

DAVID BRANSON SMITH '02

'02

The Wild, Wild, West

BY SARAH ZOBEL

INGRID GOES WEST

Written by

David Branson Smith & Matt Spicer

10.30.15



David Branson Smith apologizes for needing to take a call in his car, but he's just wrapped up a meeting with one studio executive and is on his way to another. He laughs at himself, living the clichéd life of a Hollywood writer, but with a 2017 Sundance screenwriting prize gracing his desk and the film that won it due out in August, he has surely earned the right.

"It's been a pretty busy year after 11 not-so-busy years," says Smith, who was also married in March. His movie, *Ingrid Goes West*, will be released in major markets August 4, 2017 and stars Aubrey Plaza, Elizabeth Olsen, and O'Shea Jackson Jr. Within a six-month span in 2015, Smith conceived and co-wrote it with Matt Spicer, who also directed. It was sent to Plaza on a Friday and by Monday she had expressed interest. Financing was hastily pulled together, and the movie was shot last summer.

"It was a miracle that we got it made, and a miracle that we edited it in time to get it to Sundance," says Smith. Some 10,000 movies were submitted for consideration, and the field was winnowed down to the 16 that were shown at the festival in January. Each of those was screened roughly half a dozen times over the course of the week, and a jury of filmmakers and actors then voted on the awards. Spicer and Smith shared the Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award, which was made all the more special for Smith by the dozen Deerfield friends who were in attendance, his version of a bachelor party.

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Courtesy of David Branson Smith



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Indeed, Deerfield connections helped Smith get his start in Hollywood. After his 2006 graduation from the University of Pennsylvania—where his passion for movies really caught fire—Smith decided to head to Los Angeles. He connected with Mikey Glazer '94 thanks to an introduction from his half-brother Kirk Bedell '93 (Smith's father, Stephen G. Smith '67, is editor-in-chief of *National Journal*; his mother, Sally Bedell Smith, is an author [see page 88] and historian). Glazer was producing *Vas o No Vas*, a Spanish-language version of *Deal or No Deal*, and although Smith didn't know Spanish and had no experience to speak of, he was hired as a personal assistant. Glazer later connected Smith with Hanley Baxter '96, then an assistant at what is now William Morris Endeavor, a talent agency. Baxter helped Smith land a job in the mailroom, where Smith was surrounded by other recent college graduates also earning their "Hollywood MBAs." He was eventually promoted to assistant to three literary agents, a demanding job that entailed tracking schedules, submissions, and calls.

In the meantime, Smith had teamed up with a friend, and for five years they spent nights and weekends writing scripts for what he calls "big studio comedy stuff." After they amicably parted ways, Smith found work writing for writer-director Mike White on the HBO show *Enlightened*. It was a turning point, because although he had been in the movie and TV business for five solid years by then, he had not yet stepped on a set until that point, and, guest directors for *Enlightened* were a Who's Who of Hollywood names, including Jonathan Demme, Miguel Arteta, and Nicole Holofcener, many of whom Smith had admired since college.



"And now I was sitting behind them—maybe a little too close—getting to watch them at work, which was just a revelation. It felt like I had bridged the gap," he says. He has since written for the third season of Lifetime's *UnREAL*, and is in the process of adapting a handful of novels in several genres. The stylistic variety is proving advantageous "in terms of cross-pollination and creativity. It's nice to be able to go back and forth between different stories and styles, because they really inform one another," says Smith, who counts among his early influences *The Big Lebowski*, *Boogie Nights*, and *The Royal Tenenbaums*—all films he first saw at Deerfield.

Smith, who wrote an adaptation for Warner Brothers TV of David Gates' Pulitzer Prize-nominated novel, *Jernigan*, and is currently working on an adaptation of Robert Bingham's *Lightning on the Sun*, is an on-again, off-again user of Instagram and Twitter. He says the germ for *Ingrid Goes West* came out of a conversation he had with Spicer about social media and how it allows people to form judgments about those they know only through their posts. In the film, the title character fixates on Instagram posts from a so-called "lifestyle guru," and moves across the country to befriend her.

"That's something that none of us really do, but I think in our mind's eye we find ourselves making character assumptions or judgments or thinking that we know who someone is by looking through their social media," he says. "A lot of the movie is about the disconnect between that and the other side, which is real life." Yet he is quick to add that he and Spicer are not interested in preaching.

"Our goal is not to put forth teachable lessons," says Smith. "I think the goal is to say, 'This is a circus, and we're all in it, and it's funny and crazy and terrifying and weird, but that's 2017.'"

Next up, Smith and Spicer are co-writing the script adaptation of Joshua Ferris' novel *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*—a novel that was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and features a protagonist who is searching for the meaning of life among its modern absurdities. //