

Local couple has special connection to movie 'Argo'

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

Thursday, 08 November 2012 15:04 - Last Updated Thursday, 08 November 2012 15:26



Jim and Karan Smith of Gothenburg plan to see "Argo" on Sunday.

Playing at the Sun Theatre this weekend, the movie dramatizes the true story of a joint CIA-Canadian operation to smuggle six Americans out of revolutionary Iran in 1980.

"We were waiting until it came to Gothenburg to see it," Karan said.

The Smith's have a unique relationship with the main character of the movie, CIA agent Tony Mendez played by Ben Affleck. Tony has been described as the mastermind behind the escape and has written a couple of books about the event that happened during the Iranian hostage crisis.

Tony was married to Jim's sister, Karen, who died of lung cancer in 1985—five years after her husband led the fugitives out of Tehran.

"He wishes she would have been here for what's happening now," said Karan, who still corresponds with Tony.

Following the declassification of the mission in 1997, Tony wrote a book "The Master of

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Disguise" from which parts were taken to create the film. Another book by Tony, "Argo" was released in September.

The story is almost too crazy to believe as Tony, the CIA agent, and the six Americans pose as a Canadian film crew that is scouting locations for a fake science-fiction movie called "Argo."

In Greek mythology, Argo is the ship Jason and the Argonauts sail to retrieve the Golden Fleece.

Tony, who is now retired from the CIA, met Karen at a swimming pool in Denver, where the Smiths grew up.

They married in 1960 and, after working as a plumber and illustrator, Tony joined the CIA's technical services staff, later becoming its chief of disguise.

Karan said the couple lived in places around the world, residing in Bangkok, Thailand, for several years. Jim and Karen's mother lived with them there for several years.

Karen and Tony had three children, who are now grown. Two of the children—Amanda and Toby and a child Tony had with his second wife—appear in the movie as extras as do Tony and his second wife, Jonna, Karan said.

"They're walking down the hall in an airport," she said, noting that the picture of a 10-year-old shown in the film is Karen and Tony's son, Ian, who died of cancer.

The Smiths remember celebrating Christmas with Jim's family, including the Mendezes, after the Argo operation.

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