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Hilary Swank to play Amelia Earhart

Mira Nair to direct biopic from Ron Bass script

By **MICHAEL FLEMING**

Hilary Swank is set to play aviatrix Amelia Earhart in "Amelia," a biopic that will be directed by Mira Nair. Ron Bass wrote the script.

The picture will get off the ground in April, financed by Ted Waitt through his Avalon Pictures banner.

Waitt will produce with Avalon prexy Kevin Hyman and Lydia Dean Pilcher; the latter is Nair's producing partner.

Swank will play Earhart in the formative stages of her career. George Putnam, a publisher and publicist, was engaged by society denizen Amy Guest to set up a daring nonstop flight across the Atlantic Ocean. When Guest was talked out of trying to become the first woman to make the trip, she dispatched Putnam to find a female pilot, and to turn the flight into a media event.

Bass delivered the script just before the WGA strike began, and he used Susan Butler's book "East to the Dawn," Mary Lovell's "The Sound of the Wings" and Elgin Long's "Amelia Earhart: The Mystery Solved" as primary resources. Swank, who just starred in "P.S., I Love You," attached late last year, and Nair became available to direct after Warner Bros. postponed the Johnny Depp starrer "Shantaram."

Waitt made his fortune as the co-founder of Gateway, which he built along with his brother Norm Waitt, the financier behind Gold Circle Films. Ted Waitt, who is also the chairman of Avalon Capital Group, has quietly staked several films, but "Amelia" is the first major film he has financed.

The mandate of Waitt's Gotham-based Avalon Pictures is to produce and finance entertaining fact-based films with historical and cultural significance. Waitt has secured attorney Skip Brittenham to broker worldwide sales of "Amelia," a process that won't begin until the film has been cast.

Swank and Bass will be exec producers.