



'It's the words on the page': A former accounting major beats the odds to become an action assignment writer

SOME WRITERS USED last year's strike as a welcome hiatus; others procrastinated. Ryan Condal used the downtime to launch his Hollywood career. The strike was barely over when the sale of Condal's spec, *Galahad*, vaulted him into the lucrative circle of tentpole-movie screenwriters. Quite an impressive feat considering that only six weeks prior, the 29-year-old had been a virtual unknown with few industry contacts.

Growing up in Hasbrouck Heights, N.J., Condal knew he wanted to write. And while J.R.R. Tolkien, Stephen King, Marvel Comics and the *Star Wars* movies got him hooked on the world of fantasy and sci-fi, his parents were more concerned that Condal have a 401(k) and a steady income.

He graduated from Villanova University with a degree in accounting, but it turned out that bean counting was not to be his destiny. For the next six years, he earned a steady living writing ad copy for prescription drug companies. Nights and weekends were reserved for writing screenplays.

"I knew I wasn't that good for a while," Condal says. "I wrote a ton of scripts and read as many as I could get my hands on.... I was trying to learn everything I could." Unlike those who subscribe to the it's-who-you-know theory of breaking in, Condal placed a premium on talent. "My approach was that contacts don't make a difference, it's the words on the page," he says. "The writing must speak for itself."

In October 2006, the fledgling screenwriter relocated to Los Angeles, continuing his day job and making his first strategic Hollywood push: to write a script that would be good enough to win a screenwriting contest. By mid-2007, his crime thriller *Human Resources* became a Nicholl Fellowship semi-finalist and attracted the attention of Adam Marshall, a manager at Energy Entertainment.

The company was looking to sign an action writer, and Condal was looking to be the next James Cameron. When Con-

dal pitched Marshall the outline for his new spec, the manager flipped for it. That idea was *Galahad*, a darkly subversive tale that Condal likens to "a Cormac McCarthy approach to the Arthurian legend."

"I'd always wanted to write an American western set in the age of chivalry," Condal says, though he initially sat on the idea. "They always tell you don't write a period piece; no one's going to want to buy a big-budget script from an unknown."

Unless, of course, that big-budget period piece is a kick-ass actioner that turns a legend on its head. In the script, a knight is framed by his queen for murdering his king and tries to clear himself while on the run through a medieval castle. "It dawned on me that nobody had killed King Arthur before," Condal says. "I wanted to tell a dirty tale with heroes that aren't invincible who fight villains stronger than them."

By this time, the writers' strike had the town on lockdown — except for Condal, who sensed a once-in-a-lifetime window of opportunity. "I was trying to beat the clock, make sure Adam got the script before his employed writers came back," Condal recalls.

Condal sent Marshall the script in early February. Some writers can wait weeks for a response; Condal got one in three hours. "I get an e-mail from Adam," Condal says. "I finished the first act. Arthur's dead. I love this!"

The next few weeks were a whirlwind. Energy signed Condal as a management client and then hooked him up with William Morris agent Aaron Hart. Four days after Hart sent the script out, it was purchased by prodco The Film Depart-



Ryan Condal

ment. No one was more surprised than Condal. "I never expected a sword-and-sandals epic would actually sell. It was meant to be a talent showcase to introduce myself to the town," he says.

Galahad reaped immediate dividends. With *The Dark Knight* and *Ironman* connecting with a need for superheroes in an anxious America, Condal found himself in

the right place at the right time. Producer Nick Wechsler (*The Player*, *North Country*) hired him to adapt the graphic Warren Ellis novel "Ocean," a futuristic, *Abys*s-like thriller set on an icy Jupiter moon, which had been languishing in development hell at Warner Bros.

Once he completes work on *Ocean*, Condal will tackle *Hercules*, a co-production of Spyglass, Radical Comics and Peter Berg's Film 44. Not that landing these plum assignments came easy. It took Condal four meetings and a 40-minute verbal pitch to win *Hercules*. "It's the modern era of assignments," he says. "You have to pitch an entire movie to win a job, and you're often up against five other writers."

Condal is still adjusting to his seemingly instantaneous transformation from lonely spec writer to hired gun with many masters to please. "I've spent eight years in my head trying to come up with stories; now I get to develop these great ideas that I wouldn't have necessarily come up with on my own. With *Galahad*, I wrote the movie I wanted to see. Now, there's a lot more pressure to deliver what they're looking for."

Not that Condal's complaining. "I'm living the dream," he says. "I'm writing the stuff I grew up loving that made me want to write movies." **CS**