

# Screenwriter Adam Cozad

Research, research, research—sell a spec to Paramount.

Adam Cozad's action script *Dubai* highlights the Arab city's emblems of excess, such as its indoor ski slope, ubiquitous construction cranes, and artificial islands arranged as a map of the world.

Funny thing is, Cozad's never been there.

"Thank God for the Internet," he explains.

Cozad, 31, is also not an economist and not a CIA officer, but the details in the script—which he sold to Paramount in June—might have you fooled.

"That's a testament to how much research he does," says Jeremy Bell, one of Cozad's managers at Foursight Entertainment, along with Michael Lasker. "He has such a handle on the worlds that he's creating."

*Dubai*—which has Lorenzo di Bonaventura (*Transformers*) attached as producer and actor Eric Bana (*Munich*) as executive producer—is an action script for the globalization age. The hero is an American economist who moves to Dubai to work for a finance firm and uncovers a plot to cause a huge drop in the value of the U.S. dollar, thus creating mass starvation. "As far as an action script goes, it's pretty complex," Cozad says. "It isn't like he's on the run and he's trying to stop a bomb from blowing up. He's trying to stop something that's very abstract."

Cozad's interest in the subject matter dates back to college where he majored in Middle Eastern history and minored in economics. His challenge is getting other people interested, too. "You're trying to do something that is rather complicated economically in a way that doesn't bog the story down and in a way that people understand," he says.

A year ago, Cozad was developing a television pilot with his friend Mikhail, an executive at Mandate Pictures, who sent the pilot to Foursight. They signed Cozad in December 2006. In January, Cozad pitched his new managers five feature ideas. They liked *Dubai*.

Cozad started writing in early February and had a draft by the end of March. But the work was hardly over. "We probably went

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through 15 drafts,” says Bell. A major part of the revisions, he adds, was “trying to make the economics understandable and exciting.”

*Dubai* eventually got Cozad signed with Jeff Gorin and Aaron Hart at William Morris Agency. They gave the script to Bana, another William Morris client, who signed on as executive producer before they started shopping it around.

The studios liked the script, but its non-traditional subject matter still made Cozad nervous. “The week of the sale was such a ridiculous emotional roller coaster,” he says.

As a kid, Cozad wasn’t your typical, film-obsessed future screenwriter. He grew up in Chico, California, about 85 miles north of Sacramento, at the foot of the Sierra Nevada mountains. “It was like a Tom Sawyer sort of childhood—you’re making dams to catch pollywogs and picking fruit off trees,” he says. His family had one tiny black-and-white Zenith television that had buttons falling off and required pliers to change the

eventually renting a room in San Francisco from his uncle, a playwright. Under his uncle’s mentorship, Cozad started writing a screenplay set amidst the Zapatista revolutionary group in Mexico, known for their 1994 uprising. He drew on stories from his older sister who had worked as an activist trying to stop government reprisals against the group.

Cozad discovered his passion for screenwriting and one day, “I just committed to it,” he says. “I set up my life to become a writer.” He would work four nights a week bartending at San Francisco’s W Hotel. The rest of the time he spent writing.

He says, “Every day I would sit there and I would think, ‘Is this realistic?’ I put all my eggs in one basket. I didn’t have another career.”

If he had known it would take five years before he sold a script, he says, “I don’t know if I would have stuck it out.” He adds, however, “I just kept having an idea to write. I love getting up in the morning, getting my coffee, reading my paper, and getting into it.”

hours in the morning, break for lunch, work a couple more hours, then go for a jog. At the end of the day, he’ll often sit outside his apartment with a notebook to jot down ideas. “I’m excited the next morning to go write because I’ve sort of already got a template of what I’m going to work on,” he says.

Lately he’s been spending much of his time revising *Dubai*, working to maintain a balance between explaining the economics and keeping the audience engaged. “You’re trying to have everyone get about 80 percent of what’s going on, but to explain that extra 20 percent, it’s going to take five pages of really dry stuff,” he says. “The goal is to make it so that the 20 percent doesn’t matter,” he adds. The film is essentially a chase movie, and Cozad hopes it’s enough for the audience to know that if the hero fails, 50 million people will starve.

Throughout his first formal experience in the Hollywood development process, Cozad has been able to take criticism and ignore his ego—a skill he learned from his uncle. “He

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channel. And when they went to the movie theater, it was a big event.

Still, Cozad grew up around art—his mom was a painter and potter. At Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, Cozad started watching more movies and took a screenwriting class, where he wrote a short film. It was about a young man contemplating suicide who breaks his grandfather out of a retirement home for a “last hurrah” adventure.

Also at college, Cozad developed his interest in military history. His favorite films include *Braveheart* and *Forrest Gump*, which wrap their fictional elements around real-life events. “If you do enough research, half your work is done before you start writing the screenplay,” Cozad says. “You’ll always be finding these nuggets and gems that’ll be useful and that you don’t have to make up on your own.”

After he graduated in 1998, Cozad didn’t know what he wanted to do. He waited tables in Los Angeles for a year and a half before

Cozad’s work ethic was such that when he entered the screenwriting M.F.A. program at UCLA, “It kind of felt like [class] was cutting into lots of my writing time,” he says. “They were teaching poets and other kinds of writers how to translate their talents into screenwriting. I had spent four years teaching myself all that stuff.” He left after a quarter to write and direct a short film about a day in the life of an American soldier in the Iraq War.

Cozad started bartending again, this time at the Shade Hotel in Manhattan Beach, where he lives. But he still hadn’t sold a script. At one point as late as summer 2006, he was set to apply to the firefighting academy.

But his television pilot—*The Sentinels*, about a special forces unit in Alaska that specializes in rescue missions—got some traction, and Cozad rushed to revise it before development season. It wasn’t done in time, but the script got him his managers at Foursight.

On a typical day, Cozad might work three

never would pull any punches, and eventually I learned that even when he was saying something I didn’t want to hear, I would realize that there’s something to it.”

Cozad quit his bartending job a week after *Dubai* sold, and for the first time he’s making a living as a screenwriter. And his script revisions and meetings with executives don’t leave much time for hobbies. He’s always told himself, “Alright, if I could just make it as a screenwriter, make a living at it, I could take classes and salsa dance,” he says. “The reality is that I’ve never been more busy in my life than right now.”

Cozad is working on getting the costs down for his television pilot and is writing a sci-fi spec called *Dark Side of the Moon* about a team of soldiers who travel to the moon to stop a theft.

He also hopes to actually visit Dubai, though Paramount hasn’t broached the subject. “I didn’t ask them yet,” he says. “One can hope.” 🐦