



## Jason Reitman flies high with 'Up In the Air'

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JASON REITMAN'S new film, "Up in the Air," is very much of the moment — a dark comedy set against the backdrop of America's ongoing "Great Recession." But the film started its journey from concept to cineplex years before the downsizing, bank collapses, raging unemployment and home foreclosures.

It was in 2002, when things were pretty darn swell with the U.S. economy, that Reitman (who last directed "Juno") stumbled upon the book "Up in the Air," a relatively obscure 2001 novel by Walter Kirn.

Reitman says he was at a West Hollywood bookstore "looking for something to make into a film, because no one would make 'Thank You for Smoking' " at the time. (Reitman's screenplay for the latter was based on a Christopher Buckley political satire about the tobacco lobby.) "I just happened to pick up the book because there was a quote from Buckley on the cover, and it had this interesting cover art.

"Then I read the dust jacket, and it was this story about a guy who fired people for a living and was obsessed with collecting frequent flier miles. And I thought, 'That's a great character.' "

Of course, Reitman, the 32-year-old son of comedy director Ivan Reitman ("Ghostbusters," "Stripes"), eventually did make "Smoking," which premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in 2005, eventually receiving numerous awards, and "Juno," the surprise, Oscar-winning hit in 2007. But "Up In the Air" took longer to bring to the screen and went through so many changes along the way that the film bears only a passing resemblance to Kirn's book.

The heart of the story, however, remains Ryan Bingham (George Clooney), a "human relations" specialist who proudly and happily spends more than 300 days a year on the road downsizing staffs when their own companies don't have the stomach for the task. But for the movie, Reitman heightened Bingham's alienation from the rest of the world and added two key characters: Alex (Vera Farmiga), Bingham's smart, sexy female counterpart, and Natalie Keener (Anna Kendrick), a young newcomer at Bingham's firm who thinks it would be better to fire people via video conferencing.

"It was six years of writing, and it all changed over time," says Reitman, who shares screenplay credit with Sheldon Turner, author of an early draft. "I knew I wanted to do my own things with it, and Alex and Natalie were pretty much inventions from the beginning.

"The usual way I adapt is I'm looking for someone who has the words for something I have been feeling for a long time. Whether I want to tell the story verbatim or whether I just use a few ideas, I'm trying to express something that I've already felt or a question I'm already trying to answer. In the end, it simply becomes an excuse for me to tell my own story."

(Reitman, incidentally, never has been fired but admits he's had to show some people the door over the years — including a 7-year-old girl when he was filming a commercial. "Nothing," he says with a wry grimace, "is more fun than firing a child.")

But while the director was writing his screenplay, the economy was tanking — forcing him to change the story and the film's structure right up to the last minute.

Last winter, Reitman hit the road to scout locations in Detroit and St. Louis, where the economic downturn had hit hard.

"One of the most heartbreaking sights — and I don't know if they left this up as a joke or not — was one office where the only thing left on the wall was the board that had everyone's name and whether they were in the office or not. It just had those names — and everyone was 'out.' "

At that point, Reitman decided to alter his key framing device: scenes in which Ryan Bingham fires people from jobs they have often held for years. "When I started writing the script, I wrote it as a corporate satire," he says. "The firing scenes were humorous, and done with actors. (Then) the world changed on me, and I realized I had to alter those scenes so that they make sense. That was when we came up with the idea of (using) real people. We put ads in the paper in Detroit and St. Louis, saying we were making a documentary about job loss. We brought in real people who had lost their jobs to act on camera."

In the end, only a few of these scenes, emotional high points in the film, were done with professional actors, and Reitman says he was stunned by how forthcoming people were about their job loss.

"I was amazed by how many people of different age, race, gender were willing to speak frankly about what happened," he says. "And what a cathartic experience it was for these people, some of whom had not even told their own spouses how they felt about what had happened and what it was truly like to search for purpose in the middle of your life."

Still, "Up in the Air" remains a comedy, albeit a dark one — something of a cinematic high-wire act in terms of tone, a situation Reitman enjoys embracing.

"If you think about my three movies — the smoking lobby, teenage pregnancy and, now, a professional termination expert — I get excited about humanizing tricky characters and taking on movies that seem tonally impossible," he says.

"Nothing bores me more than a traditional film, traditional characters, traditional genre."

"Up in the Air" has been at the top of the Academy Award list since its debut to rave reviews at the Toronto Film Festival earlier this year — a response that pleases Reitman but doesn't have him rushing out to get a tux for Oscar night. "If I could ask for anything with my movies, with the rest of my career ... I'd like to hold on to the idea that my movies are mirrors. They're not going to tell you what to think but, rather, act like a mirror, so when you get to the end of the movie, you see yourself in it."

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