

THE SCREENPLAY IS THE THING, YO: David Ayer has risen above his hardscrabble past to become Hollywood's bard of the streets.

luck would turn its barrel on him but certain that it inevitably would, Ayer went back to beating a path through the routine nastiness of the hood. There was nothing else he could do.

That was half a lifetime ago. Today, Ayer, 34, opens the door to his grand Los Feliz home on another brisk Los Angeles day looking very much the survivor—if of a different sort of suffering. Late last night, he finally finished yet another (and, he hopes, the last) rewrite of *S.W.A.T.*, a big-budget remake of the '70s cop TV show, for Columbia Pictures. Standing shirtless in the early afternoon sun, Ayer has the hardened look of an off-duty cop. Six feet two, his tattooed arms muscled, he runs a hand over his military-style buzz cut and groggily says he's heading to the shower to wash off last night's impromptu celebration. It was nothing fancy—just a bar, a buddy, and too many Buds. After writing three distinct versions of the script over the previous six months, Ayer felt he had earned himself a little shore leave from “chair time,” as he calls it. “I feel like I’ve been in a cave,” he says. “When I write, everything just falls apart.”

Considering the cards that he's been dealt, Ayer has had every reason to expect that disarray would always be the norm for him. But he's turned quite a trick: He's spun meager means and little education into a highly paid screenwriting career and a big house in the Hills. After being lauded for his realistic, tough-guy writing on scripts for *U-571* and *The Fast and the Furious*, he landed on the A-list with 2001's *Training Day*, for which Denzel Washington earned an Oscar spouting Ayer's finely crafted mean-streets dialogue. Ayer's services now go for a million dollars a pop. On the surface, his rise to glory seems like a Hollywood cliché, but then, there are actually very few working screenwriters out there with Ayer's true tale of poverty, family tragedy, arrests and probation, and an aimless street life surrounded by

Writing Shotgun

Hollywood's hottest tough-guy screenwriter, David Ayer, takes a ride through the streets that were once his home—and which have become his salvation.

On a crisp day in 1986, David Ayer saw a guy get clipped by a bullet across the street from his house. This was in the heart of South Central, Los Angeles, so it could have been over drugs, a woman, a territory transgression—it doesn't really matter. Ayer rushed over, dropped to his knees, and performed CPR, but the young man soon died in a pool of his own blood. It wasn't the first time Ayer had had to confront the viciousness of urban life or the cruelties of men. Just 17 years old, unsure of when this brutal type of bad

random violence. His has been a life rooted in the grim realities that most college-educated, upper-middle-class screenwriters are hired to re-create—but have to go online to research.

“We are always finding ourselves in projects where we have to write about guns and cops and all the things that Hollywood peddles,” friend and fellow screenwriter Wesley Strick (*The Glass House*, Martin Scorsese’s *Cape Fear*) says of himself and his writing colleagues. “I’m repelled by guns and so are most of my friends. We’ve never held one, much less fired one.”

“I think David’s seen the other side of life that a lot of people may not have seen,” *Training Day* director Antoine Fuqua says. “That gives him a lot of credibility. He’s seen human nature in its rawest form, and if you can write like David can and you can capture it, then I think you’re doing something important.”

At first, not everyone was ready to accept Ayer’s version of realism as accurate. Now cleaned up and dressed, he is shaking his head about the battles he had to fight over his depiction of rogue police squads squeezing inner-city criminals for drugs and money in his script for *Training Day*, which was first circulating before the Rampart scandal broke open in 1999, when dozens of L.A. police officers were implicated in a widespread pattern of misconduct. “People like to hear that you know what you’re talking about, that you know what you’re writing about, that you’re not making it up out of thin air, but, it’s like, they still don’t fucking believe me,” Ayer laughs. “On a lot of shit.” As if to prove himself for yet another audience, he conveniently produces what appears to be a genuine copy of the LAPD handbook to show that the scene in which cop Alonzo Harris forces rookie Jake Hoyt—played by Ethan Hawke (who also earned an Oscar nomination)—to toke up on the beat is not so far-fetched. He points to a page in the “Use of Intoxicants” section that he’s marked with a yellow Post-it—the page where it sanctions the use of drugs on the job (under extreme circumstances).

He smirks and then climbs into his black SUV for an Alonzo Harris-style tour of his old haunts, just a few miles south, but a world away, from where he lives now. “*Training Day* was where I really put it all together,” he says as he

drives. “In essence I was just writing about what I knew.” What he saw, experienced, and heard stories about on these streets provided the factual flavor that gave the spa-weekend set running the show from their plush studio offices something to foam about, and attracted cast members Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, and Washington, as well as the director. “It’s the first thing I read that gave me a real heartbeat,” Fuqua says,



BY LAND AND BY AYER AND BY SEA: The screenwriter tapped into his tour of duty on a submarine to write *U-571* (top), and into growing up in South Central to pen *Training Day*.

“that made me realize that the writer obviously knew what he was talking about.”

Ayer makes a turn onto a street around the corner from his old house on Budlong Avenue, just south of the 10 freeway—an unofficial dividing line between two police precincts that acts, he says, as a no man’s land for drug dealing and for abandoning joy rides—and starts pointing out landmarks like some underworld tour guide, replete with fluent Mexican-idiom Spanish. “This is all Harpys, the neighborhood gang,” he says, nodding toward some graffiti. “See—‘BARRIO HPS?’” A few turns later:

“Right there in front of that bar, this dude got shot. There was blood all over the fucking sidewalk. I’m walking to the bus, like, ‘Did someone drop a Slurpee?’ I used to come here until they firebombed it.” At the next stop sign, he points off to the left. “That was one of the first crack houses in L.A. right there. Motherfuckers would be lined up around the block.”

This scarred and tagged territory was near ground zero for the violent upheaval that followed the Rodney King verdict in April 1992. In fact, when the *Training Day* script was first making the rounds of agents and producers, in 1997, Ayer had been hired to rework an original screenplay called *The Plague Season*, written by novelist and fellow tough James Ellroy. Set for release later this month, the film will evince more of Ayer’s dented dialogue as it ricochets between the cops and perps running the city streets, in a complex tale of police corruption in the days leading up to the riots. The film, now titled *Dark Blue*, stars Kurt Russell and Ving Rhames and is

directed by Ron Shelton, who places the style and tone of Ayer’s scripts in the context of the ’70s, an era full of starkly realistic films like *The French Connection* and *Serpico*. Shelton, who lived in the embattled Rampart division of L.A. himself for 17 years, connects Ayer’s ability to ground the invented in the real to the screenwriting tradition shared by such crime writers as Joseph Wambaugh, an LAPD officer for

more than 13 years who wrote precinct dramas like *The Choirboys* and *The Onion Field*. “I think you can always tell the difference,” Shelton says. “When you read the script [for *Dark Blue*], you knew that David wasn’t making this up. He may be doing what storytellers do—breathe extra life into it—but you don’t live in Dubuque and write that script.”

As it happens, Ayer was born only 250 miles from Dubuque, in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. It was in Miami, Florida, though, when he was just four years old, that he endured his first terrible taste of violence. On Christmas morning that year, he and his mother discovered that his father had placed a bag over his head and suffocated himself. Ayer still lists that day as the worst of his life. A nomadic existence

followed until age 14, when, living outside of Washington, D.C., and having turned into a self-described “piece of shit” who was failing out of school and getting arrested for various thefts, he left home and eventually found his way to South Central, where some cousins took him in, and where he was forced to adapt to an environment struggling with the “neutron bomb” effects of the crack epidemic of the 1980s. “The kids I hung out with in Maryland were bush-league delinquents compared to the homeys,” he notes. (Ayer says he never joined a gang, did drugs, or hurt or killed anyone; when asked if he carried a piece, he responds with an abrupt “No comment.”)

With few options available to him, Ayer made the decision at age 18 to join the Navy. He spent three years as a sonar technician on a nuclear attack submarine stationed around the Pacific on the front lines of the Cold War, but when the Berlin Wall fell, “the fun was over,” so he left the service and found himself back at square one.

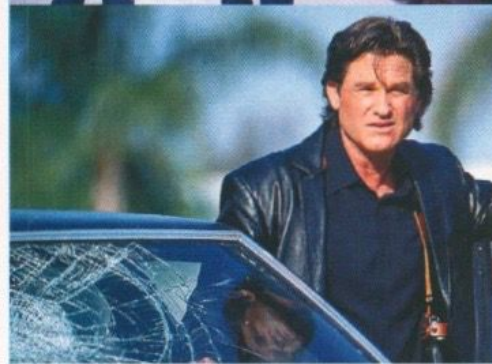
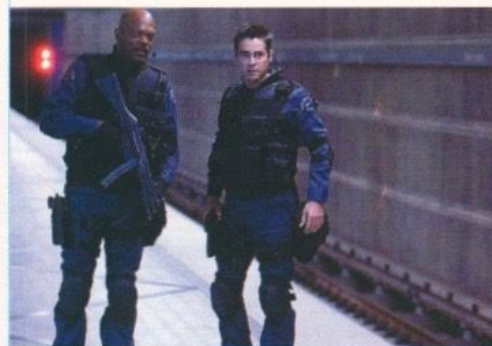
After resettling in L.A. in 1990, Ayer finally found some luck. While working as an electrician with a crew that was fixing up Wesley Strick’s new Hollywood Hills home, Ayer showed the writer a few short stories about sea life that he had written. Strick was impressed enough with the observational detail in the work to give Ayer some screenwriting instruction—and a few years of rent-free living in his guest house. “I think I saw a guy who hadn’t had a break yet in his life,” Strick says, “and also there was just something of the lost boy about him. But he was very sweet and very smart and clearly self-educated.” Ayer seized the chance and muscled out a handful of increasingly more polished scripts (years later, he would hand over a check for the amount he felt he owed Strick, who had never asked for the money).

“I’d be writing, and there would just be this overpowering sense of—for lack of a better word—creation,” Ayer says. “Almost like a runner’s high, I’d get a writer’s high, where a script’s coming together, it’s flowing. It’s almost like I’m channeling. It’s really some profound shit, and it was the first time I ever felt anything like that. My old man, you know, there was a lot of death around me and a lot of destruction. And to be able to sublimate all of that negative experience into something positive is... Thank God.”

“He is that rare artist that has a very specific and strong voice, and he is also pragmatic about applying his vision,” former Warner Bros. production chief Lorenzo di Bonaventura says. “I

think having grown up in tougher circumstances has made him appreciate the opportunity he has and makes him really deliver on it.”

Ayer’s military training—the work ethic, the discipline, the responsibility—has served him well in the sharky waters of Hollywood. His battle-hardened attitude has also gained him entrance to some of the more macho social



THE TRUTH ABOUT COPS AND ROBBERS: Ayer wrote the script for *S.W.A.T.* (top), due this summer, and this month’s *Dark Blue*, which stars Kurt Russell (above).

circles of the industry: He says he’s been doing unofficial work for the military by helping to imagine potential terrorist attack scenarios on the country; he is rumored to have whupped Steven Seagal in a shooting contest; and di Bonaventura, known for his man’s-man outings, has brought Ayer on several white-water-rafting trips. “With where he grew up and his military training, he’s a very valuable guy to have by your side in the middle of challenging circumstances,” di Bonaventura says.

“I just think that all of that kind of stuff comes naturally to Dave,” Strick adds. “He was always the authority on what kind of gun, and how you would get out of this situation, and that’s something Hollywood is never gonna not need. So Dave’ll have work forever.”

Ayer’s clout is perhaps best represented by his being hired on *Dark Blue*, an original script by Ellroy, who is well-known for the bare-knuckle prose of his novels *L.A. Confidential*, *The Black Dahlia*, and *American Tabloid*. In

fact, Ayer made the writing his own to such an extent that Ellroy now merely retains a “story by” credit. (Ellroy, who his representative says is “locked in a hole writing,” couldn’t be reached for comment.)

Ayer—who now appears to be the go-to guy for broken-teeth text—isn’t one to gloat, asserting that the rewrite process is just another part of a falsely elevated business. “It’s all just a job,” he says. “I don’t think it’s any different from house painting. You go in there and give your bid, and labor away. It’s kind of blue-collar in a sense, I think, writing. I feel like a janitor sometimes.”

This off-handed self-deprecation belies the fact that Ayer has solidified himself as Hollywood’s most reliable gritty scribe. He’s a finisher in an industry famous for rarely getting off the ground. With *S.W.A.T.*, as with *U-571*, *The Fast and the Furious*, and *Dark Blue*, Ayer resculpted stagnating material and helped get those movies into production. *S.W.A.T.*, which opens in August, will star Samuel L. Jackson and Colin Farrell as members of the LAPD’s Special Weapons and Tactics Team who are forced to protect a high-profile criminal. But at the moment, in the aftermath of this latest *S.W.A.T.* writing jag, which caps a work run of four years straight, Ayer seems to be aching for a break. “I thought being locked in a tube underwater was tough,” he says. “This job is the toughest shit I’ve ever done in my life. It’s taken more brain horsepower, more emotional stamina, will, and just brute force.” Still, in addition to developing a project called *Squids*, about his experiences on the sub, which he wrote for director David Fincher, his attention is now turning toward setting up a new challenge—his first directing gig.

But even with his hard-won success, Ayer’s eyes sharpen, and an uneasiness about the seeming impossibility of his current life sets in his shoulders. Somehow it still doesn’t feel quite real to him. “I’ve lived a dog’s life,” he says, looking off into the distance. “Maybe this is back pay...” he wonders with a shrug.

Ayer pulls up to a stoplight at Washington and Normandie. Across the street to the right is Rosedale Cemetery, a sloped green lawn with markers scaling up over the hill, where Ayer used to drink with homeys who are now buried there. “I thought I’d end up in there,” he says, leaning forward into the windshield. “I didn’t think I’d live to be 18. I never expected to make it this far. And then all this shit’s happened...” He struggles to find the right words. “I’m alive,” he says finally. “I’ve got a life.” ■