

Kenny Ortega

Biography

Over the course of his 30-year career, Emmy winning director/choreographer Kenny Ortega has developed an astute understanding of what it takes to create and sustain entertaining, dramatic moments that continually exceed an audience's expectations at live events and on the screen.

From his experience directing and choreographing for both live audiences and the camera, Ortega has learned to speak two different languages with the same alphabet.

"On stage the audience is looking at the choreography from one single perspective," he explains, "while in film you can cut and get different angles, different points of view. You can look high, look down, lengthen a dancer, or highlight a dramatic point. You can't do that onstage."

Early in his career, Ortega had the honor of working alongside Gene Kelly as a choreographer on the movie "Xanadu" and then again on Francis Ford Coppola's critically acclaimed "One From the Heart." He attributes much of his understanding of choreography for the camera to Kelly, who became his mentor, and who showed him how to discover and highlight dramatic moments choreography. He recalls how Kelly "had me crawling on my hands and knees with a viewfinder around my neck and a timer in my hand. He showed me what choreography for the camera was about. It wasn't just creating the movement, or just creating the narrative or the story. It was much more sophisticated than that."

Ortega went on to choreograph the blockbuster motion picture "Dirty Dancing" and eventually won two Emmy awards (Outstanding Direction and Outstanding Choreography) for his work on the Salt Lake Winter Olympic Games, which the Washington Post called "A stunningly beautiful pageant" and The New York Times called "An emotional ceremony...that delicately touched on American patriotism and the international hope for unity...."

His choreography credits include dozens of films, including "Ferris Bueller's Day Off," "Pretty in Pink" and "St. Elmo's Fire," nearly 20 world tours for artists such as Barbra Streisand, Madonna, Cher, Michael Jackson, Gloria Estefan, Kiss, and Diana Ross, and numerous television specials like the Academy Awards, the Atlanta Summer Olympics and the American Music Awards. His award-winning choreography on Madonna's Material Girl music video established him as a pioneer of the genre.

Following a route similar to that taken by Kelly and choreographers Bob Fosse and Herb Ross, Ortega went on to direct the musical motion pictures, "Newsies," based on the historical newsboys' strike of 1899, and "Hocus Pocus," a comedy about Salem witches starring Bette Midler and Sarah Jessica Parker. Ortega has directed episodes of a number of the dramatic television series including but not limited to "Ally McBeal," "Chicago Hope," "Grounded for Life," and continues to direct episodes of "The Gilmore Girls."

Currently, Ortega is overseeing the creation of a production for Steve Wynn, the mastermind behind Bellagio, Mirage, Treasure Island, and others Las Vegas properties. He is also involved with "Declare Yourself," a nonpartisan campaign founded by TV producer and philanthropist Norman Lear to energize young voters to participate in the electoral process.

But he admits his "first love" has always been the theatre. Ortega began his career at age 13, performing in plays and musicals, including the show, "Oliver," with Georgia Brown. A Redwood City, CA native, he is best known in the Bay Area as a member and artistic director for the Tubes, a 1960s rock 'n' roll band famous for its elaborate staging, costumes and choreography. It was after a Tubes performance in Los Angeles that Cher approached Ortega and asked him to choreograph her television special. He soon became the choreographer of choice for the entertainment industry's biggest musical artists.

Having established himself as a director of large-scale, enormous events and world tours, he says: "what more could I learn about 'big' after all the shows I've done? Now I would like to focus on quality."

"A great book and great characters -- that's what I care about," he says, "not just the size of the production."

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