

Woodstock Director's Salinger Film Screens at WRIF

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Alex Wolff and Stefania Owen in a scene from Jim Sadwith's movie "Coming Through the Rye." It is to be shown at the White River Indie Festival on May 13, 2016, at 7 p.m. (Courtesy photograph) Courtesy photograph

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Jim Sadwith, at his home in South Woodstock, Vt., on May 11, 2016. Sadwith wrote and directed "Coming Through the Rye" a movie based on meeting J.D. Salinger in 1969, which opens at the White River Indie Festival. (Valley News - Jennifer Hauck) Copyright Valley News. May not be reprinted or used online without permission. Send requests to permission@vnews.com. Valley News — Jennifer Hauck





By David Corriveau
Valley News Staff Writer
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Jim Sadwith figures that he spent 5½ hours roaming around Cornish before finding J.D. Salinger at his home on Dingleton Hill, one November day in 1969.

“I was out on all the back roads,” Sadwith recalled last week during an interview at his home on the back roads of South Woodstock, “and I got lost with people pointing me in different directions.”

By the time he returned to his Connecticut prep school and tape-recorded his impressions of the encounter with the reclusive author of *Catcher in the Rye*, the then-teenage Sadwith knew he had a coming-of-age story of his own to tell.

It just took him longer than he imagined to find the right words and the best lens through which to show it with the world.

“I still have all the tapes,” Sadwith said. “I recorded everything I could remember. I’ve had them for more than 46 years.”

Coming Through the Rye, the feature-length film that grew out of those recordings, brings the origin story back to the Upper Valley tonight at 7, at the White River Indie Festival. Now 63, Sadwith has spent much of the last seven months at festivals around the country, screening the dramatization of his adolescent quest to win Salinger's blessing for a stage adaptation of the travails of Holden Caulfield.

The tapes mostly sat on shelves, while Sadwith built a career directing and writing screenplays for television movies and series. After an attempt in the early 1980s to write a memoir about his experience — during which, he recalled, “the basic consensus of people who read it was ‘You’re a screenwriter, not a novelist’ ” — he set it aside until 2012, almost two years after Salinger died. That year, during which his most recent TV movie, *A Smile As Big as the Moon*, ran on the Hallmark Channel, he completed a first draft of the *Rye* screenplay.

“Maybe I couldn’t have done it while Salinger was alive,” Sadwith said. “Maybe it just had to be at a point in my career when it was the right time.

“This was the right time.”

With the basic story on the page, Sadwith embarked on his next quest: to raise from family, friends and acquaintances the money needed to recruit the cast and crew, to scout and secure locations and finally to shoot it.

That process ranged from casting up-and-coming actor Alex Wolff as the teen protagonist Jamie Schwarz and Googling how to come up with a business plan to trying to reach his choice to play Salinger — Academy Award-winner Chris Cooper. Sadwith had acquired Cooper's phone number in 1991, when Cooper appeared in *In Broad Daylight*, a TV-movie thriller Sadwith was directing with a cast that also included future Academy Award-winner Marcia Gay Harden.

“I didn’t hear back for two days,” Sadwith remembered. “At the end of the third day, the phone rang and the caller ID said, ‘Chris Cooper.’”

Serendipity further presented itself in the hunt for a location where Sadwith and his production crew, which included Woodstock-area aspiring filmmakers Aidan Saunders and Charles Kahn, could spend between four and six weeks capturing a time of year that matched Sadwith's memory of Cornish in November.

“It’s not sad,” Sadwith said, “but it’s a feeling of, ‘Jamie’s been away from school. He’s been bullied.’ It couldn’t be vibrant colors. It should be just pretty.”

By this time, Sadwith had been living in the Woodstock area since 1998, and now he hoped to shoot fairly close by in New England, maybe the Berkshires of western Massachusetts. Eventually, however, he settled on Virginia's Orange County, at the suggestion of an investor. In addition to finding the all-boy Woodberry Forest School as a location, Sadwith had more than a month to shoot before Cooper arrived for the later scenes.

"You can really calibrate the look," Sadwith said. "It evokes more of a feeling of alienation, not only for Jamie but for Salinger."

Sadwith returned to South Woodstock from the shoot long enough to celebrate Thanksgiving at home, then head to New York for weeks of intensive editing, including the incorporation of music by Woodstock saxophonist Fred Haas and Hartland singer-songwriter Jay Nash.

By April 2015, Sadwith was screening the rough-cut DVD of the film for test audiences, including students and teachers from Woodstock Union High School in the theater at Billings Farm and Museum. About 250 of those viewers returned surveys distributed at the end.

"People said things like, 'It takes a long time to get on the road'" from the early scenes at Jamie's school "and 'It takes a long time to find Salinger," Sadwith recalled. "Some of the kids said things like, 'Too much kissing'" between Jamie and Deedee, the girl who drives him to Cornish, "so we cut some of that down."

After more fine-tuning, Sadwith began submitting the finished product to film festivals around the country, and was accepted by 20.

"I'm told that that's actually a pretty good percentage," Sadwith said, "but each one of the rejections was a dagger to the heart."

The response from audiences, starting with the late-October Heartland festival in Indianapolis, eased the pain pretty quickly.

"After all the time I'd spent watching it by myself, I wanted to watch it with the audience," Sadwith said. "To hear the audience laugh in some places, and hear pin-drop silence in others, it's so invigorating."

So was the recognition after the lights went up: At California's Coronado Island Film Festival, the movie won the audience-choice award, and Rising Star awards for Wolff and for Stefania Owen, who plays Deedee. The film also reaped the audience-choice nod at the Omaha Film Festival, best-film and best-screenplay recognition at the Phoenix Film Festival, outstanding achievement in editing at Newport Beach, Calif., honorable mention for the jury award at Sonoma International in California, and a Rising Star award for Wolff at Denver.

After tonight's Upper Valley premiere, Sadwith hopes also to show *Coming Through the Rye* at the Woodstock Town Hall Theatre and at Hanover's Nugget Theater.

As long as the festival circuit took, it paled next to Sadwith's next task: How and through whom to distribute the film for wider release, preferably by September. If he can't find an arrangement that works, he said, he might consider a Kickstarter campaign.

"We haven't explored all the possibilities for making the investors whole," Sadwith said. "This is the hardest part. This has been as difficult or harder than making the movie."

"The ride is just beginning."

Coming Through the Ryewill be screened tonight at 7 at Northern Stage's Barrette Center for the Arts in White River Junction. Admission to the film alone costs \$7 to \$9 at the door. Viewers attending the 6 p.m. gala that precedes the movie pay \$40. For more information about the screening, visit wrif.org.

Rest of the Fest

On the theme of "Local Heroes," the White River Indie Festival opens this afternoon at 4 in Northern Stage's Barrette Center for the Arts, with a two-hour, mixed-media presentation on the evolution of logging in northern New England.

Filmmaker Herb Di Gioia screens the digital restoration of *Chester Grimes*, his and colleague David Hancock's 1970 documentary portrait of a Northeast Kingdom man who logs with horses. Afterward, poet Verandah Porche and painter Kathleen Kolb will discuss their collaboration on the exhibit, "Shedding Light on the Working Forest," selections from which will be displayed throughout the festival; admission is free on a first-come, first-served basis.

The festival's hectic Saturday schedule opens in the Barrette Center's Schleicher Studio with free, back-to-back screenings of two documentaries by Bill Phillips, a veteran screenwriter and Dartmouth film instructor. At 9 is the 30-minute *On the Trail*, Phillips' 2010 portrayal of the Green Mountain Horse Association's annual three-day, 100-mile competitive trail ride. At 9:30 comes the hourlong *Sabra*, a review of East Barnard printmaker Sabra Field's life and work.

Saturday night at 7, the Upper Valley creators of the web-TV series *Parmelee* will unveil a compilation of the first four episodes in the Barrette Center's Byrne Theater; admission is \$7 to \$9.

Also at 7 on Saturday, at the Center for Cartoon Studies, Dartmouth film professor Jodie Mack will present 70 minutes worth of short animated films, chosen by students in her Curating and Microcinema class, focusing on how women and girls are depicted in comics.

Screenings during Sunday's showcase of regional short films in the Schleicher Studio include the 29-minute *Winter Light*, Hanover High School graduate Julian Higgins' adaptation of a James Lee Burke story about a confrontation in Montana between a college professor and two hunters trespassing on his property.

The showcase also will feature *Don't Leave Me Hanging*, Hanover native Samantha Davidson Green's adaptation of a play by Strafford resident and Thetford Academy graduate Lillian Schley.

The festival wraps on Monday night with a screening at 7 of the documentary *Zydeco Crossroads* followed by dance party at which the Planet Zydeco ensemble will set the rhythm. Admission is \$20.

Passes to all events at the White River Indie Festival from today through Monday cost \$125 plus a processing fee. Passes for individual days cost \$35 plus processing fee on Saturday and Sunday. For more information on the festival offerings and schedule, visit wrif.org.

Extra(s)! Extra(s)!

Hanover High School graduates Thea Brooks and Matt Celia, now making their way in the wider worlds of theater, filmmaking and performance art, are looking for Upper Valley residents of all ages to act as extras in the short movie that they'll be shooting in Norwich and Fairlee, among other nearby locations, during the first full week of June.

Brooks, who wrote the screenplay, outlined plans for the shoot during a community meeting Wednesday evening at Norwich's Marion Cross School, which she attended in the 1990s. She said that while the main characters have been cast — among them Vermont actor/performance-art entrepreneur Rusty DeWees — for the adventure/fantasy, based on her family's experience with a logging operation near their home in the woods, extras will be needed for some scenes. To learn more about *Green*, including other opportunities to support the production, visit seedandspark.com/studio/green#wishlist

Coming Attractions

As a benefit for Woodstock's Norman Williams Public Library, the Woodstock Town Hall Theatre screens *Sabra*, Bill Phillips' one-hour documentary about East Barnard printmaker Sabra Field's life and work, on Thursday night at 7:30.

David Corriveau can be reached at dcorriveau@vnews.com and at 603-727-3304. Film-related announcements and news also can be sent to highlights@vnews.com.

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