

FROM SCRIPT TO SCREEN

# SUPERBAD

So, you were in ninth grade and you decided you were going to write a screenplay. Chances are that you didn't get very far, and if you did, you wrote something that today you can barely bear to read.

Imagine, though, that you didn't put that script in a drawer, never to be seen again. That you kept banging on it for years, and were even able to get advice from some of the best writers and producers in the business on how to make it better. That before your hair turned gray, you actually saw your movie made. By a major studio, with everything it takes to turn your movie into at least a cult hit.

If you can truly wrap your brain around that idea, you may have an inkling of what it feels like to be Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg. *Superbad*, the script they started on a whim some 11 years ago, is ready to become a summer release from Sony.

Michael Cera, Jonah Hill and Christopher Mintz-Plasse star in *Superbad*





Evan (Cera), Fogell (Mintz-Plasse), and Seth (Hill) enjoy the view

PHOTOS Melissa Moseley  
[Courtesy of Columbia Pictures and Sony Pictures]

“It wasn’t really like, can we have a career in movies? It was just like, can we write a movie? Regardless of whether it could ever get made, could we do it? Yeah, we could do it.”

—EVAN GOLDBERG

To be fair, Rogen was not a typical 14-year-old when they wrote their first draft. “I was doing stand-up,” he says. “So, the whole notion of writing seemed like something that was possible.

“We dreamed the film would get made some day, but when you’re 14 years old in Canada, you never really think that’s going to happen. It was mostly for our amusement to create something we thought was funny.

“We wrote some of those lines when we were 14 years old, and they’re still in the movie as it will be in theaters. Which is terrifying, kind of,” says Rogen with a belly laugh.

Directed by Greg Mottola (*Arrested Development*), with current comedy king Judd Apatow among its producers, *Superbad* is a raunchy teen comedy that pushes the envelope in ways that certainly qualify as adolescent humor. Yet, along the way, with tutelage from Apatow and others, Rogen and Goldberg found a genuinely sweet story and some positive messages within the raunchiness.

Or, as Goldberg puts it, “We have raunch with heart.”

The two have the same sense of humor, but where Rogen peppers his conversation with baritone laughs, Goldberg is deliberately deadpan. Neither appears eager to puff himself up, which must be a temptation when 1) Rogen now seems to be on the cusp of movie stardom, 2) the pair have both *Superbad* (as writer-producer-actor and writer-producer respectively) and *Knocked Up* (as actor-producer and producer respectively) on screens this summer, with a third movie, *The Pineapple Express*, just finished, and 3) the leads in *Superbad* are their namesakes.

### 120-Proof Grail

*Superbad* recounts a day, more or less, in the life of two awkward teens, Seth and Evan. The two are inseparable but have few friends, other than an even more awkward buddy, Fogell, and none of them has a girlfriend. The high school seniors are under a strain, though, as Evan is getting ready to go to Dartmouth in the fall and Seth, well, isn’t.

The wheels start turning when Fogell gets a fake ID so he can buy liquor. Seth gets asked by a girl he likes, Jules, to come to her graduation party and bring alcohol, and Evan gets asked by a girl he likes, Becca, to bring

her favorite brand of vodka. The pair sends Fogell into a liquor store, but the shop gets robbed while he’s in there. He gets caught up with two patrol cops who take him under their wing, while Seth and Evan, convinced their pal has been busted, go off on their own search for the alcohol—an odyssey that gets them into some harrowing situations. Then, when they finally do get to Jules’ party, things don’t go at all the way they’d planned.

Before the story is over, the two buddies have a bitter falling out, reconcile, reveal their true feelings for each other, albeit in a drunken stupor, and make some progress toward achieving that mysterious and seemingly unattainable goal—a girlfriend.

Seth and Evan are played by rising stars Jonah Hill and Michael Cera, but the biggest rising star in the picture is probably Rogen himself. As the romantic lead of *Knocked Up*, Rogen will already be well-established with young audiences by the time his memorable turn as a fun-loving, irresponsible cop in *Superbad* hits screens. In truth, though, Rogen was supposed to play Seth. He just got too old to be believable as a high-schooler. That can happen when a script is in the works for 11 years.

Of their artistic drive, Goldberg recalls: “Neither of us can truly remember the film we were watching that [convinced] us in our beliefs that we could [write a film]. We watched some crappy movie and we were just like, ‘We can do this.’

“It wasn’t really like, can we have a career in movies? It was just like, can we write a movie? Regardless of whether it could ever get made, could we do it? Yeah, we could do it. We didn’t really discuss it much. It was ‘sure, we could.’ We literally just got up, walked upstairs, and gave it a shot.

“I still probably have a draft of that, which we won’t show anyone, ever, because it’s quite embarrassing.”

Rogen remembers, “We were trying to tell a high school story that was truthful to our high school experience, which we just weren’t really seeing much in movies. *American Pie* hadn’t been made when we started writing it, actually. We saw it and I really liked that movie. In some ways it’s very truthful to our high school experiences, and in some ways it wasn’t quite, but it didn’t make us want to

stop writing our movie. It just made us want to dig a little deeper with everything we were going through.

“We basically just wanted to give something that was relatable so people would say, ‘Yeah, that’s exactly what it was like when I was in high school.’”

### Accidental Advertising

Both agree, though, that the characters are only very loosely based on them, despite being named Seth and Evan.

Says Goldberg, “The straight-up truth of it is, we sat down and were like, ‘Okay, let’s do this thing. First, what are we going to call the characters?’ That was our first issue, which is not the proper way to write a movie, but we just sat down and we literally couldn’t think of names. That’s how poorly we started out.

“So, we decided let’s just give them our names and change it later. Then someone read the script and was like, ‘Wow, it’s genius how you guys left your names in so people will remember you.’ We pretended, and we were like, ‘Yeah, yeah, that was a good move of ours.’ So we just left it in when it turned out that might be the case.”

Rogen says, “It’s an ‘inspired by’ movie, inspired by true events, as they would say. I would never want to put that in front of the movie. We would never want to admit to it. ‘Only the embarrassing parts of the story are true,’ that would be our disclaimer.”

Once they got far enough to actually consider a structure, they decided to focus on one ordinary night for Seth and Evan. That concept would eventually change as the film finds the boys at a transitional moment in their lives. At first, though, Rogen and Goldberg wanted no part of such an “important” tale.

“That just kind of scared us for a while,” says Rogen, “because we thought all these movies are about kids on the fucking craziest night of their lives and what happens, and we just didn’t want to do [a message movie].”

They worked on the script for a while, put it down, then picked it up again later. By that time, much had happened. Rogen had landed a part on the beloved TV series *Freaks and Geeks* and was down in Los Angeles, far from Goldberg, still in Canada.

“I gave [the script] to Judd around then,” says Rogen. “It was right around then that we





Seth Rogen, Bill Hader and Mintz-Plasse

finished a version of it, so I was about 17. A version we thought was good. We were older, it had the beginnings of a more emotional storyline between the guys. That's when we gave it to Judd. As soon as I could give it to someone, I did, pretty much," he laughs.

Goldberg remembers, "We'd all heard the rumors and the hubbub about Seth's crazy life in L.A. doing *Freaks and Geeks*. I'm not 100 percent sure, but I'm pretty certain nothing happened [with the script] until [*Freaks and Geeks*] got cancelled. It was somewhere in the hiatus between that and *Undeclared* that Judd became truly interested."

Apatow saw something in the script, but Goldberg recalls early on someone telling them the film was "fundamentally unmakeable."

"I don't remember who said it," says Goldberg, "but it was filthy as hell and, in people's eyes, it was only for those kids—14, 15, 16, 17-year-olds. Eighteen-year-olds wouldn't have it. To us, it was something that we hoped—even though we were kids and didn't know any better—everyone would enjoy it because it's not only about *our* childhood, it's about childhood. It's in a bit of a limbo about when it occurs in our heads. It's quite 90s, but it's also now, and one of the parties feels quite 80s to me. I think one of Greg Mottola's genius touches was to make it kind of accessible to all."

### In the Meantime

Rogen remembers, "Everyone read it. Everyone liked it. It got us a lot of work, ultimately. It was a great writing sample. People really liked reading it, but people wouldn't sack up, so to speak.

"I would always hear these stories, like 'The script floated around for years and then it finally got made.' I'd think 'How does that happen?' Then it happened before I knew it in a weird way. It came so close to getting made so many times, it always seemed that it might happen. Then eventually we accepted 'We'll make this movie in 15 years, and we'll just direct it or something.' It'll get made, so stop worrying about it."

In the meantime, though, their careers were moving along. Apatow decided to test the pair to see if they really had the goods as a writing team. The result of that test was their script, *The Pineapple Express*. They also landed representation at comedy powerhouse United Talent Agency.

"Must join and conform" says Goldberg in his best robot voice. "I'm just super happy they *let* me join."

At the end of 2003, the pair landed a writing gig on *Da Ali G Show* where they learned valuable comedic lessons watching Sacha Baron Cohen work.



The friends inspect the fake ID

"It was just cool to be working on something I was such a big fan of," says Rogen. "I guess what I learned from him is that if you really really really think hard, you'll probably think of funnier stuff than if you just think hard. He *really* thinks hard."

When writing, Rogen continues, "You want to get into kind of a jazz mood, 'However your riff comes out, the first instinct is the best instinct.' But no, sometimes rethinking something for hours can actually help," he laughs.

Goldberg, for his part, says, "I learned that if you work and apply all your mental power to it, you'll do well. But I'm not capable of doing it at the same level as Sacha Baron Cohen, so I need a partner like Seth."

"Judd Apatow and Sacha Baron Cohen work their asses off, and that's one of the reasons they do so well. So, I've just got to maintain a similar work pace if I can. Those guys are machines. I literally sit in awe of them. I don't know how Seth can do it right now, with all the publicity. Those guys are made of stern stuff.

"I'm just not used to the concept of being a hard worker, but I guess I definitely am. I needed some people to show me the ropes. Seth showed me how to work really hard. I wasn't totally lazy in university, but

when I got here, it was a whole different ball game. You've got to work your ass off all the time. When you get a vacation, take that vacation, but otherwise, work. It would be impossible if it weren't such fun work. I'd have no way to keep this up if this were a job I didn't love."

### Buddy Love

Having proved he belonged with the big boys, Goldberg could join Rogen for more work on *Superbad*. Apatow kept steering them toward a stronger emotional story. The script had always had a decent arc for Seth and Evan in terms of the girlfriend quest, as they eventually learned some lessons from the night's disasters, but nothing satisfying for the pair of young men themselves.

Rogen says, "As we got older, we started realizing [the story] needed more, and Judd helped with planting the seed of that, I have

to say. We just were thinking what could be funny and kind of relatable.

"We thought it would be funny to have a sweet movie, a sweet story going on in the midst of the filthy sexuality of it all. That was something we thought would play well against it and would add more layers to the movie."

With prodding from Apatow, and through many conversations, they made the primary plot an unlikely love story between the two buddies.

"We always view our movies as male love stories in a weird kind of way. Which is funny, because Evan and I are totally not like that at all. We don't hug each other. It's always amusing to us.

"It's like any other movie with a man and a woman, we just want to see them tell each other how much they love each other. And I think we may have even started there and thought what other kinds of things these guys

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could be going through, and the whole college Dartmouth thing was what we thought would work best for the movie,” says Rogen.

Concurs Goldberg: “Everything we do has a secret, man-to-man love story,” adding deadpan, “And on that note: I don’t love Seth Rogen, I never said those words to him and I never will.

“I don’t think I’ve even hugged him before. I hugged Fogell once. I remember that.”

Also surprisingly staid is Evan and Fogell’s choice of conservative stronghold Dartmouth as their future alma mater.

“Shit like that just makes us laugh,” says Rogen. “There’s no real defense for us. We thought that would be funny if he was going to Dartmouth for some reason.”

The details of the harrowing events of the night the film depicts have changed a lot over the years. In even the old versions of the story, the boys are able to blackmail a 20-something guy into getting them booze. He takes them to a party with his friends, then promptly gets beaten up by the host. Seth and Evan are suitably freaked out but discover there’s more than enough booze for them—if they can figure out how to smuggle it out.

Originally, there was a scene where Evan smokes pot; that is gone from the film. Instead, Evan winds up trapped in a room with some older guys who, between lines of coke, mistake him for someone else and insist he sing for them.

Says Rogen: “Evan and I were at a party once when we were very young where there were a bunch of guys doing coke. That really freaked the shit out of us, so we thought that would be a good thing to put in the story. And maybe it was after meeting Michael Cera that we thought it would be funny if he starts singing, because of how funny he sings. We thought that would be a funny way to showcase his hilarity.”

One of the film’s filthiest bits comes when an older girl throws herself at Seth for a sexy dance, draping herself all over him. Later, two other guys notice a red patch on Seth’s pants and realize, to Seth’s horror, that it’s the girl’s menstrual blood.

“That happened to our friend in high school,” says Rogen. “Evan and I were the guys who basically found the blood and our friend was Seth. That happened at a high school dance.”

The sexuality of these high school kids’ lives may get wincing from what few parents actually see the movie.

“We live in a much more sexualized time these days, I think,” says Rogen. “When we were young in high school and horny and we’d go to the 7-Eleven, there’d be *Playboys* and porno everywhere, and girls were wearing nothing in school, and Britney Spears was out. It was a bad time to be a virgin, you know?”

On the other hand, parents may be comforted by the unglamorous picture of teenaged drinking.

Becca, stone drunk at the climactic party, is eager to do pretty much any sexual act Evan wants—and some he doesn’t. She’s so eager, in fact, and so drunk that Evan has to be the one to slow things down. Meanwhile, Seth gets falling-down drunk only to discover the object of his desire, Jules, doesn’t drink at all. When he finally has a heart-to-heart with her, it ends in disaster, thanks to his drinking.

“The great pursuit is for alcohol and all these great things,” says Rogen, “but we drank in high school. We knew what actually happened after a 17-year-old girl had 15 shots of tequila, and it was not in any way pretty or cool. It was terrible, and it led to vomiting and popped blood vessels. That was something we thought was a major part of the movie and a big joke at one time and something we thought was very close to our experience.”

The movie takes its riskiest swerve into sweetness in its final scene. In a mall, humbled by their bad experiences at the party, the boys come face to face with Becca and Jules. Sober and chastened, they take a stab at their first, tentative, honest conversation with the girls, and at the end, the boys and girls pair off. The buddies finally separate.

“It’s kind of what most people actually, I would imagine, learn somewhere in their early 20s. You don’t have to be fake, you can just be who you are; be cool. It’s also about a lack of courage. These guys keep hiding behind all sorts of things. They’re hiding behind liquor, hiding their friendship behind the girls, and it’s about being upfront, being truthful, and sticking with your friends, I guess.”

When the idea of the mall conclusion was first pitched to Goldberg, though, he hated it.



Writing partners Evan Goldberg and Seth Rogen on the set

“I thought it was the lamest, worst idea in the world, and I was wrong,” he says. “I kept saying ‘You’re crazy, this is just so corny. The two guys run into the two girls—it’s so perfect.’”

“But when we had the actors there, I saw what Judd had been getting at the whole time. With the right actors there, you can make the right awkwardness so that this moment will be both a satisfying wrap-up and a not corny, tie-everything-together kind of scene. Then Greg Mottola got the perfect music and the perfect shots with Russ Albro. I don’t know, they did it. I credit my lack of experience at the time with making me naive about how well that scene would have worked.”

*Superbad* is, like many of Apatow’s films, arguably the opposite of subversive, something that seems dirty and raucous but actually contains traditional, even conservative, social messages. That’s far from what Rogen and Goldberg started out to do, but Goldberg is happy with how it turned out.

“I truly wonder if people will see [the messages]. I think it’s a benefit to society. It shows you that you can go out and have fun like teens do, stick with your friends, don’t try to get girls drunk. And don’t drive around drunk if you’re a police officer.” 🦋