at the annual Brendan Byrne Lecture he gave at Fairleigh Dickinson University in 2016. In it, Vinny ➤



Director Jonathan Lynn with actor Fred Gwynne as the judge

Jonathan Lynn on set with Austin Pendleton, who plays the public defender.



Ralph Macchio



Marisa Tomei



Joe Pesci



Courtesy of Jonathan Lynn

questions a prosecution witness who says he saw the murder occur and he was certain of the time the clerk was killed—because he had just started cooking grits.

In his cross examination, Vinny says the timeline doesn't match up, since the witness claimed he cooked his grits in five minutes and, as Vinny points out, "it takes the entire grit-eating world 20 minutes.... Are we to believe that boiling water soaks into a grit faster in your kitchen than anywhere else on the face of the Earth? Were these magic grits?"

Fishman reportedly told his audience: "I have taught trial techniques for 15 years using that because his cross examination is terrific."

While lawyers embrace the movie, some Italian American groups have reasonable doubt. Dr. Manny Alfano, president and founder of the anti-bias organization Italian American One Voice Coalition, says "the movie may be funny, [but] it reinforces the old negative stereotype that Italian American men are not very bright.

"From the time Hollywood was established, Italians and Italian Americans have been portrayed as mobsters,

bums, bigots, buffoons and bimbos," he says in an email. "What troubles us is that there are very few positive roles. We are not asking for candy-coated portrayals, only reasonable depictions that show us for who we really are."

The film's director Jonathan Lynn disagrees: "Nonsense. Vinny and Lisa are heroes. They may be blue collar but they are intelligent, persistent and they do the right thing."

Ralph Macchio defends the film as well: "...I don't believe anything we did or said was derogatory to Italian Americans." He adds that the only negative reaction to the film he remembers came from the National Stuttering Association: "I was blind copied on a letter objecting to the way Austin Pendleton portrayed ... the public defender who stuttered. And Austin was upset when he found out, because he really was a stutterer."

Louis Gallo, vice president of the Order of the Sons of Italy in America's National Commission on Social Justice, understands how Alfano could think the movie is disparaging. "It's a fine line," he says. "The saving grace is, in the end, the movie shows how brilliant an attorney Vinny is

and how knowledgeable Mona Lisa is about auto mechanics. If both leads played their roles straight, the humor would have definitely been lost. The portrayal of the stereotypes is what gives the movie such endless appeal."

Georgia businessman Chris Credendino has visited the Sac-O-Suds convenience store, in Monticello, Ga., where the crime scene in "My Cousin Vinny" was shot. He has visited several "Vinny" film locations for his blog. A transplanted New Yorker, he says he understands the film's fish-out-of-water premise firsthand. He doesn't think the film sends the wrong message about Italian Americans at all.

"Please, I have a vowel at the end of my name. Neither I nor any of my friends are offended by the movie," says Credendino. "That's all it is, a movie. A very funny movie." ▲

The author of "Carving a Niche for Himself: The Untold Story of Luigi Del Bianco and Mount Rushmore," Douglas J. Gladstone is a frequent contributor to these pages. His cover story on Associate Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito appeared in the Fall 2015 issue of Ambassador Magazine.