



NEW RELEASES

Sing Sing

Sing Sing

Directed by: Greg Kwedar

Executive Producers: Teddy Schwartzman, Michael Heimler, Colman Domingo, Raúl Domingo, Larry Kalas, Larry Kelly, Nancy Schafer, Clarence Maclin, John 'Divine G' Whitfield
Produced by: Monique Walton, Clint Bentley, Greg Kwedar

Written by: Greg Kwedar, Clint Bentley

Story by: Clint Bentley, Greg Kwedar,

Clarence Maclin, John 'Divine G' Whitfield

Based on 'The Sing Sing Follies' by John H.

Richardson and 'Breakin' the Mummy's Code' by Brent Buell

Director of Photography: Pat Scola

Production Designer: Ruta Kiskyte

Editing by: Parker Laramie

Costume Design by: Desira Pesta

Music by: Bryce Dessner

Sound Design by: Lee Salevan

Cast:

Colman Domingo

Clarence 'Divine Eye' Maclin

Sean San Jose

Paul Raci

David 'Dap' Giraudy

Patrick 'Preme' Griffin

Mosi Eagle

James 'Big E' Williams

Sean 'Dino' Johnson

Cornell 'Nate' Alston

Camillo 'Carmine' LoVacco

Dario Peña

Pedro Cotto

Miguel Valentin

Jon Adrian 'JJ' Velazquez

John 'Divine G' Whitfield

Sharon Washington

Johnny Simmons

Brent Buell

Michael Capra

Joanna Chan

Cecily Lyn

Katherine Vockins

Reynaldo Gayle

USA 2023

105 mins

Digital

A Black Bear release

Filmmakers Greg Kwedar and Clint Bentley began their careers together in the early 2010s, having met after graduating from university and finding they shared similar interests in telling stories of human connection in impossible places. They began by collaborating on shorts and documentaries, but in 2015 shifted to narrative features, with the production of *Transpecos*, a border patrol thriller starring actor Clifton Collins Jr., which went on to win the Audience Award at SXSW for Best Narrative Feature. By then, the two had a strong, bilateral working understanding. 'We're both writer-director-producers,' Bentley states. 'So we write together, and then one of us directs and the other produces.' *Transpecos* was helmed by Kwedar, their next feature, *Jockey*, by Bentley, which premiered at Sundance in 2021, and also starred Collins.

While awaiting *Transpecos'* premiere at SXSW in March 2016, Kwedar began helping a friend produce a short documentary inside a maximum security prison in Wichita, KS – the first time he had ever been inside such a facility. While passing through the gallery, Kwedar turned to his right and saw a gentleman in his cell, raising a rescue dog, part of a programme found in a number of prisons that paired rescue dogs with incarcerated men. 'It's a rehabilitation program for both the animals and the men,' Kwedar recalls. 'My whole world flipped upside down, just in that half-second, passing a cell.' The humanity and intimacy on display between man and animal surpassed stereotypes, and moved Kwedar to investigate further what type of reforms were in process at prisons across America.

That night, in his hotel room, he Googled, 'Who is doing things differently in prison?' At the top of the search was a programme in New York, 'Rehabilitation Through the Arts', also known as RTA, which was putting on plays at Sing Sing Correctional Facility. RTA's programme had created remarkable results for its participants: while the national rate for people returning to prison after incarceration was over 60%, less than 5% of RTA graduates ever returned to prison. This shocking statistic sparked a deep interest in Kwedar's mind to learn more about the programme, and in conducting further research, Kwedar discovered a 2005 *Esquire* article, 'The Sing Sing Follies', written by John H. Richardson, about a time-travelling musical comedy, entitled *Breakin' the Mummy's Code*, that the men at Sing Sing staged through RTA. Says Kwedar, 'there was something about the seesaw of the tone – threading the needle of the inherent drama of that difficult environment, experiencing significant human transformation, juxtaposed with the playfulness of a wacky comedy. I thought that perhaps this might be the right jumping off point to tell a story that gives people a deeper understanding about the full capacity of some of the individuals behind bars who are otherwise stereotyped or forgotten.'

Kwedar shared the article as inspiration with Bentley, who was intrigued, but like Kwedar, needed to find a unique path forward. 'A lot of people see a prison as good fodder for drama,' Bentley notes. 'But we are always trying to take a world that is inherently interesting, but find another way into it,' which in this case, meant steering clear of the typical harsh, violent – or even comedic – tropes too often seen in this setting.

The filmmakers began, as they always do, by doing extensive research, which included getting to know the leadership of RTA, fully understanding its

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SIGHT AND SOUND

NEW RELEASES

Sing Sing

From Fri 30 Aug

Starve Acre

From Fri 6 Sep; Sat 7 Sep 15:00 + discussion with filmmaker Daniel Kokotajlo and novelist Andrew Michael Hurley

My Favourite Cake

From Fri 13 Sep

In Camera

From Fri 13 Sep; Preview Thu 5 Sep 20:35 + Q&A with director Naqqash Khalid and actors Nabhaan Rizwan, Amir El-Masry and Rory Fleck Byrne

The Substance

From Fri 20 Sep

The Outrun

From Fri 27 Sep

The Goldman Case

From Fri 4 Oct

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programming and purpose. In addition, the filmmakers reached out to Brent Buell, a playwright and theatre director, who had volunteered with the RTA programme at Sing Sing for more than 10 years. An experienced stage actor in his own right, Buell notes about his own RTA experience, 'When I started going up to Sing Sing, I felt much more at home, inside prison, than I do on a New York stage. It was this amazing thing, like, "Why haven't I been doing this all my life? Where have these guys been?" It was just wonderful.'

Through Buell, who had written and directed *Breakin' the Mummy's Code* at the behest of his Sing Sing students, Kwedar and Bentley learned about process, about Sing Sing, and most importantly, about the men in the programme. Buell was beyond giving, and opened up his home and his relationships, introducing Kwedar and Bentley to various RTA alumni, including a number of alumni who had appeared on stage in the original *Breakin' the Mummy's Code* performance and were now on the outside of the prison system.

These growing relationships impacted Kwedar and Bentley at their core. The filmmakers immediately decided that there could be no version of a film without the direct creative involvement of RTA alums to help shape what any future potential film project might become.

In addition to learning from RTA alumni, Kwedar and Bentley began volunteering through RTA within the prison system, teaching filmmaking inside Greenhaven Maximum-Security Prison in Stormville, NY. The two would help the students get a scene up on its feet, working from such cinematic references as *Selma*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Dead Poets Society*, and *12 Angry Men*, using prison ID cards as 'cameras' and a participant's cane as a boom mic. The process transcended the scenes themselves in more ways than can be described. It would typically take at least an hour to get through security at Greenhaven. 'But these men were there to learn – alive with curiosity and open in their desire for human connection. The immediacy of feelings and emotions – it was unlike any experience we've ever had.'

Inspired, the two began the very delicate task of trying to write a screenplay that captured the essence of these men's stories. 'We wrote many versions of this film,' Kwedar admits. 'The world was clear, but in our films, the characters are sacred. We're always in search of the arrow shot through that world, an honest character examination that can carry us through. And with RTA, you could make a film about each and every one of these men's lived experiences.'

Kwedar and Bentley's first draft was an ensemble piece, trying to fit so much of what they had learned into the film – to tell 'everyone's story'. 'But there was no anchor, nothing to hold onto,' says Kwedar. Then, they went the other direction, focused on a single protagonist based on a man at Sing Sing known as 'Pow Wow', but through their growing understanding of RTA, they quickly realised that a singular journey through the programme was too narrow a story. 'RTA is about community. We needed to find an authentic way to tell the story of friendship,' says Kwedar.

Production notes