

EXCLUSIVE

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Scribe adapts 'Wings' for 'Ice Age' helmer Knighton also adapting own memoir for bigscreen

By Gregg Goldstein



Knighton

Blindness is usually considered a handicap, but for screenwriter Ryan Knighton, it's been a blessing in disguise.

"He's learned to use creativity as a way to fight against isolation," says Jodie Foster, who advised Knighton as he adapted his memoir "Cockeyed" for the bigscreen. "He really understands frailty, human interconnectedness and absurdity of spirit."

Those abilities will come in handy for his biggest assignment yet: adapting Paul Hoffman's tome "Wings of Madness: Alberto Santos-Dumont and the Invention of Flight" for the live-action feature debut of "Ice Age" helmer Chris Wedge.

The Wedge Works World Wide biopic will chronicle Santos-Dumont's spectacular balloon and dirigible trips above turn-of-the-century Paris, and how a new form of international celebrity sparked his descent from eccentricity into madness. The banner's Nikki Levy is overseeing the project, developed with discretionary funds from Fox's first-look deal with Wedge Works.

Handing such a visually driven project to a vision-impaired scribe might seem counterintuitive to some, but the 39-year-old husband and father -- who began going blind at age 18 -- says his condition helped him become a better writer.

"Ironically, the reading of a script is more of a full experience for me because my life and world is mediated by description, not seen images," says Knighton, whose punk, tattooed look is offset by a Canadian politeness and sharp wit evident in his work.

"I literally write aloud. My stupid computer voice reads back what I write, so I hear it only aloud, never in my head. I've read that Andrew Sorkin writes speaking his dialogue. It is evidenced in anything he lends his ear to. I get that heart and soul. Dialogue is music first. Not information."

Knighton, who continues to teach contempo literature at North Vancouver's Capilano U., has had a busy 2011, working with Mandalay Pictures, FilmColony, Epoch Films and producer Anne Carey. His adaptation of his 2006 memoir led to a meeting and friendship with Foster, who became attached to direct "Cockeyed" in 2009, but bowed out this summer after realizing she'd lensed three other family-based dramedies in a row. Producers Susan Cartsonis ("What Women Want") and Jody Hotchkiss (who reps both Knighton and Hoffman) are hunting for a new helmer.

Foster enjoys the give-and-take of their work.

"He loves the back and forth of good, old-fashioned wit, especially when discussing something as serious as a heart attack," Foster says. "Since working together, we've added funny emails and too many beers to our relationship."

Knighton's memoir inspired Scott Smith to helm a feature documentary about him, "As Slow as Possible" (which made the film fest rounds in 2008), and has led to speaking engagements that supplement his teaching gig. "Cockeyed" also led to a Tribeca Sloan Filmmaker Fund award, a Sundance Screenwriter's Lab fellowship and his 2010 follow-up memoir "C'mon Papa: Dispatches From a Dad in the Dark" .



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His Sundance and Tribeca-developed script proved an attractive calling card for two bigscreen adaptation assignments this year: Troy Cook's comic crime novel "47 Rules of Highly Effective Bank Robbers" for Mandalay's Cathy Schulman and FilmColony's Richard Gladstein; and Glenn Rockowitz's humor-filled cancer memoir "Rodeo in Joliet" for Second and 10th's Carey and Epoch Films' Mindy Goldberg.

Both projects gave Knighton a chance to showcase his irreverent sense of humor. Recalls Gladstein with a laugh: "I got a new office. He walked in and goes, 'Nice new digs.' It totally threw me."

On a recent trip to New York to discuss a potential TV project, Knighton seemed easygoing and comfortable in his tattooed skin. Not only has he adjusted to late-in-life blindness ("It's my brand," he wisecracks), his condition seems to have helped put the vagaries of Hollywood into perspective.

"If any of the films don't get made, it's OK," he notes. "I don't see them anyway."

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