

# For 'Spotlight,' Actors Portrayed Hunters Chasing Predators

Oct. 30, 2015





Tom McCarthy, left, the director of "Spotlight," and his co-writer, Josh Singer. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Working from a cramped, dingy office, a scrappy band of journalists exposes the Archdiocese of Boston's decades-long cover-up of sexual abuse of children by scores of priests.

Definitely an investigation worthy of a Pulitzer Prize, which the Boston Globe's Spotlight team won for [that 2002 series](#). But fodder for a Hollywood film?

[The director and co-writer Tom McCarthy](#), whose credits include "The Station Agent" and "The Visitor," was convinced that the nuts and bolts of journalism at its finest could make for thrilling cinema. The result is "[Spotlight](#)," opening Friday, Nov. 6, with a budget just under \$20 million and an ensemble cast that includes Michael Keaton, Mark Ruffalo, Rachel McAdams and Liev Schreiber.

“Spotlight” allowed Mr. McCarthy and his co-writer, Josh Singer, to explore both the importance of local investigative journalism at a time of convulsive change in the newspaper business and the conspiracies of silence that can surround wrongdoing at seemingly admirable institutions.

Not only did they use the reportorial findings of the Spotlight team, but also journalism of their own to inform every aspect of the script. On matters both big and small, Mr. McCarthy and Mr. Singer emphasized accuracy and authenticity over Hollywood embellishments. “Based on a true story” may preface many a movie, but few have devoted themselves to verisimilitude as much as “Spotlight.”

transcript

## **Anatomy of a Scene | ‘Spotlight’**

**Tom McCarthy narrates a sequence from “Spotlight.”**

N/A

Tom McCarthy narrates a sequence from “Spotlight.” Kerry Hayes/Open Road Films

“My mantra when Josh and I were writing this was, we’ve got to get it right for two groups of people: the journalists and the survivors,” Mr. McCarthy said. “I want both these camps to see this movie and feel like we got the worlds right.”

In 2009, when the producers Nicole Rocklin and Blye Pagon Faust first approached the reporters and editors about a

possible movie about their investigation, the reaction was understandably skeptical.

“O.K., you’re talking about doing a movie about people sitting behind desks and typing up notes and writing stories,” said Matt Carroll, the computer-assisted reporting whiz on the Spotlight team. “It doesn’t sound very dramatic to me, but if you want to try it, go ahead.”

The six principal journalists on the Spotlight series gave the producers options on their life rights (initially at no charge), and the long and winding development road began. Mr. McCarthy came on board in 2012, but, swamped with another project, he needed a writer. Anonymous Content, the production and management firm that had partnered with the producers, set him up with Mr. Singer, a former writer on “The West Wing” whose interest in journalism led to the script for the WikiLeaks movie “The Fifth Estate.”

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The two quickly became investigative reporters themselves. They repeatedly interviewed the journalists about the project and their lives. They combed through The Globe’s archives and court documents. They met with other Globe journalists, survivors of the abuse, lawyers involved over the years and

experts on the clergy. They then circled back to the Spotlight team, checking their findings against the journalists' recollections.

That could lead to some uncomfortable moments, which inspired a pivotal scene when one character concedes missing an earlier chance to report more deeply on the abuse accusations. "It became very clear that we were investigating their investigation," Mr. McCarthy said.

From left, Rachel McAdams, Mark Ruffalo, Brian d'Arcy James, Michael Keaton and John Slattery play Boston Globe reporters in "Spotlight." Kerry Hayes/Open Road Films

But deep into their collaboration, Mr. McCarthy was still asking himself and Mr. Singer what the movie was about beyond the importance of good journalism.

"Josh and I really started to feel a whole new level of relevance to this story when we started discussing societal complicity and deference," including at The Globe itself, Mr. McCarthy said. "When we realized that these types of crimes do not exist in a vacuum, that they are just too big, with too many involved. Someone had to know."

While the reporting process would provide the narrative propulsion, the challenge was making the characters multidimensional, not just pawns in a procedural or swashbuckling truth tellers.

The filmmakers' solution, in part: stressing even more the realism, of both the characters and the investigation. For that, he had plenty of help from the actors.

Mr. Ruffalo, after several long phone conversations with the man he would portray on screen, the Spotlight team reporter Mike Rezendes, he traveled to Boston for the first of many get-togethers.

"We sat down in my living room," Mr. Rezendes recalled, "and he opened up a notebook and turned his iPhone on. And he was asking me questions, not about how I did things but why I did them. And why I chose this profession and why I was an investigative reporter."

The actor Michael Keaton discusses playing the Boston Globe journalist Walter "Robby" Robinson in "Spotlight." Kerry Hayes/Open Road Films

Mr. Ruffalo videotaped Mr. Rezendes walking around his spartan and pristine apartment ("He lives like a monk," Mr. Ruffalo said) and snapped pictures of Mr. Rezendes's bookshelf. He even asked Mr. Rezendes to read from the script.

"I thought, gee, this is really pretty intrusive, you know," Mr. Rezendes said with a knowing laugh.

The other reporters received similar treatment.

Ms. McAdams quizzed Sacha Pfeiffer about her sweet tooth

and her conversations about the Church with her family. She peppered her with questions like did she wear a watch and how did she stack her Post-it notes. Ms. McAdams also listened to a radio show Ms. Pfeiffer hosted to help capture her fast-talking manner.

Mr. Keaton would ask Walter V. Robinson, Spotlight's editor, questions completely unrelated to the investigation, like what he knew about the baseball player Ted Williams. The answers were often beside the point.

"I really did want to know about Ted Williams, but some things I didn't really care about," Mr. Keaton said. "I just wanted to watch him and see how he acted."

The actors had no desire to do mere impressions. Though Mr. Ruffalo nails Mr. Rezendes's Caesar-cut hairstyle, his relentlessness and even an occasional chuckle he didn't know he had, and Ms. McAdams rocks the pleated front chinos Ms. Pfeiffer wore at the time, they tapped those characteristics only to better capture the essence of the people they were playing.

"I wanted to know what his relationship was with the Catholic Church," Mr. Ruffalo said, "what his ethics were, where his morality was seeded in him."

Of course, "Spotlight" is not a documentary. Scenes are

conflated, chronology tweaked, language imagined.

But the filmmakers went far beyond the norm of other Hollywood movies aspiring to truthful fictions.

Before shooting began, all six journalists received various drafts of scripts (and all gave notes, Mr. Singer said with a smile). Mr. McCarthy and Mr. Singer then sat down with Mr. Robinson and Mr. Rezendes for a full day, going over every line to make sure nothing rang false.

On the Toronto set, where most of the film was shot (and many of the journalists frequented at the production's expense), the Globe newsroom and the Spotlight office were recreated in an abandoned Sears warehouse. "I remember all of them standing in the corner with their eagle eyes on, looking at the desks," Ms. McAdams said. (Ms. Pfeiffer suggested changing the positions of a telephone and computer, so Ms. McAdams could talk and type at the same time.)

It was not just the journalists who got to weigh in. [Phil Saviano](#), the founder of the New England chapter of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, and a significant figure in the movie, lobbied for a specific word his cinematic stand-in would be speaking to describe how clergy would gain the trust of their young victims. The word "grooming" was inserted.

It took a little while for the Globe journalists to get used to outsiders insinuating themselves into their lives. But after seeing the film, which has been well received at film festivals, they believe their trust in the filmmakers and actors had been well placed.

"It really keeps the focus on the issue of clergy sex abuse," Mr. Rezendes said. "And that I think is the best part of the movie. After so many years, there's always a danger that people will forget about that."

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