

A MAN OF HIS WORDS

Uncompromising and irascible, *Undercover Brother* creator John Ridley is quickly becoming king of all media By **Jay A. Fernandez** Photograph by **Piers Hammer**

John Ridley is doing another bit. Remnants of his previous career as a stand-up comic, they recur like samples in his beat-driven speech. Another one is always in the loop, ready to be delivered in his languid, nasal cadence. Gazing out the window of Norm's, an old-school Beverly Hills diner, Ridley has just noticed the billboard for *Undercover Brother*, a movie he co-wrote and executive produced, looming over La Cienega Boulevard. "Weird," he says. "*Undercover Brother* was meant to be a satire on race in America. Now it's, 'In case you're afraid to go see a movie with black people, we've got Denise Richards's ass.'"

And that is the essence of John Ridley—screenwriter (*Three Kings*, *U-Turn*), novelist (*Love Is a Racket*, *Everybody Smokes in Hell*), director (*Cold Around the Heart*), TV producer (*Third Watch*), comedian and correspondent for NPR's *Morning Edition*. He's got a headful of one-liners and presents each with the "whadaya gonna do" nonchalance of a man all too familiar with the complications of being black in the entertainment business. And at 35, this wordaholic has earned the right to both confront and surpass considerations of skin color in his work: His current multimedia charge has *Undercover Brother* in theaters; his fourth novel, *A Conversation with the Mann*, arriving in bookstores; and a TV pilot, *I've Got You*, vying for a mid-season slot in January.

"Let's face it," Ridley says. "To get anybody to pay attention to you, you've gotta sell something that's a little different. So people can talk to me about the pilots, the movie and the book all at the same time. It's nice to be able to say, 'I'm not just this, I'm not just that. There might really be a story here, would you mind paying attention a little bit?'"

Undercover Brother is as in-your-face as Denise Richards's assets are in the ad campaign; it's a perfect encapsulation of Ridley's irreverent MO. The screenplay fuses the Jim Kelly-era blaxploitation of Black Belt Jones with the spy-genre spoofing of Austin Powers, amid a barrage of zingers aimed at both hypocritical black self-righteousness and the hoary predictability of white racism. The film, directed by Malcolm Lee (*The Best Man*), stars comedian Eddie Griffin (*The New Guy*) as a '70s-lovin' spy who infiltrates white corporate America on behalf of an underground black organization, collecting information on the power conspiracies—like

Urkel and the NBA's three-point line—used by the Man to suppress black cultural dominance.

UB's smart satire first surfaced a couple of years ago in animated webisodes Ridley created for urbanentertainment.com, but its appearance in mainstream theaters has brought its edgy jokes about mayonnaise, Caucasia-vision and "black man's kryptonite" (a white woman like Richards, too hot for any brother to resist) to a wider audience, potentially more critical of its no-holds-barred humor. But those behind it seem unconcerned. "There's no such thing as taboo," scoffs Griffin—like Ridley, a Midwesterner who got his start in stand-up. "I don't even know what that thing is, *politically incorrect*."

Ridley is perpetually prepared for fallout from black critics. "People are gonna look at this and go, 'A bunch of white executives thought, How can we make some dough on black culture?'" he says. "The thing about being black in America to a big degree is, you gotta work hard, you gotta do

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something with yourself. And then you make it and they're like, 'You've sold out.'"

Ridley's own work ethic is unassailable—he writes constantly, has no hobbies to speak of and can only be pried from work by his wife, Gayle, a former script supervisor. Overachievement runs in his family: He has millionaire sisters (both Wall Streeters) on either side of him, his father is an ophthalmologist, and his mother is a teacher.

His Milwaukee youth couldn't have been further from that of the hard-pressed protagonist he created for his latest novel, *A Conversation with the Mann*. The ambitious story is a monologue from Jackie Mann, a Harlem native who devotes his life to becoming the first black comedian on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, all the while battling an abusive father and racist mid-century America. The book's wince-inducing moments derive in part from the author's own experiences in the entertainment business.

In the late '80s, as an NYU undergrad, Ridley dove into stand-up. He continued to pursue that career even after he moved to L.A. (just before the '92 riots), where he began receiving more lucrative paychecks as a writer for *Martin* and

Fresh Prince of Bel Air. But as he developed his socially-conscious-comedian voice, he realized the rush of delivering politically charged rants was better than that of shucking for big laughs. "I got to a point with comedy where I didn't really care whether I got a laugh," he says. "I got progressively less funny and more angry."

That anger, he says, had been building since his move to L.A., a result of slights like the time he walked into the Brillstein/Grey office for a meeting in jeans, windbreaker and ball cap and was immediately steered by the receptionist toward the mail room. An imbroglio over a script he'd written, *Spoils of War*, added to his resentment: Ridley's original script called for a black star, but after a director and producers signed on, they had the film rewritten as *Three Kings*, with the lead taking the form of George Clooney. Ridley says he has no problem with Clooney—his beef is that no black actors were ever approached for the part before it was altered.

Ridley's willingness to battle an industry in which the path of least resistance often furthers your career is what gains him respect from peers. "When he believes something, you cannot sway him from it," says Lee, who had his share of run-ins with Ridley's "prickly" side (including one over a potshot at the director's cousin, Spike, that Lee insisted on cutting from the *Undercover Brother* script). "He doesn't care who you are—he's gonna say what he feels, and I respect that."

It doesn't appear as if he's going to run out of things to say anytime soon. The deluge will go on—more books and scripts, two additional TV pilots, a possible *UB* sequel—and people will be forced to reckon with John Ridley. Such saturation was always part of his plan. "It was about, I'm gonna put out so much product that eventually people will just throw up their hands and go, 'We'll make your movies, we'll do your TV show, all right? Just stop it!'" he says. "Every time you turn around, I want to be in somebody's face."

***Undercover Brother* and *A Conversation with the Mann* (Warner Books, \$25) are out now.**



RENAISSANCE MANN Ridley's novel *A Conversation with the Mann* is the latest work in his prolific output, which also includes projects for television, film and radio.