Growth up in the farm belt town of Terre Haute, Indiana, Christopher Kyle, SOA’92, saw the stages of New York City and the studios of Hollywood as distant planets. He was enchanted by show business early on—which led to starring roles in several school plays—but had no expectation of ever reaching either artistic pinnacle. When he came to study at Columbia in the fall of 1989, Kyle had no idea that he was only a few years away from writing for some of the biggest figures in both arenas. Kyle gained notice this summer with the release of the film K-19: The Widowmaker, which starred Harrison Ford and Liam Neeson and was generally met with strong reviews. The film, a feature film career path he didn’t anticipate, “never happened” so easily. The film didn’t get made, but he started landing other work on a consistent basis and suddenly found success in TV and film, a career path he didn’t anticipate. “I never really wanted to be a screenwriter,” says Kyle. “It just sort of happened.”

Then, a couple of years ago, Kyle was asked to work on a screenplay for a movie being made by fellow Columbia alumnus Kathryn Bigelow, SOA’81, who has also directed films like Strange Days and Point Break. K-19 was to chronicle the true story of a Russian submarine that nearly suffered a nuclear meltdown and barely averted setting off World War III. Kyle was intrigued by the idea of writing a feature film set underwater because he knew the genre and its intimate setting, would require him to call on his experience writing for the theater.

“The nuclear event in the film is only about 30 minutes. That left a lot of room for character and story development,” says Kyle, who focused much of the film on exploring the different leadership styles and political opinions among the crew. What resulted was a unique film told from the Russian perspective. Kyle even traveled with Bigelow to Moscow to meet survivors from the submarine and hear their stories, not noticing that he and the director were especially “moved by the heroism and sacrifices made by the crewmen.”

Back in L.A., Kyle worked closely with Peter Huchthausen, a naval advisor who knew how to help accurately recreate the near meltdown. But collaborating with Bigelow in Moscow was still going to be perhaps most elucidating. “He’s very intelligent. He has a very precise, technical mind. He was a very powerful force on the set in his desire to make sure every detail in the film was accurate,” says Kyle, who notes that he was a bit star struck when first meeting the Indiana Jones and Star Wars veteran, but that Ford quickly became just another person on the pre-production team. “Once we started working, it was all about getting the script and the film done right.”

Busier than ever these days, Kyle will share screenwriting credit on, The Weight of Water, which opens in major cities this fall and is also directed by Bigelow. Though he spends a good deal of time in Los Angeles, he makes frequent trips to Rockland County, N.Y. because the former playwright still feels the need to interact with the theatre scene. “I’m more in life, you should get up and possibly might enjoy doing it now and go do it.” Lucky for Kyle, he stayed in his seat.

Christopher Kyle

BY KRISTIN STERLING

In the weeks immediately preceding September 11 Beau Willimon, CC ’99, SOA ’03, had been traveling through South Africa and was struck by the deep sense of paranoia he saw, stemming from the high rate of crime, the AIDS epidemic and the residual racism of apartheid. Willimon found this to be an eerie preamble for the day to come, stemming from the high rate of crime, the AIDS epidemic and the residual racism of apartheid. Willimon found this to be an eerie preamble for the day to come, stemming from the high rate of crime, the AIDS epidemic and the residual racism of apartheid. Willimon found this to be an eerie preamble for the day to come, stemming from the high rate of crime, the AIDS epidemic and the residual racism of apartheid.

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