

My "Date" With Simon Kinberg

Written by Paul Francis, SOA Film '99
Sunday, 26 October 2008 00:00



I didn't know much about Simon Kinberg before I met him. All I knew was that he wrote MR. AND MRS. SMITH and other very high-profile studio pictures and was considered "a success story" of Columbia's MFA Film program. I knew he was active in Columbia Alumni Affairs and was well liked, but there were the requisite spurious rumors:

"Isn't he British?"

"Dude, that guy totally c*** blocked me at a party the other night."

"Oh, that guy is so part of a massive conspiracy engineered by The Masons."

Going into the interview, I brought many preconceptions to bear - thinking of other "high profile" writers and directors I have met. These other meetings have always proven bittersweet as I've detected a mix of pride, relief and a pervasive tinge of panic caused by the often unpredictable mood swings of the studios. Sometimes there is a sense of partying it up in Pompeii with soft rumblings in the distance.

Simon's office didn't disappoint. The building was part of a small courtyard complex in West Hollywood. I was buzzed through a small iron gate and I walked into a seemingly anachronistic and Ivy-covered courtyard that did, indeed, feel very British. And being the Anglophile that I am, I thought to myself: "This is how I would do it – lots of ivy." Simon met me at the downstairs landing, shook my hand and led me into his tasteful and comfortable office. It turns out that the compound had been owned by Charlie Chaplin. That explains the Englishness. I was a bit nervous coming in, but something about him just put me at ease and we immediately started talking. He asked me questions about myself and we did the name game a bit and I thought to myself, "This guy's good," as I pulled out my little black recorder and tried to look professional.

PF: WHAT MADE YOU PURSUE SCREENWRITING AS A CAREER?

SK: Well, it's interesting because I actually did everything in my power to avoid getting into "the industry." I actually grew up here (in Los Angeles) and I was exposed to a lot of people in the business and I saw how horrible it can be. It seemed like you either struggled without having success or you had success, but then spent all your time trying to hold on to it. Even the successful people eventually crashed and burned, so I had a lot of negative associations with Hollywood and the industry. I actually wanted to be a novelist or some other kind of more literary writer. I went to Brown undergrad and applied to other grad programs but eventually I ended up at Columbia.

PF: SOUNDS A LITTLE "HIP HOP" LIKE, "I DIDN'T CHOOSE SCREENWRITING, SCREENWRITING CHOSE ME."

SK: Yeah.

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PF: WHAT ABOUT IT DO YOU MOST ENJOY?

SK: I really like telling stories, especially how they relate to people and human nature. Screenwriting is particularly interesting because you often have these extraordinary people in other worlds going through incredible things but we can learn from them because they are people and we are all essentially are faced with the same problems and challenges from a human nature perspective.

PF: WHAT SPECIFIC TALENTS DO YOU FEEL DISTINGUISH YOU AS A WRITER?

SK: There are things that concern me as a writer that I think allow me to solve problems that come up in the filmmaking process. I find a very common problem is reconciling a tension that occurs between theme and plot in a script and I've become fairly good at smoothing that kind of problem out.

PF: AND WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES?

SK: Sometimes shoots can be very chaotic and pressurized to the point where you are rewriting huge sections of a script on a daily basis as its being shot. So the challenge can be to just maintain your composure, keep your focus and do the work. Not to mention the fact that there can be all kinds of different people requiring something different from your work at the same time, so learning to please several different masters under very pressurized circumstances can be challenging.

PF: SOUNDS LIKE IT CAN BE KIND OF PRODUCER-LIKE.

SK: Kind of, in the sense that you are often juggling a number of different responsibilities and obligations at a time. I think the trick is to just keep a positive, professional mindset and do your job. It's a real balancing act, because if you're writing "on set" you can have a bunch of people breathing down your neck as you write, so it can be as much about managing relationships as the actual writing in itself. I could tell you stories...

PF: UP UNTIL NOW, YOUR WORK HAS BEEN PRIMARILY IN THE "GENRE" SPHERE, WITH MR. AND MRS. SMITH, X3, ETC. WHY DO YOU THINK THAT IS, AND WHAT ARE THE PARTICULAR CHALLENGES?

SK: It's just kind of worked out that way so far in my career, and I particularly enjoy making seemingly "big" stories smaller and more character focused. For instance Mr. and Mrs. Smith is basically just a story about a marriage. They happen to be this specific world, but they still have to confront the challenges any marriage would face. And in X3, the main character Wolverine is put in a position where he has to make the choice whether or not to kill the woman he loves. I've always loved comic books so it's really thrilling for me to help bring these stories to the screen.

PF: HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR EXPERIENCE AT COLUMBIA, AND HOW HAS IT AFFECTED YOUR WORK?

SK: Columbia has the reputation for having strong writing and I think it's well deserved. I was coming from the West Coast, so I already had a strong sense of what's commercial, and I think Columbia taught me to appreciate the art of character, storytelling and all its subtleties. An interesting thing happened where I reached a kind of middle ground where I can manage to tell stories that some might consider "commercial" but bring a degree of craft to it, pay more

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attention to structure and character, etc. I had some great writing professors at Columbia and I learned a lot from them.

PF: IF YOU HAD TO GENERALIZE ABOUT THE COLUMBIA GRAD FILM PROGRAM'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE FILM INDUSTRY, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

SK: Like I said, I had some great professors at Columbia and I think it's one of the only programs out there that really does emphasize good writing, apart from the more simplistic approaches.

PF: YOU WORKED ON X3 AND NOW HARDY MEN, DO YOU SEE ANY PARTICULAR CHALLENGES ADAPTING SERIALIZED CONTENT INTO FEATURES?

SK: Actually, it kind of makes my job easier in the sense that there's so much material to draw from. The characters in both X-Men and The Hardy Boys are already so rich and fleshed out that it mainly becomes about paring down the material to fit the plot. For instance in X-Men there was a lot of paring down that had to be done, but Wolverine's relationship with Jean Grey was always a strong theme in the comic.

PF: THE SUCCESS OF COMIC BOOK THEMED MOVIES CONTINUES TO GROW. WHERE DO YOU SEE THE TREND GOING, OR WILL IT END SOON?

SK: I don't really see it ending soon. There are so many rich and interesting stories in comic books and I think, if anything, it's going to diversify and you will see more stories of different types being adapted from comic books or having "comic book type" themes. Comic book properties are being taken more seriously and attracting a higher caliber of talent. Chris Nolan isn't a director you would automatically associate with comic books and that combination has been very successful. And now with IRON MAN and THE INCREDIBLE HULK with Robert Downey Jr. and Ed Norton, you're seeing highly talented and respected actors sign on to projects they may not have considered before, so who knows where it's going to go, but I don't see it stopping anytime soon, as long as the properties keep attracting a high level of talent.

PF: SPEAKING OF IRON MAN, YOU'RE WORKING WITH ROBERT DOWNEY JR. ON SHERLOCK HOLMES?

SK: That's right. This guy is a major talent, probably the best actor of his generation especially when it comes to improvisation. I've been lucky enough to work with two geniuses in that area – Robert and Vince Vaughn – and what they do is incredible. As a writer you can just point them in a direction and they do the rest. I've been really lucky to work with really talented people. That's been a treat for me.

PF: ANY PARTING WORDS FOR THE READERS OUT THERE?

SK: Well, I've been very lucky, but I also think I work hard and also work hard to stay grounded and focused, which can be difficult in this business. I think finding a balance in life can be the hardest part, and I've also been lucky to have been exposed to kind of the two different extremes in terms of East Coast and West Coast culture, and even time in Europe, so I think that's helped.

PF: SO BASICALLY: STAY GROUNDED, FOCUSED AND PROFESSIONAL... AND BE LUCKY.

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SK: Pretty much. And be nice.

Simon Kinberg talks the talk and walks the walk. I thoroughly enjoyed interviewing him and I came away inspired. Not in the sense of "You CAN have success in this business!" which goes without saying. But rather you can have success in this business and still be a very charming, nice, and grounded guy with a family, who is genuinely excited about his job and is not above "geeking out" with a fellow Columbia alum in his pitch perfect, Ivy-covered office.

Keep up with Paul Francis' Blog at <http://blog.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=blog.ListAll&friendID=25545878>