

Kenny Ortega

How a Redwood City street kid danced his way to Hollywood

by Karen Macklin

Film director and choreographer Kenny Ortega has had, by his own admission, a fantastic career. He directed Gene Kelly in *Xanadu*, co-created Michael Jackson's concert tours, choreographed *Dirty Dancing*, and, more recently, directed the *High School Musical* trilogy. But before Ortega was rubbing shoulders and dance shoes with Hollywood greats, he was spending his childhood nights watching his parents dance in the family's 1960s Redwood City living room.

"My mom would put on records, and they would swing dance, mambo, and jitterbug," said Ortega. Climate reached Ortega by phone while he was in Toronto scouting locations for his next film, Fox's remake of *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. "My dad was a factory worker and my mom was a waitress. What they shared in common was that they loved music and dancing."

Ortega's parents, Octavio and Madeline, were of Spanish descent. Their families had worked in the sugar cane fields in Hawaii before making their way to the Bay Area in the early 1900s. Though Ortega always admired watching them dance, his own foray into dancing was a lucky accident. As a child, he once joined his mother and

sister during a visit to Jean's Dance School, a school attended primarily by girls.

"The story goes," he recalled, "that when the class started, I jumped up off my chair, ran out into the middle of the class, and started dancing with all the girls." The studio owner, Jean, offered him a spot in the class. And, since Ortega's parents couldn't afford the tuition, she threw in a scholarship.

Ortega learned the basics of dance — including ballet, jazz, tap, and acrobatics — at this small Redwood City dance school. He continued to study dance and music at Sequoia High School, where he still remembers the influence that his teachers in drama, Ray Doherty, and music,

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Jay Selby, had on him. At 17 he and his aunt, Shirley Martin, along with community help, started the Redwood City Civic Light Opera, a nonprofit theater youth organization that put on musicals at the Veterans Memorial Theater in Redwood City. Ortega directed and produced these productions. "We were an organization of more than 100 people," he said. "It was an incredible coming together of aspiring musical performers."

At the same time, during high school, Ortega had started acting professionally throughout the Bay Area. His first professional role was *Oliver Twist* in the musical *Oliver* at the Hyatt Music Children's Theater in Burlingame. He went on to work at the Circle Star Theater in San Carlos, after which he was invited to be a part of the British touring production of *Oliver*, starring the iconic Georgia Brown.

"Every night, I was onstage with this professional British theater company," he said. "That changed my life. I realized then that there was nothing else for me but to pursue a life of good theater and music and dance."

After Ortega graduated from high school in 1968, he moved to San Francisco, where he received another big break: He was cast in the original San Francisco production of *Hair*. He then became part of the musical's first national tour, playing the young anti-war activist, George Berger, and traveled with the company from 1969-1972 throughout the US and Canada. The show received rave reviews and, sometimes, road blocks and bomb threats because of the musical's then-radical ideas against war and for free love.

"I felt like a missionary more than an actor sometimes," he said. "I remember coming back home, at 22, after this incredible tour with this incredible show, and thinking that I probably lived more now at 22 years old than most people ever get a chance to in their lifetime. At that moment, I realized how blessed I was. Every day after that was truly a gift."

Ortega spent the next decade directing and producing concerts for The Tubes, a progressive rock band that was one of the first to start using visual media in concerts and recordings. It was during this time that Ortega learned how to work with film; it's also when he shifted from performing to directing, producing, and choreographing.

One of his greatest achievements during the next period of his career was the work he did as choreographer on the unexpected blockbuster 1987 film, *Dirty Dancing*. When first asked to do the film, he said, he couldn't help but remember his memories of school dances in Redwood City, recalling how the teachers would threaten to turn the lights

on and end the dance if the kids got too close and started "dirty dancing." Telling that story to the film's screenwriter, Eleanor Bergstein, is what landed him the job, he added with a laugh.

To create the iconic dance scenes in the film, a coming of age story set in 1963 upstate New York, Ortega drew on music and dance influences of his youth: The Latin music his parents listened to, their classical partner dancing, and the soul and

Motown he heard and danced to as a Redwood City street kid.

"Patrick Swayze and Jennifer Grey were both extraordinary," he said about the film's stars. "We were up together on a mountaintop in the Carolinas making this tiny independent movie. None of us had any idea that it would become the kind of global phenomenon that it did."

But Ortega's most memorable working partnership, he said, was with the King of Pop, the late Michael Jackson. With Jackson, Ortega co-created and co-directed two concert tours, *Dangerous Minds* and *HIStory*. They were in rehearsals for a third tour, *This Is It*, when Jackson unexpectedly died. Ortega went on to direct the documentary film about Jackson preparing for the tour, also entitled *This Is It*.

"He had respect for his craft, he adored his fans, he could play to the back of the house, and he could make every person in the audience feel like he was singing to them," said Ortega. He and Jackson had many artistic tastes in common, he added. They even shared the same favorite musical, *Oliver*, and would sing its songs together while traveling. "The *pièce de résistance*, one of the greatest achievements of my life, was having the opportunity to come into a partnership with him," Ortega said.

Ortega's illustrious career in television, film, and stage concerts has led him to work with talents as varied as Diana Ross, Madonna, and Miley Cyrus. In more recent years, he directed all three of the films in *The High School Musical* trilogy, and *The Descendants*.

And his childhood in Redwood City set the stage for all of it. Among his greatest mentors, he counts his parents, and his cousin Chris Sakelarios (see page 24), who runs Redwood City's popular Backyard Coffee Co.

"She reminds me to step back every once in a while to open my eyes to what's around me," he said, "to invest in making this world a better place."

Another major life influence? Gene Kelly, who taught Ortega to always find a *raison d'être*, purpose and reason at the center of his work.

"In my life I do my very best to make choices that are going to put me in a place where my work is going to make an impact, not just entertain, but, perhaps, inspire," he said, "and hopefully shine a positive light." 