

'Me & Mrs. Jones' Film Club feature

Storyboard artist discusses the biz

By Richard Freedman
rfreedman@timesheraldonline.com
@RichFreedmanVTH on Twitter

He's been a lot of things in a lot of movies, but Gilbert Johnson practically defines the word "anonymity."

Doesn't matter how high-profile the film was, be it "The Wedding Planner" to "Bandits," to "Titanic: Treasures of the Deep."

Stick around after a film. Johnson's name will appear in the credits. Eventually.

From set designer to carpenter, to lighting guy to storyboard artist, Johnson's had a literal hand in more than 25 films and TV shows.

On Thursday, the Vallejo resident strolls from his downtown home to the Empress Theatre on behalf of the venue's Film Club for a screening of "Me & Mrs. Jones."

Johnson was storyboard artist for the 2003 movie which won "Best Film or Video" category at the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame.

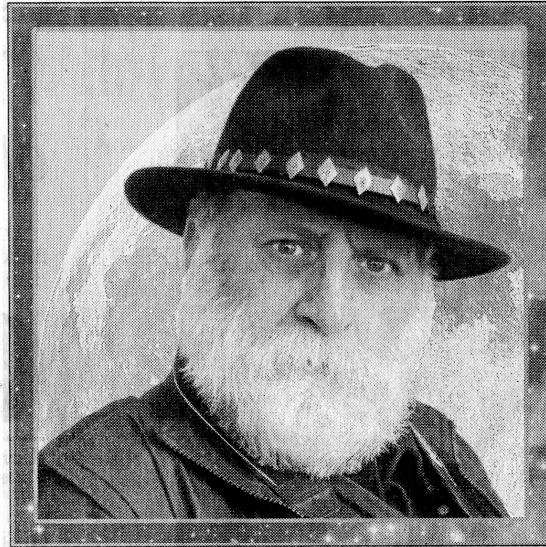
Born in San Francisco, Johnson "thought I wanted to be an artist" back in high school.

"It was always on my mind," he said earlier this week. "I wasn't real sure."

He became sure soon after, graduating with a degree from the San Francisco Art Institute.

Johnson got a first taste of the show business thing when he was asked to assist on the lights of a Santana concert. It was the last "light show" at the famed Winterland.

That evolved into drawing rock band posters, "stuff like that," Johnson said. "That's how I got into show business. It led from one



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Gilbert Johnson

thing to another to another."

He was called on for various jobs as a "grip" or electrician. Then came a big break, snagging a job doing underwater lighting with Al Giddings, who did the documentary, "Titanic: Treasure of the Deep," hosted by the late Walter Cronkite.

"Somebody thought it might be a good idea if we had some kind of storyboard to go with the script which had none," Johnson said. "Since I was the only one there who could draw, I grabbed a pad of Post-Its and started doing sketches, which were stuck on the script at appropriate places."

After that, "it occurred to me that doing storyboards had a certain appeal," Johnson said. "It was the only craft I had worked in the business that did not somewhere require loading or unloading a truck."

Johnson had already worked on "The Abyss," a James Cameron film, three years earlier, but as an electrician doing underwater

wiring.

Cameron, an artist in his own right, quickly gained Johnson's respect.

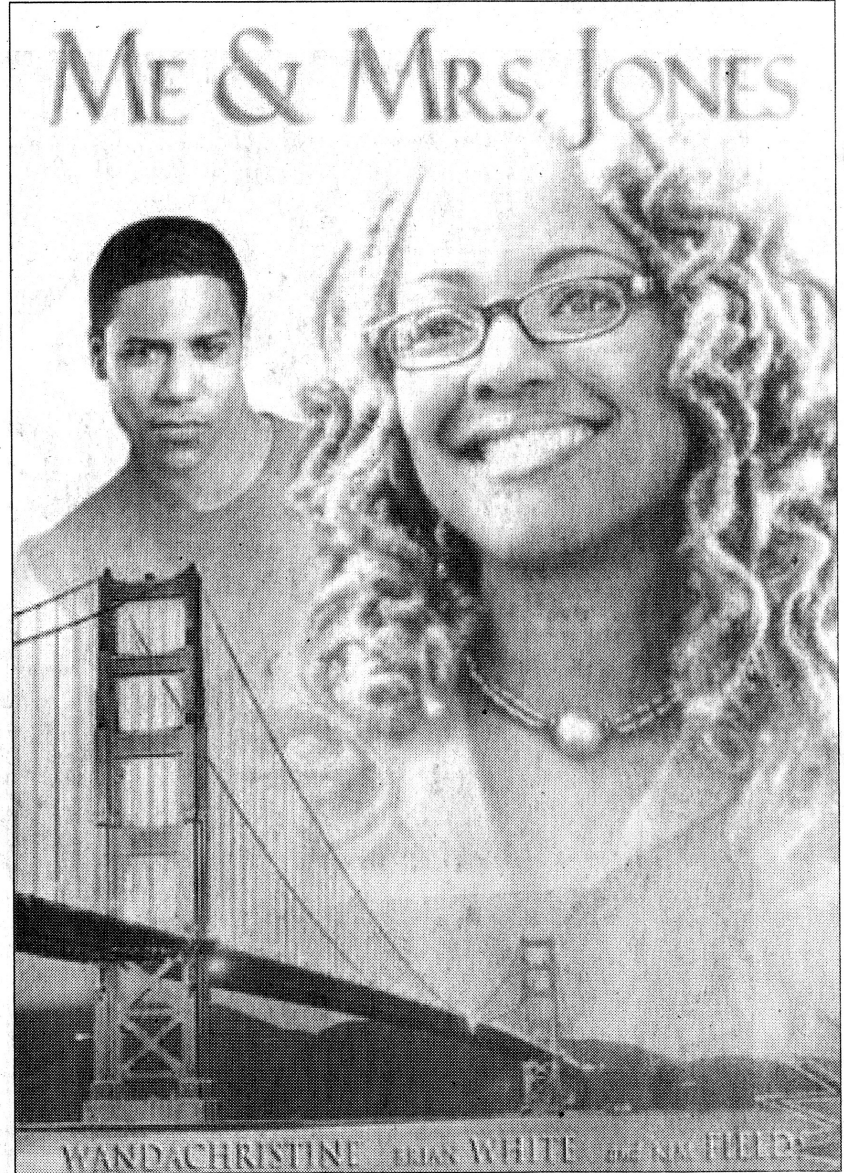
"I'm convinced he could do every job on the lot and better than most people," Johnson said. "He was tough to work for but he expected quality. If you gave it to him or made the effort, he was there for you."

Johnson admired the storyboard artists working on "The Abyss."

"Cameron's office was in this warehouse and one wall must have been 80 feet long and all the storyboards in order where there," Johnson said. "Some really amazing storyboards."

Johnson would eventually take his storyboard skills to a bunch of TV programs and films, including the TV movie, "Nash Bridges," "Boys Night Out," and the short, "Dorme," which will also screen at the Empress with "Me & Mrs. Jones."

He's also worked on the sets of "The Bachelor," "The



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The promotional poster for 'Me & Mrs. Jones,' screened Sept. 8 at the Empress Theatre. Vallejo resident Gilbert Johnson, who worked on the film, appears to discuss the film and his career.

Wedding Planner," "Sweet November," "The Animal," "The Princess Diaries," "Bandits," and "The Assassination of Richard Nixon."

Johnson enjoyed storyboarding because "it's a place you can try out ideas." The Empress Theatre Film Club screens "Me & Mrs.

"Jones" and "Dorme" on Thursday, 7:30 p.m. Free admission for Film Club members, \$10 for non-members. For more, visit empresstheatre.org.