

# The Hell of It All Alex Holdridge mines his L.A. struggles for his art

**THERE'S A MOMENT** early on in Alex Holdridge's charming romantic comedy, *In Search of a Midnight Kiss*, where the protagonist, Wilson, a downtrodden screenwriter, contemplates suicide in his friend's bathtub, but decides it's too filthy to do the deed.

The soft-spoken 33-year-old writer and director can laugh now, but the scene reflects his precarious state of mind during a hellish first year in Los Angeles when he had no car, no money and few prospects.

The future had looked a lot brighter back in 2001 when Holdridge completed his first film, *Wrong Numbers*, after four years of stop-and-go production in Austin, Texas. A comedy about a night in the lives of two teen slackers trying to buy beer, it was an immediate hit at the Austin Film Festival.

"When I got home from the first screening, every studio had left a message," Holdridge says. His career seemed poised to take off, and screenwriter Jessica Bendinger (*Bring It On*) took Holdridge under her wing to help him navigate the treacherous Hollywood waters.

Holdridge sought financing to expand the 76-minute *Wrong Numbers* into a full-length feature, but the studios were hesitant to commit. "The first *Harold & Kumar* movie hadn't done well (in theaters), and now the studios weren't sure that an entire movie about two guys trying to buy beer could sell," Holdridge says. Ultimately, Sony's Red Wagon offered a deal — but only if Holdridge was willing to write on spec.

Instead, Holdridge made *Sexless*, which he describes as a "slacker *Annie Hall*," with \$250,000 he'd already raised from local investors. *Sexless* became the only movie to win both the Audience and Jury Award at Austin's SXSW Film Festival, but it never found a distributor. It was now 2003 and Holdridge, who was working menial day jobs between film shoots, was getting restless.

"I was treated very well on the indie circuit, but very quickly, you're back working at Peet's behind the counter," he says.

Holdridge struck out for Hollywood, determined to get *Wrong Numbers* made as a

studio comedy, enduring a series of mishaps that might have discouraged a lesser spirit. He flipped his car during the drive to L.A. (an actual photo of the totaled car appears in *Midnight Kiss*) and in the process destroyed his DV camera. Upon his arrival in L.A. his laptop was stolen (also recreated in *Kiss*), his girlfriend moved to Japan, and — just like his protagonist — Holdridge found himself holed up in a friend's shabby Los Feliz apartment. He was heavily in debt, had no health insurance and only \$150 to his name.

Over the next 18 months, Holdridge eked out a living with a series of odd jobs, including a co-directing gig on the 30<sup>th</sup> *Annual Mrs. America Pageant*. Then, just as he was ready to move forward with the remake of *Wrong Numbers*, Judd Apatow's similarly plotted *Superbad* was announced, and *Numbers* was dead. "I was devastated," Holdridge says. "I didn't know if I had the energy to start over from scratch."

Fate intervened in the form of Robert Murphy, a cinematographer friend who showed up in L.A. with an HD camera in



late December 2005, asking Holdridge if he had anything to shoot. It was the best Christmas gift a fledgling filmmaker could ask for. Over the next two weeks, Holdridge — using his L.A. experiences as inspiration — cranked out the 130-page script that became *Kiss*.

The story, which takes place on New Year's Eve, centers on Wilson's desire to meet a woman he can kiss at midnight. He places a

personal ad on Craigslist and meets Vivian, a tough-talking actress wannabe who's similarly adrift. As they wander the neglected streets of downtown L.A., an intimate connection is made.

"I love downtown. It has this post-apocalyptic grandeur," Holdridge says. "It's the perfect metaphor for L.A. Full of ambition, but has no respect for history."

What was originally conceived as a diatribe against the city (early title: *If L.A. Fell Into the Sea I Wouldn't Miss It*), evolved instead into an offbeat love letter. "I wanted to show how screwed up the town is and how little humanity there is, but I also romanticized the excitement of coming here," Holdridge says.

The lush, soft-focus black-and-white cinematography and lyrical romanticism recalls a blend of *Manhattan* and *Before Sunrise*, updated for the MySpace generation. Pulling together cast and crew from previous collaborations, Holdridge shot the film in two weeks on a \$12,000 budget financed with credit cards. In 2007, IFC acquired the film at the Tribeca Film Festival, and it has opened strong overseas.

At last, Holdridge's career appears to be in full throttle. In the pipeline is an adaptation of Jonathan Ames' novel "Wake Up, Sir!" — which Holdridge will direct — and a suspense thriller to be shot in Paris, using the same indie-film, guerilla-style tactics Holdridge appears most comfortable with.

"I don't need to be rich," Holdridge says. "I just want to be able to pay my rent." **CS**

