



# IT RUNS IN THE FAMILY

## Production Notes

*Some families can survive everything. Even each other.*

The Grombergs are a highly successful family – except when it comes to communicating with each other.

Alex Gromberg (Michael Douglas) is a man caught in the middle. Navigating the tricky, ever-changing roles of father, son, and husband, he’s trying to avoid the mistakes his father made while coming to terms with the ones he’s already passed on to his own sons. Alex’s wife, Rebecca (Bernadette Peters), is a psychologist trying to balance a professional life with her marriage and raising her kids.

Mitchell Gromberg (Kirk Douglas), the patriarch and a retired partner of one of New York’s leading law firms, is having difficulty coming to grips with his mortality. Evelyn (Diana Douglas) is his devoted wife and has been his emotional rock throughout their marriage – and the peacemaker between him and Alex.

Asher Gromberg (Cameron Douglas), Alex’s eldest son, is a rebellious college student trying to cope with life, love, and sex in a confused society. And Eli (Rory Culkin), Alex’s 11-year old, is perhaps the “oldest” and most levelheaded of all the Gromberg men.

Three generations of an American family, they all live separate lives, each in their own dysfunctional way. But every once in awhile, there comes a time to come together – to celebrate, to laugh, to fight, to cry, and to care for each other.

Onscreen together for the first time in their careers, Academy AwardÆ-winners Michael Douglas and Kirk Douglas join real-life relations Cameron Douglas and Diana

Douglas, along with Bernadette Peters and Rory Culkin, to tell a story about the loving, frustrating, and ultimately inescapable bonds of family.

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures and Buena Vista International present Michael Douglas and Kirk Douglas in *It Runs in the Family*, a Furthur Films production of a Fred Schepisi film. Directed by Schepisi and written by Jesse Wigutow, the film also stars Rory Culkin, Cameron Douglas, Diana Douglas, Michelle Monaghan, and Bernadette Peters. Produced by Michael Douglas, *It Runs in the Family* was executive produced by Schepisi and Kerry Orent, with Marcy Drogin as co-producer and Joel Douglas as associate producer. The production team includes director of photography Ian Baker, production designer Patrizia Von Brandenstein, editor Kate Williams, costume designer Ellen Mirojnick, composer Paul Grabowsky, and music supervisor Susan Jacobs.

### **ABOUT THE PRODUCTION**

OscarÆ-winning Hollywood legend Kirk Douglas and his two-time Academy AwardÆ-winning son, Michael, tried for over twenty years to find a film project in which to work together. “This is my father’s 86th film, made in his 86th year, and it’s the first time we’ve ever actually worked together as actors,” says Michael. Both men have enjoyed remarkable film careers of their own, but they had long wanted to do something together, something they could share as father and son in a business they both understand extremely well. Through the years there had been several possibilities for a collaboration, but for one reason or another it never happened – it wasn’t the right project, it didn’t work out logistically, or it just didn’t come together.

Time passed, and in the meantime Kirk suffered a stroke as a result of a helicopter accident, leaving his speech impaired. Then came the tragedy of September 11th. Like the rest of the world, the Douglasses were deeply affected by the events of that day. In an age where things move faster and faster with people taking less and less time to stop and think about what’s important, the notion of family quickly became significant again as everyone struggled to come to terms with what had happened.

Michael was set to start production on *The In-Laws* in October 2001, but because of the subject matter in light of 9/11 the picture was postponed. At around the same

time, young screenwriter Jesse Wigutow sent a writing sample to Michael for consideration for another project Michael was developing. The script was *It Runs in the Family*, and it was a story about one particular family – and all families.

“My goal was to portray this family in a realistic light – one that is unforgiving, but one in which you sense the love and connection beneath it all,” says Wigutow. “You see a family’s issues with each other and with themselves, how those issues are manifested in their interaction with each other, and how those issues are passed on through three generations.”

Wigutow is a 29-year-old New Yorker who sold his first script, *Urban Town*, within two weeks of graduating from the American Film Institute. He followed with *It Runs in the Family*, something he had started about three years ago. “It began with this idea I had about a story revolving around a certain character – an elderly man. He was inspired by both my girlfriend’s grandfather and my own,” he says. “The more I developed the idea, the supporting characters started to make more and more noise and came up with their own stories.

“Halfway through writing the piece,” he continues, “I realized I was following the lives of four men from one family, and I felt like that was too much. I went back and re-outlined the piece to cover just three men – three generations of a single family.” The Gromberg family was born.

Michael Douglas says, “I was in New York with my family on September 11th, and the events that happened made us all feel much closer to each other. We realized how important each day had become.” Michael decided that if he and Kirk were ever going to work together in a film, the time had come. “At some point, if it had gotten too late to make a film together, I just wouldn’t have felt complete,” he says. He put the project on the fast track, climbed aboard as producer, and *It Runs in the Family* went into pre-production.

Michael’s character is Alex Gromberg, a man trying to make sense of the life he’s found himself living. He is the son of a demanding father, he himself is father to two different and challenging sons, and his marriage is showing signs of strain. “The guy’s having a bit of a mid-life crisis,” laughs Michael. “He’s not really achieving as much as his dad would like, not living up to his father’s standards.” Living in the shadow of his

father, Alex also hasn't been true to himself. With his family members' story lines swirling around him, Alex is an anchor of the film, a link to the past and the future in the Gromberg family quilt.

Michael is incredibly grateful for the experience of working with his legendary dad. He found himself inspired in the process. "My father is as dynamic and strong a persona on screen as anybody," he says. "He's identified by that strength and grit. But what struck me about Kirk while we were filming, both as a person and as an actor, is how he has managed to adjust and adapt through all the adversity he's faced in recent years. He has rekindled his spiritual life. His sense of humor has increased dramatically. And there's a relaxation about him I discovered as we were working together. It was joyful for me to see a man at peace with himself."

Getting the film made was a labor of love for Michael. When asked what he'd like audiences to take from the film, he says, "I hope they laugh a whole lot. I hope they cry. Family makes you nuts. You're tied together by blood, but you want to strangle them half the time and defend and support them the other half. Hopefully, a lot of families will see themselves reflected in *It Runs in the Family*."

For his part, discussing the origins of their working together, Kirk Douglas tells a humorous story about a conversation between him and Michael. "Before my stroke we talked about doing a movie," Kirk says. "Michael brought a script to me and we were discussing it, and then I had my stroke. I was depressed, and Michael said, 'Look, dad, don't worry. You'll work with a speech therapist and then we'll do a movie.' I said, 'Michael, why don't you work with my speech therapist? When you speak like I speak, we'll do the movie,'" he laughs.

"I always knew my son was a good actor," says Kirk, "but *It Runs in the Family* gave me a chance to see what he was like as a working producer. This time was different because Michael was the boss, and I'm used to being the boss. I've produced a number of pictures in my time, but I can tell you I'm impressed with my son. He took care of business and was always on time. He set a very high standard for us all."

Interestingly enough, *It Runs in the Family* is not the first time the two generations came in contact as producers. "Michael surpassed me a long time ago," says Kirk. "I bought the rights to the book *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, starred in the

theatrical version on Broadway, and for ten years tried to get it made as a motion picture. Michael loved the book, and when I was about to give up the option, he asked if he could try making the film. He ended up making a movie that won all the major OscarsÆ that year. I don't think I taught him much as a producer – he did it on his own. He was very young at the time and succeeded in doing something I was not able to do.”

As they continued developing *It Runs in the Family* and getting ready for filming, it quickly became apparent that Mitchell Gromberg was a perfect role for Kirk Douglas. Once writer Wigutow had adapted the role a bit and made Mitchell a stroke survivor, Kirk felt right at home. It was a perfect blend of drama and comedy for the actor, who has a sharp sense of humor. “I am the only actor who could play this character, because I am a father who had a stroke. I have the market covered – whenever they need an old man with a stroke they will have to come to me,” Kirk says.

Being that *It Runs in the Family* portrays such a volatile relationship between a father and son, the filmmakers wondered whether moviegoers might confuse fact with fiction when it came to the Douglasses themselves. “People will try and read things into the film that bear no relationship to our family off-screen,” says Kirk. “In life, I get along a lot better with Michael than Mitchell does with Alex in *It Runs in the Family*. My own father never gave me a pat on the back, but I always made a point to pat Michael's back when he needed it. If he needed a kick in the butt, I also gave him one, but I found it very important to give him support when it was deserved.”

Kirk is effusive in his praise for his son's abilities as an actor. Kirk says, “I was surprised by the energy that came forth from him. He was always in character. I've worked with Lawrence Olivier, Henry Fonda, Burt Lancaster – I've worked with a lot of actors. But Michael is one of the best. I'm very thrilled that I finally got to act with my son.”

Like the Grombergs in the film, the Douglas family also has a third generation. “Not only did *It Runs in the Family* have a wonderful part for Kirk,” says Michael, “but the role of Alex's son Asher seemed tailor-made for my own 24-year-old son, Cameron.” said Michael.

“I had no personal knowledge of the Douglas family before Michael decided to produce the script,” says Wigutow. “But it turns out I had a random connection with

Cameron since we both grew up in New York and shared some mutual friends. I also went to high school with his former girlfriend.” Both Kirk and Michael Douglas, like Mitchell and Alex, have been very successful in the same business, and Cameron, like his character, Asher, enjoys success as a DJ in some of NY’s hottest dance clubs.

Unintentionally, Wigutow’s script contained some amazing coincidences between life and fiction. Those coincidences resonated with the Douglases, and helped Michael decide that casting Cameron in the film would be a great idea.

Despite his familial background and having spent time on film sets, Cameron had only entertained the possibility of acting in the last year and a half. “I did plays in school but wasn’t the world’s greatest actor. I was more interested in music. I played a small part in a friend’s independent film and had begun taking classes when my Dad approached me with this idea,” says Cameron.

In order for Cameron to take part in the film, Michael insisted he spend a few months studying with a top acting coach, then he actually had to screen test for the picture. Cameron gave up his late night job and devoted himself to working with NY-based acting teacher Michael Howard.

Once award-winning Australian director Fred Schepisi signed onto the project, Cameron then had to prove himself to the director. “I was a bit concerned at the beginning, but Cameron worked very hard and came to the test with a good understanding of acting,” claims Schepisi. “I am sure his father and grandfather also contributed with hints on the side,” he laughs.

Cameron was excited to work in the film as an actor, but he was also grateful for the chance to work so closely with his father and grandfather. “Working with my family was really great,” he says. “The most nerve-wracking thing was when we did the first full cast read-through. I walked into the room and everybody was sitting around this huge table. I didn’t know whether it was going to be good or bad.” Ultimately, he just did his best. “I just had to throw it out there,” he continues. “The most fun part is when you really nail something. When it happens, you just know it – everybody knows it – and it’s so rewarding. It was such a nice feeling.”

“I know Michael and Kirk were both surprised as to how good he is in the film and how professional he was during shooting,” says Schepisi. “Cameron did a great job.”

With Cameron in the cast, Schepisi was now in the unique and somewhat daunting position of having three generations of the Douglas family as leads. Schepisi knew it could be complicated working with family members – after all, the movie was about how difficult families can be. But Schepisi had true professionals to work with and the “family thing” didn’t become a problem. “Obviously in every family there are differences of opinion,” he says. “But this is one of most revered professional families in the film industry.” He adds, with a laugh, “And I knew I could always use any conflicts to my advantage, if need be.”

There are three Gromberg generations represented in the film, but there are four Douglases: Diana Douglas – Kirk’s former wife and Michael’s mother – was cast as Mitchell’s wife, Evelyn. Ms. Douglas has had a long career in the theatre and on television, and Michael thought she would be perfect as the very nurturing wife to Mitchell. With three family members already cast, it also seemed right for the script, making it even more of a family affair.

“Mitchell is a bully, but Evelyn gives as good as she gets,” says Diana. “She has a good sense of humor and is intelligent, very nurturing and strong.” Kirk and Diana have been divorced for fifty years but have always remained close friends. If Schepisi had any worries about their relationship, it was shortly dispelled.

“Kirk and I worked together on *The Indian Fighter* in 1955, and it was much easier working with him this time. He was much more open and took direction better,” Diana says. “Having worked together in the past made it easier – like shorthand.”

As for working with her son, Michael, Diana thought it was fantastic. “Michael is a very good producer,” she says. “I was fascinated to watch him and his complete command of the set. His eyes were everywhere – he was checking on the sound, the lights, how we looked. He was on the ball – quite impressive.”

Diana was also proud of her grandson, even though he was a first-timer. “For the first shot, we were all around the dinner table at the Seder, and when Cameron came into the scene, he was just like an old pro. He was right at home immediately.”

Diana thinks the film is incredibly entertaining, but she also thinks *It Runs in the Family* has a very important message. “I think families are very important,” she says, “particularly in this nuclear age. It’s important – even for a dysfunctional family – to keep reaching out, respect everyone’s individuality, to not be smothering, and to be forgiving.”

Tony Award-winning stage and screen star Bernadette Peters was cast as Alex’s wife, Rebecca. Though she was a non-Douglas in a movie full of Douglases, Peters felt very included during shooting. “They made me feel very welcome,” she says. “It’s a real pleasure to be involved with this family, to actually be observing this beautiful family at this time in their lives. It’s just amazing, and quite a privilege for me.”

Peters also enjoyed watching Michael and Kirk work, both together and separately. “Seeing Michael and Kirk interact with each other is a great joy,” she says, “and lots of fun. They have a beautiful relationship. You can see how much Michael admires and loves his father and respects him as an actor. And he should. Kirk has that spark – he’s magic on the screen. So is Michael. He’s a great, great actor.”

In addition to getting to work with the Douglases, Peters was attracted to the richness and complexity of her character. “This film gave me the chance to play such a real, multifaceted woman with a family and career and problems in her marriage,” she says. “I’ve always played such larger than life characters in the theatre, characters painted with broad strokes, always a little quirky and out in left field. I really welcomed the opportunity to play Rebecca.”

The youngest Gromberg, Eli, is played by acclaimed young actor Rory Culkin. Culkin isn’t a Douglas either, but he comes from his own well-known family of entertainers. With two older brothers (Macauley and Kieran) having found success for themselves in motion pictures, Rory is no stranger to “showbiz” families.

Upon being cast, it soon became evident Rory was a natural for the part of an eleven-year-old just beginning to experience the early stages of teenage angst. “Rory is very smart, and already very disciplined,” says Schepisi. “His talent becomes apparent very quickly, and he really brings a truth and interesting quality to a difficult role. He’s also working with some pretty incredible actors, but he completely holds his own with no problem.”



Rory's co-stars also found him to be incredibly giving and kind between takes. "He's a delightful kid," says Diana Douglas. "And he's a very, very good actor – very subtle." And Rory was especially grateful to play a role that required him to learn karate. He loved it so much, he's continued to take lessons.