



Since graduating with his MFA in 2005, independent filmmaker James Ponsoldt has directed the acclaimed feature *Off the Black*, starring Nick Nolte; developed his screenplay for *Refresh, Refresh* through the Sundance Labs, then turned it into a graphic novel; directed a short documentary and contributed to *Filmmaker Magazine*

His most recent project, the indie feature *Smashed*, stars Mary Elizabeth Winstead and Aaron Paul.

Smashed premiered to great reviews at Sundance, was picked up by Sony Pictures Classic and hit theaters in on October 12th. For information on where the film is playing and to see the trailer, please visit [the web site](#).

How did you come up with the idea for *Smashed*?

This film started as a conversation with my friend, Susan Burke, who became my co-writer on *Smashed*. Susan is sober, open about her struggles with alcoholism, and how she started AA meetings in her early 20s. One night we chatted about stupid things we'd both done while drunk. While sharing stories, we realized we had never seen a film that dealt with substance abuse in these terms: a story that tackled the issue in a way that was believable, but also real and funny. There was always an otherness about those films. Those characters were usually older, and the stories dealt with impact of their substance abuse on their friends and families. They weren't stories where you went and enjoyed living in the film; they were stories – sometimes great ones – that left you feeling punished. We wanted to do something else. Once we started talking about it, the idea just became something I couldn't get out of my head. Susan's stories were both funnier and more upsetting than anything I'd seen captured in films. She knew the ins and outs of the 12 steps, and she had a lot of personal experience to draw on. I knew this was something that would only work if we wrote it together, because to tell this story in broad strokes, without the specificity that Susan brought, would have been a disservice to the subject. *Smashed* is fictional, of course, but Susan's perspective lent a critical authenticity to the project.

This is the first time I'd collaborated on writing with anyone, but it felt like the obvious and natural progression.

How did you decide this was the project you wanted to direct after the success of *Off the Black*?

There are a lot of stories I'm interested in telling, and after *Off the Black* I took another project, called *Refresh, Refresh* and based on an award-winning short story, through the Sundance lab. Moving forward with it was going to be tricky, for a lot of reasons. Small human dramas aren't the easiest things to finance, and this one featured teen boys and violence and a setting in the high desert of central Oregon. It became clear it would be a slow process.

When the idea for *Smashed* came along, we just decided we wanted to write it in a way that money wouldn't be an obstacle. We set it specifically in neighborhoods in northeast Los

Angeles, knowing we could make it ourselves on a micro-budget if needed. Then, as it turned out, the project developed into something that connected with others very quickly and we were able to bring onboard producers and financiers.

Was it any easier making movie number two? What elements were most challenging?

Well, there was no more time. More time would be a luxury, but time is money. In fact, *Smashed* had fewer shooting days – 18 days. All the movies I've made have been done at a dead sprint, with no wiggle room whatsoever. It's both terrifying and exhilarating. The schedule forces you to be very disciplined. But my goal is always to be as laid back as possible on set because that's how you remain more open to random happy accidents. It's easy to pre-plan everything and get locked into a concept. I do prep a shot list. But when the day comes, you have to roll with the punches and embrace what the world is giving you, and sometimes the shot list goes out the window. I guess, with the second feature, I'm getting better at that, at not getting stressed out when things change and don't go according to plan. I've also been lucky so far.

How do you work with cast and crew?

I don't do traditional rehearsal with actors. I have lots of very long conversations with the actors. Months' worth. About the characters, about going to AA meetings, but not about "in this scene, do this."

I knew this kind of performance would require a lot of trust. Especially since, once we got on set, there would be lots of stress, and things would change, but I wanted my actors to know they could go stranger, deeper, more spontaneous; that they had the freedom to do or try anything. The conversations were about developing that trust, and finding a level of synchronicity at every single beat.

As far as crew, I think the key is finding people to work with whom you respect and trust.

Surround yourself with brilliant people who make you look smarter and more talented than you are, and then give them lots of autonomy and love their choices.

Do you work with a different crew on each project, or do you have frequent collaborators?

I've worked with different people. Logistics dictate that, to a large degree, I put together the team one project at a time, starting from scratch. And there's definitely something nice about having different collaborators, because they each add different colors. That said, I've really liked the people I've worked with and hope to work with them again eventually.

How did you keep practicing and developing your directing craft between *Off the Black* and *Smashed*?

Well, I was developing another project, which when it didn't go forward right away as a film, we turned into a graphic novel. And I did some short films – a short documentary and a PSA for a great non-profit. I've also been writing for *Filmmaker* magazine, doing these director interviews, which has been a great way to stay connected to the film community and champion films I love. It's also a great way to learn how other projects and filmmakers work. I can wonder how another director might tackle something, and then actually get a chance to ask Paul Thomas Anderson or Werner Herzog what they did when I interview them.

What have you been up to since wrapping *Smashed*?

I've been promoting it, but I also went almost right into another film, an adaptation of a young adult novel by Tim Tharp called *The Spectacular Now*. This was another first for me: I didn't write the script, and it's the first time I've directed something I didn't write. In fact, it had a life that far pre-dated me. Marc Webb, who directed

(500) Days of Summer

, was going to do it but then he got the

Spiderman

movie. So some producers who'd seen

Smashed

at Sundance and loved it sent me the script. I really wasn't looking to direct someone else's script, but this was the most honest story I'd ever read about adolescence and I wanted to be involved.

In terms of what's coming up next, *The Spectacular Now* will do the festival rounds, and I'm developing a few new projects. Some are very much indie in size and scope, but there's also a bigger project, a science fiction thing, that could come together.

Do you work with any of your Columbia classmates? Does the Columbia connection play any other part in your filmmaking these days?

I haven't worked with my classmates, but I hang out with many of them out here in Los Angeles. We play poker together, and exchange script drafts. They give the smartest and toughest notes on scripts!

Having met people that went to a lot of other graduate film schools, I just feel really grateful for the quality of peers and teachers in the program. I feel like I got to grow up around really fantastic storytellers, such a diverse group, many of whom had had entire lives and careers before grad school. Since I was coming straight from undergrad, I really felt the bar being raised. I knew I had lots to learn, and really respected the level of commitment to storytelling and the sense of purpose of everyone at Columbia.

When did you move to LA, and how does the indie film scene here compare to NY?

I moved to LA in early 2006. I'm originally from the south, and then moved to northeast to go to college and grad school, which meant almost a decade of real winters... months of not wanting to leave my home. So I was eager to try the weather on the west coast.

I'd also come out to LA a bunch for work stuff, and realized they were two totally different cities. LA is nothing like NY. And even though I loved NY, I was ready for a change.

The indie film scene in LA has been as amazing and vital as the one in NYC. It's odd, how people associate LA with the studio film and television industries, but not with indie film, I guess because the machinery of the studio stuff is so huge it kind of dwarfs the independent scene. But it's a perception problem. LA is a great place to be an independent filmmaker, there's a huge community and a lot of resources.

***Smashed* is out in NYC and LA. Please go see it and support it!**