

The Evening Class

"Cinema is the evening class for discriminating adults."--Ousmane Sembene

MONDAY, MARCH 12, 2012

SVFF: *SODA SPRINGS* (2012)—*The Evening Class* Interview With Jay Pickett



With the inaugural [Sun Valley Film Festival \(SVFF\)](#) less than a week away, Festival Director Sabina Dana Plasse has announced [the festival's full schedule](#). Included among SVFF's slate of dramatic features is [Soda Springs \(2012\)](#), co-produced, co-written and starring Idaho native [Jay Pickett](#), whose handsome performance as prodigal son Eden centers the film. *Soda Springs* is solidly directed by [Michael Feifer](#) and sports [Jeffrey D. Smith's](#) accomplished cinematography of Idaho's beloved sagebrush desert country. There isn't a single dishonest note in any of the film's performances, including a heartbreaking appearance by veteran actor [Tom Skerritt](#) as Eden's father. A classic narrative about fathers and sons, mentors, and guiding spirits, *Soda Springs* speaks to classic—nearly mythic—themes of sacrifice and redemption and is sure to be a crowd pleaser at its Lantern 1 screening on Saturday, March 17, 1:45PM.

Pickett will be in attendance to Q&A with his audience.

Actor / screenwriter Jay Pickett grew up on a ranch in Caldwell, Idaho in a close-knit family with four siblings. Sports and rodeo took up the majority of his time during his youth, even as he felt a pull in another direction. A graduate of Caldwell's Vallivue High School, Pickett pursued a Theatre Arts degree from Boise State and then headed south to Los Angeles where he earned a Masters of Fine Arts Degree from UCLA.

He has guest starred in numerous television shows including *China Beach*, *Matlock*, *Perry Mason* and a two year contract on *Days of our Lives*. In 1997, Jay originated the role of Frank Scanlon on the ABC Drama, *Port Charles*. He played the character for the entire 6½ years that the show was on the air. Most recently Jay has appeared on *Desperate Housewives*, *Saving Grace* and *Dexter*. Along with producing, starring and co-writing the feature film *Soda Springs*, he also had leading roles in the feature films [Abandoned \(2010\)](#) and the soon to be released, [The Perfect Student \(2012\)](#). He Lives in Woodland Hills, California with his wife Elena and their three beautiful children Maegan, Michaela and Tyler. **[This conversation is not for the spoiler-wary!]**



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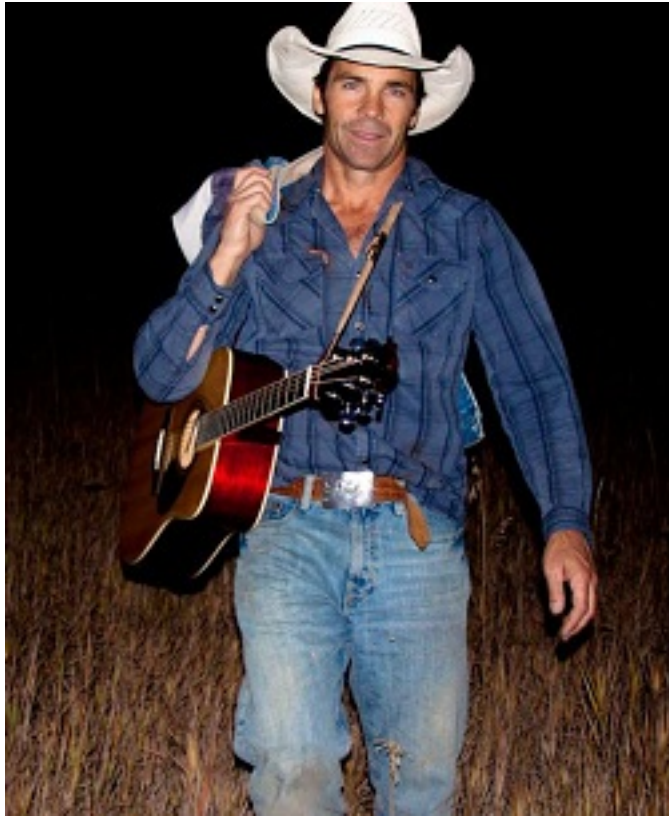
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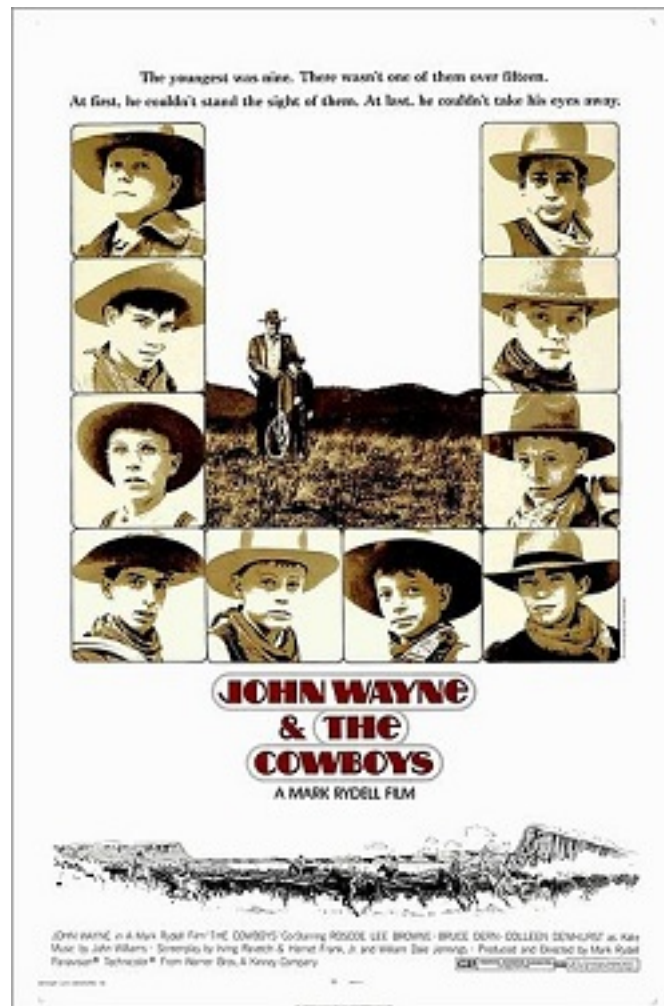
Michael Guillén: Let's talk about your origins in Caldwell, Idaho before we launch into discussing your return to Idaho to accompany *Soda Springs* to the inaugural Sun Valley Film Festival. It's my understanding that your ease with horsemanship in *Soda Springs* came about from a background in ranching and rodeo work?

Jay Pickett: Yeah, that's right. I basically grew up on a ranch and started riding horses at an early age, probably two or three. I started competing in rodeos when I was seven or eight years old. All my brothers and sisters competed. I went through the ranks of the junior rodeos, high school rodeos, and college rodeos, on into amateur professional rodeos. So, yeah, I have

a long background around horses.

Guillén: And yet you began to want more than a ranching life in Caldwell? What drove you to veer away towards acting?

Pickett: I always felt a pull in another direction, even though it was hard to define back then. I remember watching John Wayne in *The Cowboys (1972)* where he had this crew of kids on horseback. I can't remember the movie that well, but I do remember at the time I thought, "That would be the coolest thing in the world to be able to do something like that." So I was really young when I already felt that pull towards acting and performance, but it was something I couldn't really nail down. I took some theater classes in high school where I started playing around with it; but it wasn't until I went to college at Boise State that I began to think about it seriously. I had one professor Fred Norman who was a mentor and he helped me make the decision. He said, "If you really like this, you should commit to it because you're good at it." So I did that. I changed my major and pulled my focus away from rodeo and football and made acting my primary thing. I never looked back after that.



Guillén: And you've done quite well over the years. You've done a respectable amount of TV work, even in series I'd seen you in without yet knowing who you were.

Pickett: Really?

Guillén: Yeah, like in *Desperate Housewives* (where you roughed up Orson). It's always interesting to me when an actor blips on my radar and I look back and realize how they've shaped their careers. *Soda Springs* is definitely, however, the vehicle that brought you to my attention and which, I imagine, will bring you to the attention of others.

Pickett: I sincerely hope so, Michael. That's been the plan. Briefly, I went to UCLA and I was pretty lucky early on. I started working shortly after I graduated with my Masters degree. I spent a long time on soap operas but I felt that they weren't going to get me where I needed to go. I knew I had to find another way to promote myself and to get myself out there. I thought the best way to do that would be to tell my own stories and so that started me down the path of making my own movie.

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Guillén: One of the taglines for *Soda Springs* is: "Coming home is easy. It's staying that's the hard part." I've taken that tagline as an overarching comment on the state of film culture and filmmaking within Idaho, perhaps because I still feel very much an outsider. Though I was born in Nampa and raised in Twin, I left shortly after high school and have spent most of my adult life in San Francisco. So my perception of film and festival culture is fairly urban and international, even though I'm observing Idaho's film scene and its regional aesthetics with considerable interest and curiosity. Your career exemplifies what I consider the ongoing conundrum in Idaho with regard to film talent. To achieve opportunity, you had to leave Idaho?



Pickett: You're exactly right. I *did* have to leave Idaho, but going back to make a film in Idaho reminded me that I've always had a fondness for Idaho. I love the state and am proud to be from the state. My producing partner for *Soda Springs*, [Gary Hollie](#), felt the same way. He's also from Idaho. We both dreamed of going back there to shoot a film; but, there's not a lot of film production in Idaho, so it was difficult. There's not a lot of incentive. I don't know all the ins and outs—we were a lean production and weren't looking for a lot of incentives or anything—our plan was to film in Idaho just because we wanted to go back.

But to respond to your question, you have to sometimes go away and learn. Even though I know the film industry is spreading out across the country, there's still so much going on in L.A. and it's where you *can* learn. You're around

a lot of other talented people. Then you can take what you've learned and go back "home" and spread what you've learned around.

Guillén: Did you always have in mind that this script for this story was going to be set in Idaho? Did you always intend to return to Idaho to make your first feature?

Pickett: Yeah, that was always our primary objective: we wanted to go back. As I said, I love Idaho. It's a beautiful state. I have so much family there that I could call on for favors—which I did—and not just family but friends came out of the wood work. We were overwhelmed by the generosity of the people of Idaho and it truly was the experience of a lifetime, Michael. There will never be another experience like making your first film. There were so many synchronicities and happy accidents that happened along the way and I think that good vibe, that good energy, shows up in the movie.

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We used folks from both places. We brought people from L.A. and they worked so well with the people we found in Idaho. [Steve Fulton](#), the talented musician who scored our film, went to high school with me and my producing partner Garry Hollie. We wanted to involve people who we knew from our past. Our cinematographer Jeff Smith—who did such a great job—he's from Pocatello and went to Boise State, even though I didn't know him in Idaho; I met him here in L.A. He was the perfect choice to take back with us.

Guillén: I like how you talk about the generosity of the people from Idaho in contrast to the state, perhaps, not having the financial incentives in place that most filmmakers would seek out in trying to make a film there. You're not the first person to mention how important a role this generosity has played in making a low-budget film in Idaho. This generosity is one of the main calling cards the state has to draw in production. Can you talk a bit about how you coordinated that production? Did you go through the Idaho Film Office to find local talent? Or was it more through word of mouth and personal contacts?

Pickett: It was a little of both. We worked with Peg Owens and she helped point us in the right direction in a number of different ways. She helped us find [Catrine McGregor](#), who used to be an L.A.-based casting director and then she moved up to Idaho. She casts a lot of people out of Salt Lake and Boise. She helped us find a lot of talent. And then it was just word of mouth. We'd meet somebody and then we'd hear about somebody else through them and follow up on it. There wasn't any one way that we went about coordinating everything; there were actually a lot of ways that we found people.



It's not only the generosity of the people of Idaho; it's their friendly nature. Idaho is a friendly part of

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the country. Yes, Idahoans were generous but they're just good people. That's why Garry and I went back, because we knew that. We knew that people there would bend over backwards. There's also—I don't want to call it naïvete—but, a kind of innocence to the people of Idaho. They haven't had a ton of movies shot around there so it's new and refreshing to them. If they were in a place where people were bothering them all the time to make movies in this location or that location, it might be different; but, right now, it's still new, they don't get a lot of that, so everyone was willing to help. But it even went beyond that. It went from us asking, "Can you help us out?" to *their* asking, "What can we do to help *you*?"

Guillén: As someone who watches probably one too many American independents, I was genuinely impressed with the professional quality of your film, especially the performances. As I mentioned to you earlier in email, I didn't detect one false note among the film's ensemble. So let's talk a bit about the casting. You mentioned that Catrine McGregor helped you secure local talent but how did you secure some of your bigger names?

Pickett: Oh my goodness, I could go *on* about some of the casting because almost every cast member has a separate story; but, I'll start with the local people. Catrine helped us find [David Stevens](#) who played my best friend Jake. Dave came out of Salt Lake, though he does a lot of work in L.A. I thought he did a great job of adding a little lightness to the movie and humor in places where it was needed. Catrine also helped us find [Duane Stephens](#), who plays the Sheriff. Both of those guys are so professional and believable. That's what we were looking for: we just wanted honest people with honest performances. We set out to make an honest, straightforward, and heartfelt movie. We weren't trying to trick anybody or do anything too clever. We just wanted to tell a heartfelt story and those two guys fit into the cast.

Choosing the right director was key. I knew we had to work within a certain budget and I had worked with Mike Feifer on a number of smaller films and was starting to get to know him. I knew that—if nothing else—if we got Mike Feifer as the director, he has a certain eye and would help us cast and help us bring the movie in on time and on budget. He was invaluable to the production. He loved the script, he loved the whole idea, and he truly loved Idaho. He gelled with everything. He was the perfect choice. Mike has done a lot of really good films, but I think ***Soda Springs*** is the best film he's ever done and I don't think he would disagree with that.

I mention Mike because he knew [Michael Bowen](#) from working with him on another movie. Michael played Larry, the bad guy. We had other guys in mind; but, again, they wouldn't have worked. Dean Cain had agreed to do it, but he didn't want to be that mean. I thought, "Well, we have to find somebody who's okay with being *bad*." As a character, Larry has some redeeming qualities but all in all he's the antagonist. Mike came up with the idea of casting Michael Bowen and Bowen was like, "Beautiful. Perfect." He fell right in. It's not like we went out casting for all kinds of people; we *found* people.

Michael also worked with [Patty McCormack](#), who played my Mom, and I thought, "My goodness, this woman is incredible!" So we hired her. We didn't have an actress for the role of Shelly and there were a number of people we were considering because we wanted to get someone with a name for that role. I remember driving my truck from L.A. to Idaho while on the phone with Garry and Mike and agents. Whenever I had service, we were trying to cast this role because we were going to start shooting in two or three days. Before finally reaching Idaho, we had decided on [Victoria Pratt](#). She couldn't have been better. We went off of her demo reel and what people said about her and then she showed up on set and she was so great and gracious and *fun*. Things just fell into place.



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Then there's the story of Tom Skerritt. We didn't get Tom Skerritt until almost a year later. We shot our entire movie without Tom Skerritt. Between you and me, you know the secrets of how people make films. We knew we needed somebody with a name playing that character. By sheer persistence and not giving up and dealing with agents and managers and on and on and on, we were finally able to land Tom Skerritt, which was one of the best things that happened to our movie.

Guillén: Skerritt's performance is the true broken heart of *Soda Springs*. It's one of the best things I've seen him do in a long time. He's always been one of my favorite performers, as far back as his TV work in the '60s and the '70s and then, of course, as Dallas in *Alien* (1979), but I hadn't seen him in a while and to see him come forth with such a heartbreaking portrayal was welcome.

Pickett: Yeah, he showed up and *delivered*.



Guillén: Another veteran actor who you had on hand was [Henry Darrow](#) as El Quijano. There are some poetic flourishes in *Soda Springs* I'd like to address and the character of El Quijano is one of them. He's a mysterious figure. At times I wasn't even sure if he was flesh and blood or whether he was just a guiding spirit.

Pickett: Michael, God bless you because that's exactly what I wanted him to be. When you say "guiding spirit", you totally *get* it. I wanted to leave this up to the audience's imagination. What is this guy? Is he real? Is he a spirit? Is he long past? In the movie we suggested he might be a relative of Sonya ([Hollis Welsh](#)) but the audience still doesn't know if he's alive or dead or if she even knows he's around. I wanted each individual audience member to come up with their own idea of who he could be.

Guillén: The ambiguity around El Quijano is one of the film's poetic flourishes. As I thought about it, the membrane between the corporeal and the incorporeal kept thinning. According to the continuity of the narrative, El Quijano not only interacts with Eden but also (off camera) with Jake. He's entrusted Eden's father's guitar to Jake to hand back to Eden. As a guiding spirit, he then became not only a guiding spirit to Eden but, in a way, to Jake as well.

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Or rather, one could say he became a guiding spirit to the narrative.

Pickett: Right!



Guillén: I think why that further touched me is because it speaks to the nature of Eden's friendship with Jake. Why I enjoyed David Stevens' portrayal was because he reminded me of my childhood friends from Idaho who are still my friends, some 50 years later. Jake is an almost archetypal friend who exemplifies the kind of people I've had the good fortune to meet in Idaho. In my own personal mythology, the friends I made as a child in Idaho have remained my friends throughout my life, whereas so many others have come and gone. There is a constancy to their spirit, which again speaks to that guiding ethos within El Quijano.

Which leads me to the film's overarching (and classic) theme of atonement, of the relationships between fathers and sons, of mentorship, and of Eden's particular sacrifice for Sonya, which is revealed late in the narrative. Why was this theme of atonement important for you to express?



Pickett: Y'know, I'm not even exactly sure, Michael. The script has, of course, evolved into something almost completely different than how it started out; but, even in early versions of the script, I wanted an element of atonement and forgiveness. That was essential to what I wanted to say and get across. I also wanted to suggest that—with regard to fathers and sons—everything doesn't have to be passed down the line. Somebody along the way can make a change.

Guillén: Sons need not necessarily inherit the sins and the sorrows of their fathers?

Pickett: That's right. Somebody along the way can break the chain so that things don't have to remain the same. By breaking the chain you change things not only for the future

but even into the past.

Guillén: The past is never finished. The past influences the present, the future, and doubles back to influence itself. Why these themes interest me is, perhaps, because I was a student of the mythologist Joseph Campbell who often spoke of atonement ("at-one-ment") and who told me many stories about atonement, which were frequently about sons coming to terms with their fathers, or becoming one with their fathers. I remembered those stories while watching *Soda Springs*.

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Another poetic flourish that caught my eye watching *Soda Springs* was during the sequence where Eden finds the photograph of himself as a child with his father. It looked like a baseball photo and instantly reminded me of the photograph you have up on *Facebook* of you and your son Tyler, also at a baseball game.



Pickett: That's funny. I'm sure people do recognize that. We photoshopped that *Facebook* photo with Tom Skerritt.

Guillén: So it actually is that photo from *Facebook*?

Pickett: Yeah.

Guillén: Ah.

Pickett: Again, *Soda Springs* was my own movie, Michael. I brought Tyler to Idaho on the day we were shooting the baseball stuff and he was too little. He didn't want to sit in the stands long enough so I could get a shot of him in the movie so I thought, "You know what? I want my son in the movie somewhere." Especially because of the themes we're dealing with in the movie. That was my way of getting his little mug into the picture. I took a little license and put him in there. I'm okay with it.

Guillén: It's a beautiful gesture. I'm interested in why you decided to go direct to DVD? If I'm not mistaken, you did have a premiere screening at Boise's Egyptian Theater this past summer?



Pickett: Yes, we did.

Guillén: I was out of town at that time but would have enjoyed attending that screening. But other than for that screening at the Egyptian and a few festival screenings, you've decided to skirt theatrical and go directly to DVD distribution.

Pickett: First of all, a couple of things. Yeah, I would have loved for you to have been at the Egyptian because it was truly an amazing experience. We filled the theater and the audience absolutely loved the film.

Michael, not everyone gets the themes in the way that you get them. I'm also a fan of Joseph Campbell and have read his books on the hero's journey. In my own unique way, I wanted to follow that structure; but, not everyone gets that. We weren't able to muster up enough of a buzz to justify a theatrical release unless we self-distributed, did it ourselves and took the film around to different

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theaters. We weren't up for that.

Guillén: That's *hard* work.

Pickett: It's a lot of work. We put a lot of money and time into getting the film this far. I'm just hoping that with people like you who see the depth of this story—because there is more depth to this story than meets the eye—maybe we can create a kind of grass roots buzz and by word of mouth do well with DVD sales and on cable. We'll be on movies on demand also.



Guillén: *IMDb* lists two new projects you've just completed. You have a direct-to-video release from 2009 called *The Real Deal* and another project with *Soda Springs* director Michael Feifer called *Unstable* (2012). Can you speak a bit about those?

Pickett: *The Real Deal* was an educational feature film from Loyola Productions that they turned into a whole series of workshops and classes. I think it's a movie they use in-house and I'm not even sure if it will ever be available. I finished *Unstable* a few months ago with Ashley Scott and Ivan Sergei. I had a nice role in there, played a good guy, played the guy who ends up with the girl in the end. I really liked the script. I haven't seen the movie yet; but, I was happy with what I saw in the days that I was there. So we'll see what that one does too.

Guillén: In terms of your own writing and producing, you've started with *Soda Springs* but what can we hope to see from you in the future?

Pickett: I have a few different things in the air and we'll see what sticks. From another film festival, I'm working on a script with a guy out of Kentucky who loved *Soda Springs* so much that he showed me a script he was working on about an ex-rodeo rider who's down on his luck but gets a second chance through horses. I'm also working on another script about bull riding, which is kind of like *Rocky* meets *8 Seconds* meets *The Rookie*. And then I got a nice Christmas story from another guy, so we'll just see. I'm trying to find the next logical project that makes the most sense.

Guillén: Well, Jay, once again I'm sorry I don't get to meet you in Sun Valley. Have a wonderful festival experience there.

Pickett: You've been so kind and gracious, Michael. It makes me feel good when somebody *gets* what we tried to do. It warms my heart like I cannot tell you.

Guillén: I appreciate that, Jay. Thanks again for your time today.

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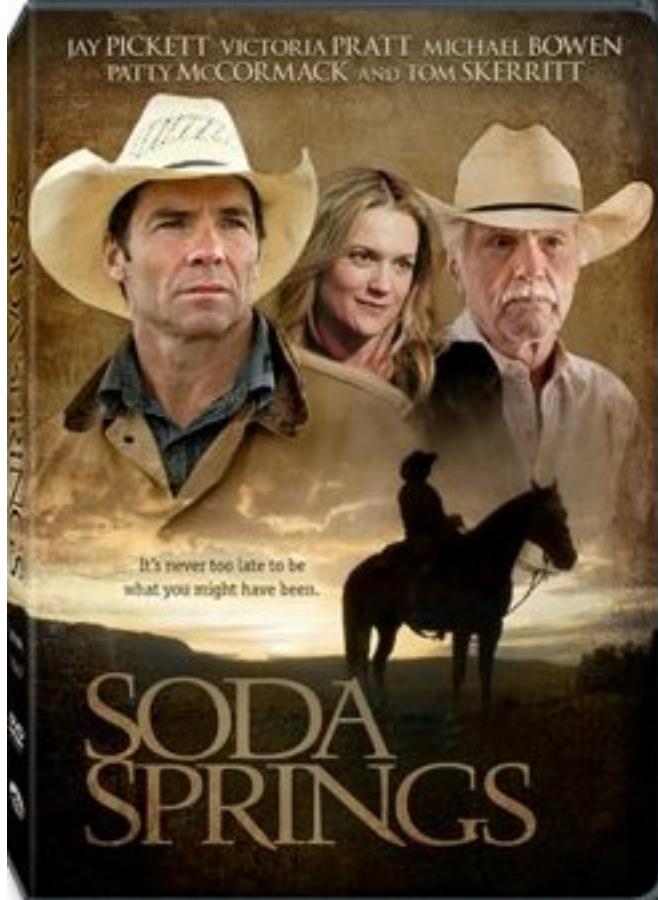
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Of related interest: Jay Pickett's [IMDb Demo reel](#). For those unable to attend the SVFF screening, the DVD for **Soda Springs** is available for pre-order on [Amazon](#). The release date is March 27. It will also be available on Movies on Demand March 27 and in Walmart stores this May.

04/21/12 Update: **Soda Springs** won Audience Favorite at the recent Sun Valley Film Festival. Here is [Dan Delago's Examiner](#) interview with Victoria Pratt. Also **Soda Springs** will screen at the opening night of the 2nd annual Idaho Cineposium, sponsored by the [Idaho Film Office](#) in association with [KNIFVES](#) (Northwest Independent Film Video Entertainment Society). Jay Pickett and executive producer Gary Hollie will kick off the event at Silverwood Theme

Park's theater. The conference continues Saturday at the Coeur d'Alene Inn with great keynote speakers, panel discussions, and time to network with speakers and industry peers.

Posted by [Michael Guillen](#) at [3/12/2012 05:52:00 PM](#)

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2 comments:

Jamer said...

Hi Michael ~

A wonderful and insightful post on Soda Springs! As Jay points out, you really get it, and we are happy to hear your affirming thoughts on the film. We look forward to many more people having the opportunity to see Soda Springs and judge for themselves.

Regards,

Jamer

[Tuesday, March 13, 2012 at 12:27:00 AM PDT](#)



Michael Guillen said...

Jamer, thanks for your comment. It was my pleasure to help promote the film. As [Executive Producer](#)4 on **Soda Springs**, you should be quite proud of yourself. Please keep me posted as to how the film does out in the world.

[Thursday, March 15, 2012 at 9:16:00 AM PDT](#)

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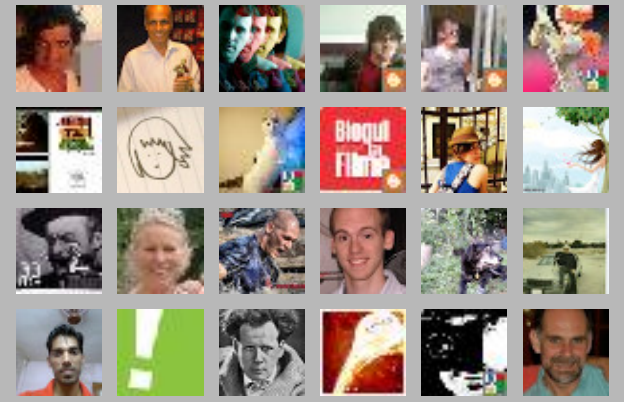
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