

UPTOWN

JUSTIN TREVOR WINTERS

THE HOLLYWOOD
SCREENWRITER GETS
USED TO THE DESERT



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Justin Trevor Winters

Hollywood
writer—and
rejection
expert
extraordinaire

BY SUSAN LANIER-GRAHAM
PHOTOS BY CARL SCHULTZ





Justin Trevor Winters is a really funny man. The Hollywood storyteller—known in the industry for his dramedy, and by his wife as an “expert bullshitter”—had dreams of starring on the silver screen. “But I quickly learned I was maybe the world’s worst actor,” explains Winters over a late night Sazerac. That realization led him to screenwriting. Today, the writer continues his love-hate relationship with words from both Los Angeles and Phoenix.

A PRODUCT OF THE '80S

Winters was born in December 1980 just outside of Chicago. Even though the family of four, plus their trusty golden retriever, only remained in Illinois until Winters was 3, he grew up with a family that “loved Da Bears, Da Bulls, Da Cubs and Da Blackhawks.” Winters says his life was idyllic after the family moved to Moraga in Northern California in 1984.

“It was a small town,” he explains. “As a kid, I of course wanted to get the hell out of Dodge, but looking back I now realize how good I had it.”

Following high school, Winters headed for University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB) to study film. Although he says the Film & Media program at UCSB is extremely competitive and he is honored to be an alum, he was sold on UCSB “when I found out I could watch movies for four years—in my board shorts—with sand in between my toes.”

The four years at UCSB helped Winters fall in love with the film industry.

“I was enraptured by the entirety of the industry,” he explains.

But during that quest for how to spend the rest of his life in the film industry, he discovered writing.

“I’m not sure if I found writing or writing found me,” says Winters, laughing. “We’re in it now, a love-hate relationship to end all love-hate relationships. I love standing upon the wonderfully high peaks of my megalomania, but spend most of my time in the deepest of deep valleys of self-loathing. I love writing, but it’s a very, very, very difficult profession where

you deal with rejection on a daily basis... more rejection in a day than most people will experience in a lifetime.”

IN THE BEGINNING

As with most people who want to succeed in the film industry, Winters graduated and moved to Los Angeles. His primary goal at that time was to become a screenwriter.

“Upon finishing my first feature-length screenplay, I felt I achieved that goal... well, creatively speaking, at least. I soon realized, however, that writing a screenplay was only half the battle and if I wanted to be a working writer, I needed to learn the business side of the industry, as well.”

Just about the time he came to that realization, he was hired as an assistant at Innovative Artists Agency, and later also worked for Creative Artists Agency. There, he worked alongside agents, managers, lawyers, investors, producers and studio execs. He also collaborated with actors, directors, screenwriters and authors. The list reads like an Oscar After-Party—Kathryn Bigelow, Stuart Beattie, Peter Bogdanovich, John Cameron Mitchell, Tim Robbins, Brad Pitt, Jon Heder, Joel David Moore.

Winters spent his time learning what he calls “the industry as a whole.” At both agencies, “I read scripts, wrote coverage, and recommended potential clients. I gained a vast understanding of the interworkings of the screenwriting trade and the industry as a whole. I also made oatmeal with exactly three banana slices, a dash of raw organic agave, and just the right amount of flaxseed. I ducked out of the way of flying staplers. I worked 16-hours days and weekends. I picked up laundry and babysat latchkey kids. I worked in and survived the physically and emotionally draining trenches with countless other assistants, and made invaluable connections and relationships that I still utilize today.”

Winters says this was the most crucial part of getting into the industry. For

someone who wants to be involved in the film industry in any way, they must work within the industry, whether at an agency, production company or studio, because you have to get your foot in the door.

CRAFTING A SCREENWRITING CAREER

With more knowledge of the industry under his belt, Winters set out to concentrate full-time on his writing love affair. He says the one thing that his time at the agencies showed him is that, “as a writer, you should never sacrifice the integrity of the story you want to tell, but you sure as hell better be conscious of the fact that at the end of the day, this is a business. And in my case, I believe it was this knowledge that helped me get my very first script optioned and produced.”

In fact, Winters now has a variety of products in a variety of stages. Currently, he has three feature dark comedies, four one-hour dramas, two half-hour single-camera comedies, a comedy panel quiz show, a feature adaptation of a short story, a biopic, a web series, and an animated short in the works.

KILLING WINSTON JONES is a feature-length film currently in the final stages of post-production. The film, directed by Joel David Moore, has been Winters' passion since he came up with the idea in 2005 while reading the Hollywood trades. He read about the death of an actress from the 1950s, but had no idea who she was despite having been a film student his entire adult life. Winters wondered, “How do you leave a legacy that will withstand time?”

The movie stars Richard Dreyfuss as Winston Jones (the retired Boys' PE teacher) who desperately wants to leave a legacy at his once-beloved junior high school. The perfect opportunity comes when the school sets out to build a new gymnasium. The only problem is that the current principle (Tyler Labine) was one of Jones' former chubby students and hates his former PE teacher. He decides

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the gym will be named in memorium. So, the competition is once again on between Jones and his old rival Washington Carver, the Girls' PE teacher, played by Danny Glover. The two men compete this time, however, to see who can kill himself first, and it turns both men's families upside down. The movie also stars Danny Masterson, Jon Heder, Aly Michalka, Lesley Ann Brandt, Joely Fisher and Lin Shayne.

Winters thought at times the film would never become reality. He says he almost gave up hope when they lost financing for the third time. Little did he know that just 48 hours after that last loss, however, they would get financing. The film is now almost ready for the public. They have had several advanced screenings, and the production company is in talks with distribution companies. The movie should be in theaters later this year.

LIFE IN ARIZONA

Winters is married to Dr. Brittany Nicole Winters, a clinical psychologist who works in the psychology department at Federal Correctional Institute Phoenix. When she took the job in Phoenix six months ago, Winters began his commute between sunny Southern California and, in his words, even sunnier Phoenix. Winters and his wife plan to put roots in Arizona and call the Valley of the Sun home.

Right now, Winters and his wife share their home with a Cavalier King Charles named Hamilton Van Pelt (think Linus and Lucy Van Pelt), love taking long walks, cooking, and whipping up cocktails with the fresh Arizona citrus that grows in their neighbors' yards.

This fall, Winters—who teaches at the UCLA Extension Writers Program—will begin teaching Story Analysis and Writing for TV at Arizona State University.

“Teaching is one of the most rewarding endeavors I’ve ever experienced,” says Winters.

He also works as a writing consultant for such websites as www.creativescreenwriting.com, www.screencraft.org and www.filmcourage.com, plus consults with personal clients.

“I’m a script consultant, a hired gun,” he explains.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Winters encourages those who want careers in film to pursue their dreams. “Never give up. Figure out where your passion lies and develop your craft. You wouldn’t just decide you want to be an Olympic swimmer and win a gold the next day.”

But Winters doesn't discount that it's a difficult field. “Know what you are getting into. It may be hard to believe, but there are very few things glamorous about this profession. Think about this stat: 60,000 new scripts are registered with the WGA every year. Six hundred of those get made. That's one percent. If



you are going to succeed, you have to be the best of the best, and even better than the best of those best. But get out there, do the work, pursue your passion, follow your dreams. Someone's gotta do it!"

Despite the fact that writing is a "terribly challenging profession," Winters explains that optimism is what keeps writers going.

"I'm optimistic that I'll be a successful working writer throughout my career."

While his big goal is to work with actors who share his passion for storytelling, Winters does have some lofty screen-writing dreams—because someone's gotta do it.

"I would love to work with Bill Murray. Would love to have Wes Anderson (*Royal Tenenbaums*) direct one of my films. Would love to co-write a concept with

Charlie Kaufman (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*) and create a show with Vince Gilligan (*Breaking Bad*)."

But his ideal gig? "My dream job would be to cramp Papa Hemingway's style, buy a typewriter, move to a finca in Cuba, and write on the beach all day while sipping daiquiris. Isn't that what every writer wants?"

Until then, he would be happy to create, write and showrun an original one-hour drama or half-hour single-camera comedy.

"I'd like to have that show be a wild success and run for a dozen seasons. That would mean working 24/7 for the next decade or so, but it would also be a retirement plan, and once it was over, then I could go buy the typewriter, finca and daiquiris."

SOME OF JUSTIN TREVOR WINTERS' OTHER PROJECTS:

THE ORDER OF THE BURNING SHIPS, a one-hour drama, thriller, historical fiction he is developing for Rickard Pictures: Upon swearing his oath to a secret society known as "The Order of the Burning Ships," Southern ivy league junior, Danny Warren, becomes entangled in the assassination attempt on President John F. Kennedy. But when President Kennedy miraculously survives, Danny must cover up his involvement and ensure secrecy... or die trying.

THE WHITE KNIGHT OF SOUL, a feature biopic under development for Sobini Films: The true story chronicles the rise and fall of Wayne Cochran... the one they called the "White James Brown"... the one who inspired Elvis to wear jumpsuits... t he one who shellacked, sprayed and greased his blond bouffant pompadour eight inches high... and the one who helped shape an entire generation of music, yet was overlooked by history. This is the forgotten story of the man, the myth, the legend...T he White Knight of Soul!

RANDOM AWESOMENESS, a half-hour multi-cam, unscripted comedy panel quiz show under development for Tremendous Entertainment: A comedy panel quiz show dedicated to higher learning and laughter. It mixes fascinating facts about history, science and pop culture, giving points for being right... but more importantly, for being funny. What type of cracker was invented to keep you from masturbating? What is the average annual income for a stripper in Las Vegas? What nationality are Polar Bears? Tune in for the answers.

THE TRADER, a one-hour drama/thriller currently being shopped to networks: Desperate to survive for his daughter, a renowned transplant surgeon with only six months to live due to renal failure enters the international black market organ trade.