

Exclusive: Michael Jackson Estate Legal Team Adds Tom Mesereau to Arbitration Case Over "Leaving Neverland" Doc

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EXCLUSIVE

I'm told the Michael Jackson estate is preparing for battle with HBO in their arbitration case over the documentary, "Leaving Neverland."

They've added to their legal team Thomas Mesereau, the superstar defense lawyer who brilliantly convinced a jury to acquit Jackson in his 2005 child molestation and conspiracy trial. The other members of the team are Bryan Freedman and Jonathan Steinsapir.

Adding Mesereau is a sensational idea because he put Wade Robson, one of the main subjects of the Dan Reed film, on the stand as a defense witness to support Jackson in the 2005 trial. If Robson testifies in the arbitration, which seems likely, he would be facing Mesereau in a much different way this time.

Both Robson and James Safechuck have seen lawsuits filed against the Estate dismissed by the court in the last year. Their credibility has been severely damaged by many contradictions in their recollection of alleged sexual abuse. Both men were steadfast supporters of Jackson during his trial and after his 2009 death, but suddenly remembered abuse in 2013.

On the stand in 2005, Robson, his mother, and sister all testified on Jackson's behalf. They stayed at Neverland during the trial. Robson even asked Jackson to be married at the Neverland Ranch, where he later said abuse took place. He also dated Jackson's niece for some time.

At the heart of the Jackson estate's suit against HBO is an agreement between the cabler and Jackson dating back to 1992 in which HBO promised never to besmirch the singer. It was part of a deal for a concert film. HBO tried to get away with breaking the agreement but the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals sided with the Jackson estate.

The court said: "The contract contained a broad arbitration clause that covers claims that HBO disparaged Jackson in violation of ongoing confidentiality obligations. We may only identify whether the parties agreed to arbitrate such claims; it is for the arbitrator to decide whether those claims are meritorious."

The arbitrators are being chosen now, and the actual process should begin within the next month, I'm told.

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Roger Friedman began his Showbiz411 column in April 2009 after 10 years with Fox News, where he created the Fox411 column. He wrote the Intelligencer column for NY Magazine in the mid 90s, reporting on the OJ Simpson trial, as well as for the real Parade magazine (when it was owned by Conde Nast), and has written for the New York Observer, Details, Vogue, Spin, the New York Times, NY Post, Washington Post, and NY Daily News among many publications. He is the writer and co-producer of "Only the Strong Survive," a selection of the Cannes, Sundance, and Telluride Film festivals, directed by DA Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus.

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