

WGAW: BEHIND THE SCREEN



SHERYL ARONSON | ARTING AROUND

On November 12, 2019, the Writer's Guild of America West sponsored Behind the Screen at the Formosa Cafe in West Hollywood. The Press was invited to meet major screenwriters of feature films released in 2019 and 2020. I sat down with seven screenwriters: Adam Mervis (*21 Bridges*), Scott Alexander (*Dolemite Is My Name*), Andy Callahan (*Inside Game*), Andrew Lanham (*Just Mercy*), Lorene Scarfaria (*Hustlers*), and Sam Pitman and Adam Cole-Kelly (*Like A Boss*).

21 BRIDGES - Adam Mervis - Writer (Starring Chadwick Boseman, J.K. Simmons, Sienna Miller) An embattled NYPD detective is thrust into a citywide manhunt for a pair of cop killers after uncovering a massive and unexpected conspiracy.

Sheryl Aronson: I'm from New York and I didn't know there were 21 bridges. What is this movie about?

Adam Mervis: *21 Bridges* is an old school crime thriller, starring Chadwick Boseman. He's a detective who stumbles upon horrific murders and he shuts down Manhattan to find the killers.

Sheryl Aronson: How did you envision this in your mind? That's quite a feat to do; shut down all of NYC. Are you a New Yorker yourself?

Adam Mervis: I lived in New York City doing theater, and I felt like my career in theater was coming to an end. My agent encouraged me to write something big. I had stumbled upon a few of the characters I developed in the movie, because I read about a famous robbery that happened in New York when I was there. I then asked myself what

would happen if these characters were involved, and all of New York had to be shut down.

Sheryl Aronson: How many New Yorkers know there are 21 bridges in New York?

Adam Mervis: I didn't know it either. I only knew of 17 bridges, but really there are around 100 bridges - 21 are in Manhattan. However, to shut down Manhattan, you could do it with 17 bridges. (He laughs).

Sheryl Aronson: Talk about developing the character that Chadwick Boseman plays.

Adam Mervis: Chadwick Boseman plays Andre Davis who is known for chasing cop killers. He will hunt down these killers and bring them back either dead or alive . . . a lot of times, he brings them back dead. This time he suspects that these criminals are worth more alive. There's something else going on here. I'm not going to give away any twists or turns in the plot. Maybe the good guys are the bad guys and the bad guys are the good guys.

Sheryl Aronson: When does the movie come out?



Adam Mervis: It comes out in 10 days.

Sheryl Aronson: Is this your first feature film?

Adam Mervis: This is my first big feature film.

Sheryl Aronson: How does it feel to now have out a major film starring Chadwick Boseman?

Adam Mervis: I've been writing movies for a while and I've been writing plays. I just sat down and wrote this script over a four-month period. It was quite a ride the whole experience.

Sheryl Aronson: How did you develop the character of Andre Davis?

Adam Mervis: He sort of appeared to me, because initially he wasn't one of the characters that I had imagined. When Andre appeared in the script I was writing, I just followed him for a while. I discovered he had an unusual inner compass, but it's a moral compass. Here's a guy at a critical turning point in his life when this event occurs. Corruption, inequity, and injustice have been blurred. He goes down a rabbit hole, and Andre has to question his beliefs.

Sheryl Aronson: Filming *21 Bridges* in New York City must have been exciting.

Adam Mervis: It was surreal for me because I was standing in an alley of NYC with Chadwick Boseman, Sienna Miller, and 500 crew members. My best friend said, "You wrote this script and here you are on set as the film is being done."

Sheryl Aronson: It seemed as if you paid your dues all the years of writing plays and screenplays. Could you please talk about sticking with your craft of writing?

Adam Mervis: I had been writing for 15 years. I was writing plays that were produced off-Broadway. When I wrote this screenplay, I was technically homeless. Actually, I was subletting an apartment. I knew I had six months of money in the bank to hold me over to write the script. I submitted the script and got a call many months later that the studio wanted to do the script. It took another six months for Chadwick Boseman to sign on. So all I can say is just keep writing.

Sheryl Aronson: Is there anything else you would like to say about the movie?

Adam Mervis: This is an old school story. You strap in for one hour and forty-five minutes and we are going to take you on a ride. You are not going to know which way is up and which way is down. You are not going to know who is good and who is bad. I promise you that for that period of time, you'll forget about your problems and just take a ride with Andre Davis.

DOLEMITE IS MY NAME - Scott Alexander & Larry Karaszewski - Writers (Starring Eddie Murphy, Keegan-Michael Key, Mike Epps) Eddie Murphy portrays real-life legend Rudy Ray Moore, a comedy and rap pioneer who proved naysayers wrong when his hilarious, obscene, kung fu fighting alter ego, Dolemite, became a 1970s Blaxploitation phenomenon.

Sheryl Aronson: Please talk about the history of this movie and how you came to write it.

Scott Alexander: Eddie came to us about 17 years ago and wanted to do a movie about Rudy Ray Moore. He was a big fan of Rudy's. He pitched it to Larry and me, and we said let's do it. We got with the real Rudy and heard all his war stories. However, when we tried to pitch the movie, nobody wanted it.

Sheryl Aronson: Why do you think now the film was able to get made?

Scott Alexander: We called in our chip. Larry and I had done the television show *OJ Simpson*. We decided to use our power for "good" and thought about the whole project. We reached out to Eddie again and said, "Let's try it now."

Sheryl Aronson: Eddie Murphy is such a funny guy. In this film, he gets to show off his comedic side and his serious side. How did you write this role with him in mind?

Scott Alexander: We were writing for Eddie and all we cared about was that he would do this film. Eddie is an incredible talent. He can do comedy, he can sing, he can do standup, and we were going to put all of that in one movie. Eddie was basically retired at that time. He hadn't done a movie in many years. We always wanted to get him back on the screen where he belonged. We wanted to write a script that he couldn't say "no" to.

Sheryl Aronson: How do you and your partner write together?

Scott Alexander: We'd sit in a room and act out the parts and then take it from there.

Sheryl Aronson: What do you want the public to know about the film?

Scott Alexander: We're paying tribute to Rudy and wanted to elevate him. Our message was he was an entrepreneur, he fought against segregation, and he did things by himself. If no one was going to hire him, he figured out a way to accomplish his goals. It's a very empowering movie.

Sheryl Aronson: How long did it take to make the movie?

Scott Alexander: It went pretty fast . . . about two years.

Sheryl Aronson: You've been writing for a long time. Do you think that being a writer now is very different than when you started out?

Scott Alexander: There are a lot fewer movies than there used to be, and a lot of the writing has turned to television. Thank God for Netflix. They are making a lot of good movies. In the 80s and 90s it was all big studio films. Because of the nature of smaller companies making films, so many more people all over the world can see them on television and social media.



Production Still *Dolemite Is My Name*

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- Co-Writer Scott Alexander,
DOLEMITE IS MY NAME

INSIDE GAME - Andy Callahan - Writer (Starring Will Sasso, Scott Wolf, Eric Mabius) In 2007, when NBA referee Tim Donaghy got caught betting on games he worked, he said two men associated with the Gambino crime family - a bookie named Baba Battista and a drug dealer named Tommy Martino threatened to kill his family if he didn't give them gambling picks. That's what Donaghy told the FBI, 60 Minutes and what he testified in court. But that's not what really happened. *Inside Game* is the untold true story of one of the biggest scandals in sports history.



Andy Callahan: It's a funny story. I got this role as a writer by attending my 10-year anniversary of high school. My wife went to high school with the executive producer of this movie. He is also the first cousin of Tommy Martino. His name is Paul Martino, and he wanted to make the movie about his cousin (Tommy Martino, the gambler). Paul called me up on the phone years after the high school reunion and said, "I remember you told me you're a writer." I told Paul that I'm not just a writer, I grew up in the same neighborhood in Philly as your main characters did. I'm the perfect writer for your story.

Sheryl Aronson: You had mentioned you were also a basketball player.

Andy Callahan: That's right. I played basketball growing up and throughout high school. One of the themes of the movie is about the teamwork that the characters learned as kids — relying on your teammates to help beat your opponents. They took that same philosophy, but applied it to a criminal enterprise as adults.

Sheryl Aronson: Please talk about your professional career as a writer.

Andy Callahan: This is my first feature film. I have another feature film in development right now. For the past five years I've been working in network television. I've written for *Taken* [on] NBC and *Lethal Weapon* on FOX.



Sheryl Aronson: Please tell everyone the plot to the story to *Inside Game*.

Andy Callahan: This is about the true story of the NBA betting scandal. Tim Donaghy, the referee, got caught betting on his own games. That story ended when Donaghy and two co-conspirators were imprisoned for his crimes. This is the rise and fall crime story of three guys who came up with a plan to bet on games to make money, but it didn't work.

Sheryl Aronson: How did you research the movie?

Andy Callahan: One of the three co-conspirators is Tommy Martino. Tommy Martino was my source for the movie. We had a standing phone date every Tuesday afternoon for about two or three hours lasting a couple of months. He lived in Philadelphia and I lived in LA. The story was public, so there was a lot of information out there on how the story went down. I wanted to get his version of the story and put that on the page. Tommy is a super colorful character. The more he talked, the more I loved his narrative voice.

Sheryl Aronson: How did you write this into the script?

Andy Callahan: So in the movie Tommy Martino, the gambler, narrates the story.

Sheryl Aronson: What is the genre of the film?

Andy Callahan: It's a crime drama that's very exciting. Once these guys realized they have an opportunity to make a bunch of money by breaking the law, things happened really fast, then their scheme starts to fall apart. That also contributed to the suspense.

Sheryl Aronson: Who are the actors in *Inside Game*?

Andy Callahan: The three principal actors are Will Sasso who plays BaBa Battista, Scott Wolf who plays Tommy Martino, and Eric Mabius who plays Tim Donaghy. All three actors do a tremendous job bringing the characters to life. The movie has played at a few festivals and the actors have won the best ensemble cast awards.

Sheryl Aronson: How long did it take you to write this movie?

Andy Callahan: I wrote the first draft in nine months, including my research with Tommy. Then it took six years to put it into production. It's an independent movie, so there were a lot of starts and stopping.

Sheryl Aronson: Who produced the film? How did you get the writing gig?

JUST MERCY - Andrew Lanham - Co-writer with Destin Daniel Cretton, (Director) (starring Michael B. Jordan, Jamie Foxx, Rob Morgan, Tim Blake Nelson, Rafe Spall, and Brie Larson.) It tells the true story of Walter McMillian, who with the help of young defense attorney Bryan Stevenson appeals his murder conviction to get off of death row.

Sheryl Aronson: What is the film about? And who are the actors in the film?

Andrew Lanham - *Just Mercy* is an adaptation of the book written by Bryan Stevenson and it stars Michael B. Jordan and Jamie Foxx. It's a true story of Bryan Stevenson's (played by Michael B. Jordan) case, where he represents a man wrongfully accused on death row, played by Jamie Foxx.



Production Still *Just Mercy*

Sheryl Aronson: How much research went into writing this movie?

Andrew Lanham: We did a lot of research via Bryan Stevenson who played a vital part in the writing of the story. He was with us every step of the way. Bryan runs The Equal Justice Initiative and is currently one of the most prominent lawyers for being against the death penalty. There were a lot of conversations and interviews with him.

Sheryl Aronson: The subject matter for the film is very loaded, volatile and personal. How did you develop the characters?

Andrew Lanham: With most writing projects, the writer is approaching the story with the question, how can I bring my personal voice to the story. The characters in *Just Mercy* do not have my own personal voice or my experience. But I had a wonderful relationship with Destin Cretton, co-writer and director. I felt I could help him bring the truth of his vision alive to the screen. Destin's truth matched the spirit and accuracy of interpretation that is vibrant and alive in Bryan Stevenson's work. So for me, bringing my voice to the characters wasn't as important as it was how could I be of service to represent the real voices of each person.

Sheryl Aronson: What do you want the audience to walk away with after seeing *Just Mercy*?

Andrew Lanham: Change in our justice system in America can feel really slow, but Bryan Stevenson infused his message with the spirit of understanding, while also educating in a deep and powerful way.

Sheryl Aronson: Talk about working with Jamie Foxx. How did he bring his character to life?

Andrew Lanham: Jamie is always so amazing to watch. It's a thrill and an honor to watch an actor of his caliber bring to life words that you have some part in creating. This performance is a special one by Jamie because he embraces the essence of this man's pain.

Sheryl Aronson: The film is a docudrama. What is the dramatic arc of the story?

Andrew Lanham: Bryan Stevenson, (his character in the film), as well as in real life, is very focused on giving representation to people who remain voiceless in our country. The arc of the story is the road to justice. Through Jamie's character, there is one example of justice being served, but I also hope that the film gives a picture toward the ways the justice system fails people, too.

Sheryl Aronson: What do you walk away with as a writer?

Andrew Lanham: It's impossible not to walk away changed from any job that you put your heart and soul into. With this particular project it's interesting because the writing was less personal. It focused more on the pursuit of justice. The amount of information that I learned about the terrible state of affairs taking place in our country, and how as a white person I take my privilege for granted . . . was very troubling. Yet the movie offers hope and justice being served against all odds. That's the overall message of *Just Mercy*.

HUSTLERS - Lorene Scafaria - Writer/Director (Starring Constance Wu, Jennifer Lopez, and Julia Stiles) *Hustler* follows a crew of savvy former strip club employees who band together to turn the tables on their Wall Street clients.

Sheryl Aronson: You both wrote and directed *Hustlers*. How did this opportunity come to be?

Lorene Scafaria: I was first paid for writing before I was offered the directing role. I had to work my way into the director's chair. This is my 3rd film that I have directed.

Sheryl Aronson: *Hustlers* is an interesting movie, because female strippers are the main characters, and are the heroes of the story. How did you develop these characters?

Lorene Scafaria: The story is based on an article in *New York Magazine* that was written by Jessica Pressler. The article was already like a movie because of the incredible story. These women were strippers before the financial crisis. When the financial crisis hit, their world got turned upside down. They ended up turning to crime where they drugged and robbed former Wall Street clients.

Sheryl Aronson: How did you take this subject matter and create characters that were sympathetic, strong, and engaging?

Lorene Scafaria: I took the stand not to judge them. The story certainly takes a look at what is right and what is wrong, and how greed does take over. I wanted to explore where they started from - who they were in present day by looking at the different relationships in regards to their job, and how they related to their bodies. It was a different time, so I wanted to have this period piece show what it was like in New York, pre-crash. Strip clubs were the hottest clubs in town. Their industry really did change when the crash happened. I wanted to tell the human story about friendship, camaraderie, sisterhood, and capitalism.

Sheryl Aronson: How was your experience working with Jennifer Lopez?

Lorene Scafaria: It was a dream. Jennifer was who I pictured from the very beginning as the character Ramona. Jennifer's smart, she's hands on, and she was one of the producers. So we talked at length about the themes in movie. To see her as Ramona was really a thrill. I had been a big fan of hers for so long. I describe working with Jennifer like I was at the gym with her and she was this athlete who was bench pressing, and I kept putting the weights on the bar. She handled everything I gave her.

Sheryl Aronson: What has been your experience as a female writer/director in Hollywood? Talk about your successes and challenges.

Lorene Scafaria: I don't think about myself as a female when I'm directing . . . I'm just being myself.

Sheryl Aronson: Meaning . . . you're just being an artist.

Lorene Scafaria: Whether I'm being a writer or director, there is a certain amount of winning people over. On the set, I do my job as I interact with the crew and actors without gender being an issue. Where it comes into play more often is when I am talking with financiers. That's when I feel most like being a female is a problem. They might see me for example . . . like a daughter asking to borrow the car. That's the time I'm most reminded of my gender.

It is worth talking about, however, how few female directors there are. I grew up watching Penny Marshall, so she was a good role model for me. I didn't distinguish in my mind whether a director was female or male.



Sheryl Aronson: Congratulations to you for writing and directing *Hustlers*. A lot of writers are directing now in order to have more control over their story.

Lorene Scafaria: I really love seeing something through from beginning to the end.

Sheryl Aronson: What do you want people to know about *Hustlers* that is important to you?

Lorene Scafaria: It's choose your own adventure. I enjoyed seeing it with audiences in the theaters and watching reactions. Many kinds of people enjoyed the movie. There's something for everyone. I think people will come away with a certain amount of empathy for these characters. I tried to look at culture in general and what we value regardless of gender. The relationships between the women enriches the story. The movie is a very entertaining ride that is worth exploring.

LIKE A BOSS - Sam Pitman & Adam Cole-Kelly - Writers (starring Tiffany Haddish, Rose Byrne, and Salma Hayek.) It is an upcoming American comedy, two friends create and build a successful beauty company from the ground up, but a buyout offer begins to test their friendship. Suddenly, all of the differences that made them a perfect match put them at war, both professionally and personally. The film will be released on January 10, 2020, by Paramount Pictures.

Sheryl Aronson: I just saw the previews for *Like A Boss* the other night. It looks hilarious. I love movies that feature strong, successful women. However, you tell your story with a comedic flair. There are some very big stars in your film. Tell everyone who is in your film and what is the film about?

Adam Cole-Kelly: Tiffany Haddish and Rose Byrne are best friends who own a beauty company. Salma Hayek wants to buy out their company that they started together. This causes a problem in their friendship.

Sam Pitman: Billy Porter and Jennifer Coolidge are also in the movie and lots of great supporting actors.

Sheryl Aronson: Do you both primarily write comedy?

Sam Pitman: ONLY!

Adam Cole-Kelly: Exclusively!

Sheryl Aronson: Tell me about how you two met and started writing together?

Sam Pitman: Wow. How long do you have? (laughs) I'm going to give you the shortest version possible. When I was in college, I was dating a girl. I broke up with her before we went abroad. I went to Florence.

She went to Seville. I wanted to go visit her because things weren't going great for me in Florence. I called her up and she told me I could come, but only as a friend. I thought she was just protecting herself but when I got there we would start the relationship again. However, when I got there I found out she was with a new guy . . . and that was Adam.

Adam Cole-Kelly: It's a true story. Of course Sam was a bit chilly toward me when we first met. However, I stayed close with some of Sam's friends from college. I ended up moving to NY and doing standup comedy. I worked for Comedy Central.

Sam Pitman: I was doing the assistant thing in LA then I moved back to New York. I was looking for connections with people who were into comedy, and Adam and I reconnected. We began writing together and decided to do it as a career.

Sheryl Aronson: Is this your first feature film?

Adam Cole-Kelly: This is our first feature film. We lived in New York and worked on a lot of comedies. We moved out to LA in 2012.

Sam Pitman: We've probably done a lot of punch up work on 75% of the comedies coming out as films. However, this is our very first film from beginning to end that we wrote.

Sheryl Aronson: How did you come up with the idea for this movie, *Like A Boss*?

Sam Pitman: For us, we were very interested in writing a relationship movie about two best friends, and what happens when your lives are intertwined and are totally codependent on each other. Then you start to fight. You're not married . . . you're just best friends. Then we added that they work together. We pitched that idea to Tiffany Haddish and she really liked it. Then we sold it to Paramount. It went from pitch to production in about one year.

Adam Cole-Kelly: It's very rare for that to happen. With Tiffany Haddish added to the pitch, it certainly made it easier to sell. We felt very fortunate to get to work with her, especially during the writing process. It helped to have her comedic voice added to script as well.

Sheryl Aronson: Were you on set when the movie was being filmed. If so, was improvisation done as well when shooting the scenes?

Adam Cole-Kelly: A little bit of both. Salma, Rose, and Tiffany are so talented and funny. They were able to take what was written on the page and make it their own.

Sam Pitman: The shooting days were also tight and long, so when the actors weren't filming, we were meeting with them and listening to their notes. We tried to incorporate their personalities into the material.

Sheryl Aronson: How do you two work together? What's your chemistry like?

Sam Pitman: We procrastinate a lot. (Don't all writers? LOL)

Adam Cole-Kelly: We do everything possible that is not writing.

Sam Pitman: It's like we're in a marriage. We've been writing together for ten years. We're both married but spend more time together than with our spouses. Our process is if we don't agree on something, while it might take longer to find something we agree on, we'll take the time.

Adam Cole-Kelly: It's usually a losing battle when you try to convince the person why the idea that they didn't like, they should like. There are infinite possibilities for everything so rather than digging in your heels, why not move on to something we both can agree on?

Sam Pitman: Oddly, we find something better when we do this. We spend a lot of time together outlining, plotting. When we write pages, we split things up. We write on our own then we send each other pages. Make notes to each other then send it back.

Sheryl Aronson: It's a long and difficult process. You have to be very disciplined.

Sam Pitman: Sitting in front of that blank page on Day One . . .



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Adam Cole-Kelly: We've written over 15 scripts, but every single time we ask ourselves . . . how have we ever done this before? This is impossible!

There's no way we're going to do it. Then you write the first word and slowly the process begins again.

Sam Pitman: When we finish a script, we ask ourselves . . . how did we do this?

When did we do this?
(we are all laughing)

Sheryl Aronson: How was it working with Salma Hayek?

Adam Cole-Kelly: She was amazing. Our director had an existing relationship with her, so Miguel talked with her about the role. We worked very closely with her and were blown away by her genius.

Sam Pitman: She's so funny.

Sheryl Aronson: I saw the previews and the scene with someone bouncing off her breasts is hysterical.

Adam Cole-Kelly: That was all Selma. That wasn't any props. (Laughs.)

Sheryl Aronson: How do men write a movie for and about women?

Sam Pitman: It's like writing about any subject when you're writing . . . we talked with our wives. We talked to female friends and female writers. Who knows if we are the right people to write this script. It's all about listening to people and being real. And listening to our actors, too. If Tiffany and Rose didn't feel the lines were authentic, then we'd change them.

Adam Cole-Kelly: I would ask them then, how would you say it? Then

rewrite the lines. You learn very quickly not to be too attached to the lines that you write.

Sam Pitman: We wanted to write a movie that had nothing to do with men.

Adam Cole-Kelly: Men play almost no role in this movie.

Sam Pitman: We asked our wives questions like what would you and your best friends fight about? What are the things that shake you up?

Sheryl Aronson: Where was the movie filmed?

Adam Cole-Kelly: It was filmed in Atlanta.

Sheryl Aronson: Is there anything else you would like everyone to know about *Like A Boss*?

Adam Cole-Kelly: It's being released January 10th, 2020. Everyone should go see it.

Sam Pitman: It's a positive story about female friendship.

Adam Cole-Kelly: Celebrating women ...

Sam Pitman & Adam Cole-Kelly: Go see it.



Photo Credits:
1. Adam Mervis, Writer (*21 Bridges*); and Sheryl Aronson
2. Lorene Scafaria, Writer/Director (*Hustlers*)
3. Andy Callahan, Writer (*Inside Game*)
4. Adam Cole-Kelly, Sam Pitman, Writers (*Like A Boss*)
5. Andrew Lanham, Writer (*Just Mercy*)
6. Scott Alexander, Writer (*My Name is Dolemite*)
Photos: Adam Pine

The Ultimate Collection of "Selfies" by America's Leading Artists: from 1901 - 2015 *Eye to I: Self Portraits from the National Portrait Gallery at the Boca Raton Museum of Art*



The term self-conscious takes on a whole new meaning in today's social media era. At a time when millions of selfies are posted every day and identity is proving to be more fluid, this exhibition from the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery shines a new light on self-portraiture and representation. The show was created to commemorate the National Portrait Gallery's 50th anniversary, celebrating the artists who make the NPG Collection so extraordinary. *Eye to I* brings together the work of major artists of the 20th and 21st centuries at the Boca Raton Museum of Art. The powerful works are from every decade, starting in 1901 and continuing through 2015. The Museum plans to showcase this indelible exhibition through online and digital programs, as a way to be of service to the community.

Self-Portrait with Rita, by Thomas Hart Benton, Oil on canvas (c. 1924), National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jack H. Mooney