



After nearly ten years of writing and promoting his screenplays, Forest Lake native Brent Boyd has struck gold with *Aurora Borealis*.

Hollywood Ending

Brent Boyd looks to home for inspiration and lands his big-screen break.

By Adam Wahlberg

In August of 1997, before my high school friend and then-roommate Brent Boyd moved from Minneapolis to LA to make it big as a screenwriter, I threw him a Hollywood-themed party and asked each guest to bring a treasured movie scene to screen. Brent, appropriately, chose one from *Barton Fink*, the Coen brothers' film about a tormented writer.

In the scene, Barton meets with a demented studio boss, who tells him, "We're expecting great things." At the end of the evening, I presented Brent with a director's chair with his name silk-screened on the back.

Cut to December of 2003. Brent and I are each eating a mountain of a sandwich at the Corned Beef House in Toronto when he peers through the window and says, "Hey, look, there goes my movie."

Sure enough, production vehicles for *Aurora Borealis* wheel by as a road scene is filmed with the two leads, Joshua Jackson of *Dawson's Creek* and Oscar-nominee Juliette Lewis. Brent wrote the script, and I'm visiting him while the film is being shot.

The film follows a twenty-five-year-old Minneapolitan, played by Jackson, whose father's death upturns his life and leaves him adrift. He reconnects with his Alzheimer's-ridden grandfather, played by Donald Sutherland, and gains a fresh outlook in the form of free spirit Lewis. The movie is filled with local references, including shots of the Mall of America and the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, music by Bob Dylan and Paul Westerberg, and possibly the world's first utterance of the phrase "Holy Hrbek."

The poignant, wry indie was one of the breakout films at TriBeCa in 2005 and won a slew of awards on the festi-

val circuit. It opened on the coasts in mid-September and began screening in the Twin Cities on September 22 at Edina Cinema.

"A big part of my writing this script came from missing Minneapolis," says Brent. "There's a line in the movie about going away and [Lewis's character] says, 'You can always come back. You have to go other places to find out what a great place this is.' I wanted the script to have a lot of Minneapolis in it—scenes at the 400 Bar, the skyways, Matt's—because I was very much thinking of home when I wrote it."

In high school in Forest Lake, Brent was the dreamy drama guy—intense, charismatic, and able to get girls with a Fonzie snap. He had a gaudy GPA and a natural presence onstage, acting in school productions of *The Rainmaker*, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, and *Once Upon a Mattress*. In college, he became interested in playwriting and, after graduation, was awarded an assistantship to the University of Georgia's master of fine arts program. He relocated to Athens, but left after a year. "I just felt I could be more productive writing plays on my own than taking costume classes," he says. "It wasn't a good fit."

Returning to the Twin Cities in 1994, he worked a day job at the downtown Barnes & Noble and had some success in the local theater scene. A

couple of his plays were given professional readings at The Playwrights' Center, but he soon realized he'd rather be Quentin Tarantino than August Wilson. "The problem with playwriting is you pour your life into something for a year and you think when it opens western civilization will never be the same, and then ten people show up," he says. "I just thought it would be nice to have an audience."

"Plus, this was around the time of *Pulp Fiction*, *Fargo*, and *The Usual Suspects*. Those movies got me excited about film."

He enrolled in a screenwriting class at The Playwrights' Center and moved in with me. His dedication to his craft was impressive. No matter what he was doing or how late he got home, he ended each day at his Macintosh Classic. Before long, he finished his first film script, *The Good Stuff*. "It's my entry into the five-guys-sitting-around-talking genre," he says. "It's boy-meets-girl, boy-gets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-doesn't-know-what-in-the-hell-he's-doing."

He showed the script to Tom Pope, his instructor at The Playwrights' Center. Pope literally wrote the book on screenwriting—*Good Scripts, Bad Scripts: Learning the Craft of Screenwriting Through 25 of the Best and Worst Films in History*—and lives, as Brent says, "the type of life all screenwriters from Minnesota want. He's well respected in Hollywood, but lives on a lake in town." Pope loved the script and sent it to his manager in LA. Not long after, a voice on our answering machine invited Brent to the West Coast.

"Since I had this script, I thought when I arrived that someone
continued on page 324

Profile

continued from page 267

would meet me at the airport with a bag of money," Brent says, laughing. Instead, he got a cold floor to crash on, courtesy of an actor friend.

Once Brent moved out to LA, Pope's manager took him on as a client and helped him get an agent (you need both—managers oversee careers, agents get jobs; both take a cut), but scripts by new writers don't sell overnight. In need of an income, he went to a familiar place, Barnes & Noble, then leased a studio apartment.

The strength of *The Good Stuff* script got him meetings with studio execs. But as the weeks turned into months, he felt he was spinning his wheels. He'd hear, "We love your script, we definitely want to make it, but maybe we could"—take your pick—"make the man a woman, the dog a cat, the comedy a drama . . ." Everything was communicated in cryptic Hollywood doublespeak, which he wasn't fluent in at the time.

"No one prepares you for how to sell your stuff when you come out here," he says. "That's something I've learned over the years. I don't know that I'm a better writer than I was back then, but I'm a better salesman."

Not all the meetings were a drag. There was the time Brent pitched a book adaptation to Billy Crystal, an experience he shared in an e-mail to friends:

"I was really nervous. I've had meetings with big producers and directors before, but none of them was ever Billy Crystal. Unless you are one of a handful of people on the planet, if you are in a room with him you are NOT the funniest person in that room.

I made Billy laugh right away, and that took a lot of pressure off me. He liked the pitch. He asked questions. The Castle Rock exec seemed to like it as well, and that's even more important because he's the guy ponying up the cash.

I'm going to incorporate their ideas into a new treatment, and I may have to go through this

whole thing again. It's a pain-in-the-ass process, but I'm feeling confident about it today.

So I guess this is an anticlimactic message—"It went great! We get to wait some more! Whoo-hoo!" But that's how it works. If it happens at all, it happens slowly. And nothing may ever come of the meeting."

Even though nothing ever did come of that meeting, Brent "rented" *The Good Stuff* script to an independent producer in 1998 and got \$5,000 for it—big money isn't involved unless a script is made into a movie, and this one wasn't; most aren't. Buoyed by the interest, he quit his day job to spend more time writing. During the next couple of years, he banged out several scripts and story treatments, but nothing sold. Yet he wouldn't go back to the bookstore and lose precious writing time. Instead, when he was desperate to swing rent, he read scripts for James Cameron's Lightstorm Productions, getting \$50 a pop to give a first-look "yay" or "nay" to unsolicited screenplays. "This was right after *Titanic*, so I was reading a lot of scripts with water in them," Brent says.

In 2000, he got close again, selling a script to Paramount called *Love Simple*, about a guy who gets dumber the deeper in love he falls. But again, the movie wasn't made. He found himself at age thirty-one with a stalled career and a jar of change for a 401(k). Doubts crept in. He knew he had the talent to make it, but wondered if his ambitions came at too high a cost. "I was living this monastic lifestyle in a fifteen-by-twenty-five-foot room where I both lived and worked," he says. "It was getting to me."

Then 9-11 happened. Alone and half a country away from the people he loved, it was all he could do to keep himself from heading to LAX and returning home. But that time of intense reflection provided the seeds of inspiration. "I thought if I was going to be away from my family and friends, I should at least write something that means something to me,"

he says. He began noodling around with an idea that had been living in his mind for years.

Brent created the characters for *Aurora Borealis* in 1993, drawing on his memories of watching his grandfather succumb to Alzheimer's. He knew he could write a good script based on that relationship, but thought the tone would be too Eugene O'Neill for Hollywood. And he didn't exactly have a reputation in town for dramatic work. "I had sold *Love Simple* and what happens after you sell a big, dumb comedy is every meeting you go to is about a big, dumb comedy," he says. "I didn't think I'd be able to sell a bittersweet family story."

Still, he needed to try. He spent the first part of 2002 writing and revising the script and, by summer, it was ready to be submitted to studios. The response was immediate and enthusiastic. "What I got caught up in [previously] was trying to give execs something they wanted," he says. "The thing that led to any sort of success was when I wrote something personal. Every aspect of it is me—the story, the characters, the dialogue. That's what made the difference."

Entitled Entertainment, makers of critical favorites *Levity* and *13 Conversations About One Thing*, made the best offer, and the deal closed in a few months. Brent was in Toronto a year later.

Which is where I met up with him. After our corned beef feast, we visit the set for the shooting of one of the most emotional scenes of the movie in which Jackson is implored by his brother to quit wasting his life and do something to honor the memory of their deceased father. As the camera rolls, I glance at Brent. His mouth tightens and his eyes moisten. Then the director yells cut. Brent smiles, nods at me, and takes a seat in his chair. On the back it reads, AURORA BOREALIS - SCREENWRITER - BRENT BOYD. ▲

Adam Wahlberg is the executive editor of Minnesota Law & Politics.