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Mr. Mudd travels to 'Lawyerland'

Laffer to mix elements of fact and fiction

By [NICOLE LAPORTE](#)

Filmmaker John Walter ("How to Draw a Bunny") is teaming with John Malkovich's production company Mr. Mudd on an adaptation of Lawrence Joseph's novel "Lawyerland," which Walter will write and direct.

Mr. Mudd partners Malkovich, Lianne Halfon and Russell Smith are producing. Project is being developed with United Artists via Mr. Mudd's first-look deal with the studio.

The shingle optioned the film rights to "Lawyerland: What Lawyers Talk About When They Talk About Law" from Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Published in 1997, the novel --often mistaken for nonfiction -- chronicles Manhattan lawyers and lawyer-speak in the late 1990s. Lawrence, a law professor and published poet, reenacts conversations he's had with attorneys, revealing the gritty, greedy cynicism of the profession. Book is divided into eight chapters, each devoted to a specific legal specialty and practitioner.

Film version will be an "American Splendor" of sorts, mixing fact and fiction to humorous effect.

Walter and Mr. Mudd also teamed on "How to Draw a Bunny," the docu-portrait of "mail" artist Ray Johnson, which took home the Special Jury Prize at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival and the Prix de Public at the Recontre Film Fest in Paris. Pic, which was also nommed for a 2003 IFP Spirit Award for documentary, will be released theatrically by Palm Pictures in Los Angeles on Friday.

"Lawyerland" appealed to Walter, he said, "because it's lawyers telling stories about other lawyers. It treated the stories as a portrait of our civilization in a way that was complex, mysterious and funny."

Although he does not consider himself a documaker exclusively, Walter said his approach to "Lawyerland"

was as a documentarian. "I'm treating the book as if it is documentary footage, and I'm cutting that into a documentary film that I go out and make."

He would not comment on whether or not he'd be casting real lawyers or actors in the film.

Walter, who's repped by Gersh, just completed production on "In Search of Ted Demme," a tribute to the late filmmaker, with the Independent Film Channel and Apostle Pictures. Pic will premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival in May.

Mr. Mudd is the production company behind Terry Zwigoff's 2001 hit "Ghost World" and Malkovich's feature film directorial debut, "The Dancer Upstairs." Mr. Mudd is in production in the U.K. on "The Libertine," starring Malkovich, Johnny Depp and Samantha Morton.

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