

A FILM BY
LISANNE SARTOR



LOGLINE:

Waitress Zoe is a socially inept numbers whiz struggling to understand her autistic son, Jax. Her fraught relationships with her own estranged mother, Marilyn, and with a troubled neuropsychologist, Pete, force Zoe to come to terms with Jax's autism as well as with her own undiagnosed autism.

SYNOPSIS

Waitress ZOE has an uncanny affinity for numbers and lives for (but doesn't understand) her eight-year-old son, JAX, a quirky kid who substitutes crossword puzzles for friends. GLORIA, their crotchety neighbor, babysits Jax and shares his love for crossword puzzles. When Jax is suspended from school for uncharacteristic violence, Gloria pushes Zoe to ask Zoe's estranged mother, MARILYN, for help. Marilyn can afford to pay for the evaluation Jax needs to determine the appropriate school for him. Instead, Zoe discovers PETE, a neuropsychologist who offers to evaluate Jax gratis if Zoe and Marilyn also participate in his current research project. Zoe refuses rather than interacting with Marilyn.

Unexpectedly, Gloria has a stroke. Fearful of losing her, Jax becomes obsessed with finding Gloria's drug-addict son Miles to help Gloria heal. Zoe reluctantly turns to Marilyn, who's willing to help but only if Jax and Zoe move in with her. Zoe takes Jax back to Pete and is devastated when Pete diagnoses Jax with autism. Jax refuses treatment unless Zoe searches for Miles. Pete and Marilyn insist they go along. During their week-long search, Zoe and Marilyn must confront their problems while Pete helps Zoe realize she too has autism. Because of this realization, Pete and Zoe's relationship deepens. When Miles surfaces, he refuses to see Gloria. Jax is inconsolable. Zoe, Marilyn and Pete comfort him together, bonding the four of them.

That bond is quickly broken when Marilyn enrolls Jax in an elite private school without telling Zoe, which causes a huge fight between mother and daughter. When Pete tries to intervene, Zoe becomes convinced that he's only interested in "fixing" her. She breaks off their budding relationship and begins to work nonstop at a local diner, intent on earning enough money to escape Marilyn. In the process, she inadvertently distances herself from Jax. Devastated by his changing world, Jax runs away. Zoe realizes she must believe in herself for Jax's sake. For the first time, she willingly asks for help by calling Pete. Together, they find Jax and convince him that he and Zoe matter. To Pete. To Marilyn. To Gloria. But most of all, to each other.

LISANNE SARTOR Director's Statement

I have always thrown myself completely into everything I do. As an assistant director, I worked non-stop despite my ulcers, bulging discs and abscesses. When I became a screenwriter, I wrote obsessively (nine scripts in three years at UCLA), won prestigious awards and got huge agents. With my drive, I was set, right?

Wrong. Instead of finding my voice, I wrote specs to chase the market. My career foundered. I worked harder, neglected my family. My two young sons favored their sitter over me. Even that didn't stop me.

What did was this sentence: "Your son has autism."

Therapists had always deemed my brilliant, creative older son, born painfully noise sensitive and lacking in stranger boundaries, as "too emotionally connected" to have autism. We wanted to believe them. At age six, he had a breakdown.

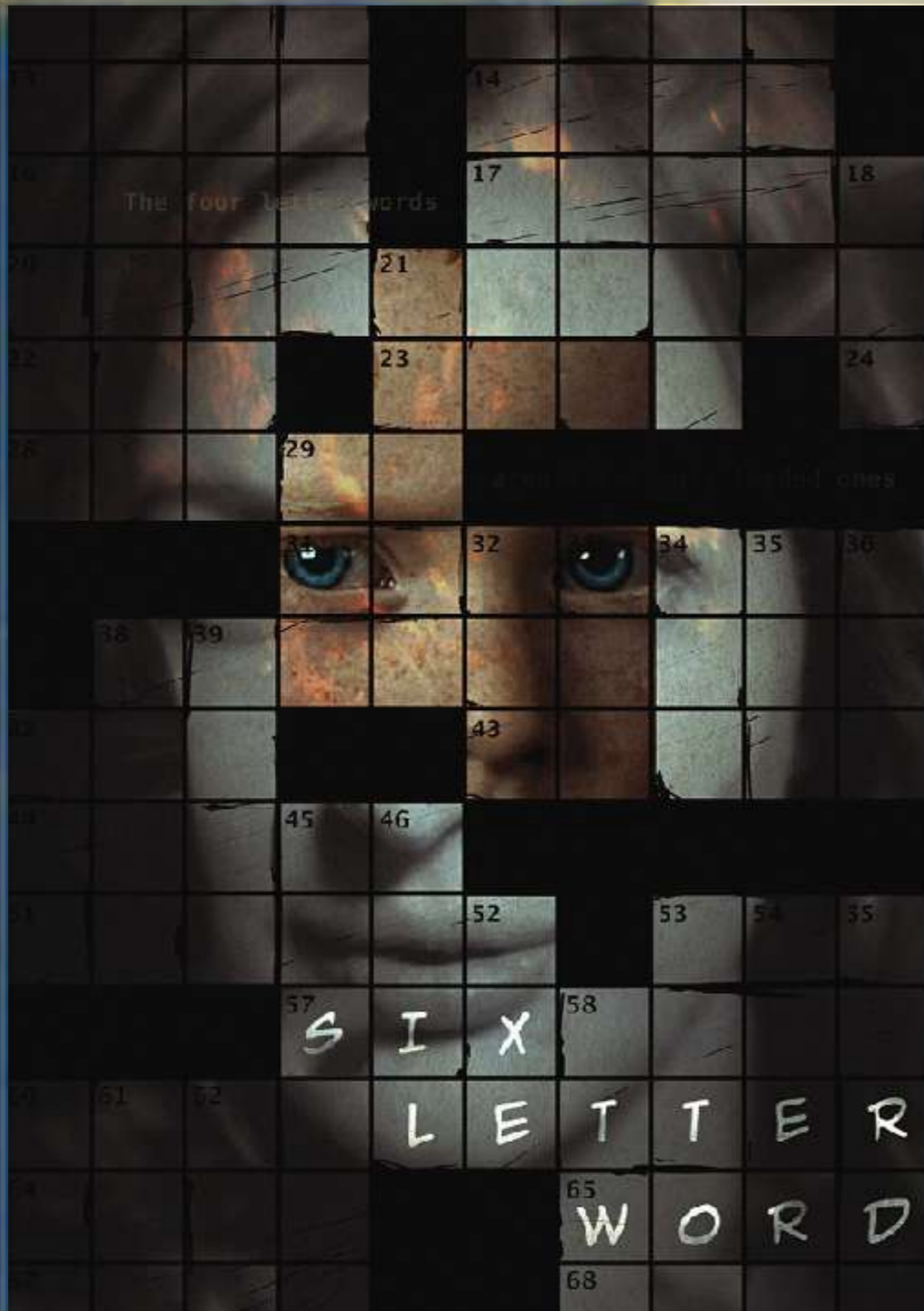
Still, the state threatened to deny him services he desperately needed because "he wasn't affected enough." So I wrote, shot and edited two short documentaries about how deeply autism affected him. I made these documentaries not to show in festivals, not to further my career, but to help my son. The day the state awarded him lifetime services was one of the most deeply satisfying of my life.

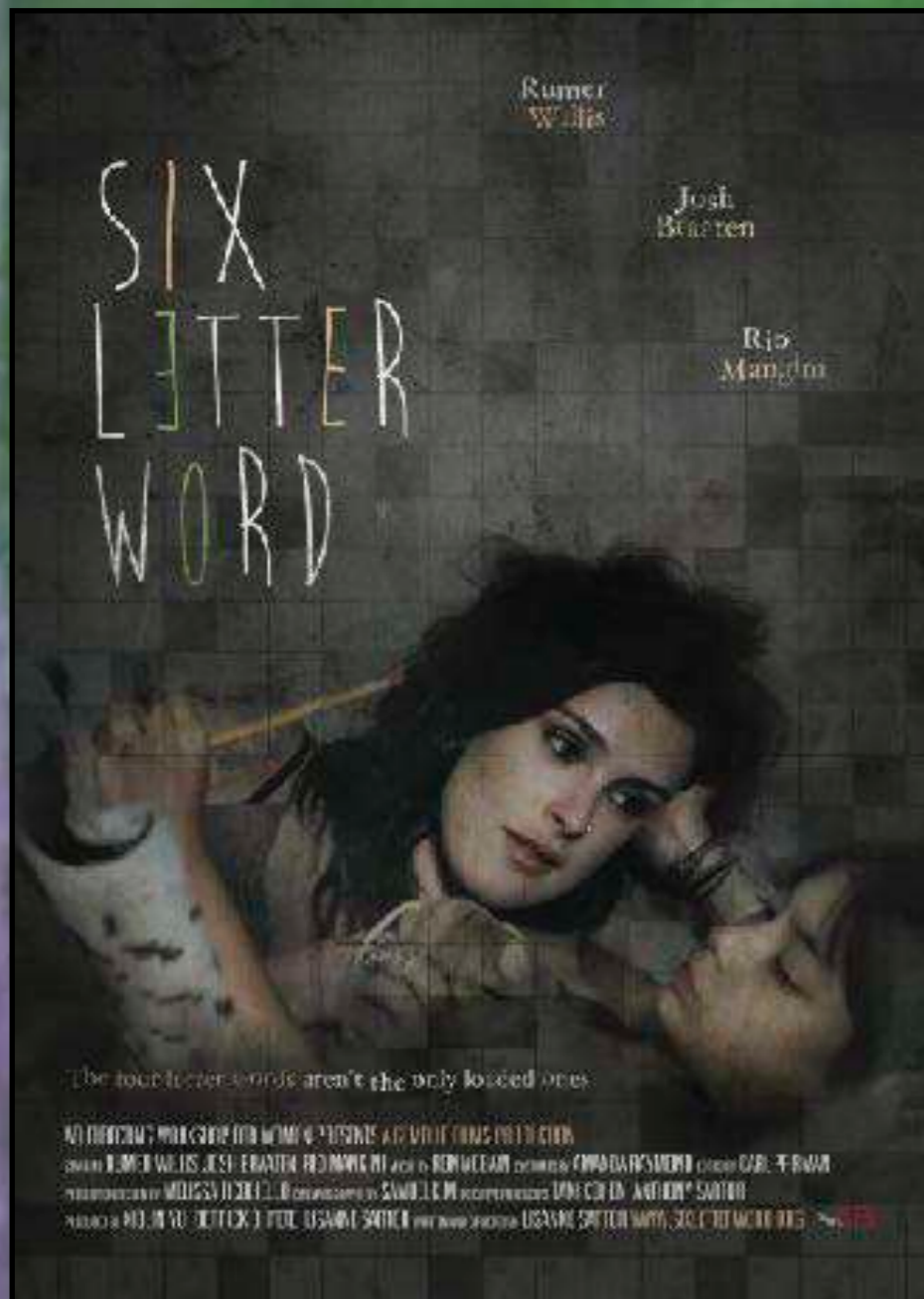
I set aside big specs, wrote a script about autism – SIX LETTER WORD – and made it into a short film through the AFI Directing Workshop for Women. It screened in over fifty-five festivals worldwide, including Telluride and Cannes. Though I wasn't my protagonist, I'd been where she was. Many people have. I wanted those people to know they're not alone. I found my voice.

I wrote the feature version of SIX LETTER WORD because I'm still a driven filmmaker, though now I'm driven in a different direction – to make movies that help people understand each other in all their idiosyncratic glory. But SIX LETTER WORD is not a "disease of the week" movie. It's a personal story about a family struggling and longing to connect, failing and trying again. I plan to tell this story so that other people can see themselves in my characters whether they have autism or not, and understand that no one is truly "typical." Being different is what makes us interesting, human and worth fighting for. Different is normal. Valuable. Necessary. And very, very human.

THE FEATURE SCRIPT

The feature script **SIX LETTER WORD** was adapted from my award-winning short film **SIX LETTER WORD**, which screened in over fifty-five festivals worldwide (details – next page). The script won the Drama Category of the **2017 Script Pipeline First Look Project**. It was featured on **The Black List website** this past October and was also performed live as **episode #25** of the webseries **Popcorn Talk: The Unproduced Table Read**. The script has twice made it through the second round of the Sundance Screenwriters Lab, once through second round of the Sloan Foundation Fellowship and was a finalist in the **Hedgebrook Screenwriters Lab**. I also received a renowned **Hedgebrook residency** and a place in the **WGA Feature Writer Access Project** with this script.





THE SHORT FILM

I wrote and directed the short film SIX LETTER WORD via the prestigious AFI Directing Workshop for Women. The short stars Rumer Willis, Josh Braaten, Suzanne Cryer and Rio Mangini. It screened at over fifty-five film festivals worldwide, including Telluride and Cannes ([click here for full list](#)). You can view the trailer to the short [here](#), the behind the scenes video [here](#), and the short film itself [here](#).

This [Indigogo video](#), which I used to raise money for the short film, gives a good idea of who I am, the story behind the short and what autism is, as does this [interview](#) I did for the LA Shorts Fest.



ZOE



ZOE has an uncanny affinity for numbers and lives for her eight-year-old son, JAX, a quirky kid who substitutes crossword puzzles for friends; however, the mother and son have little in common. Over the years, Zoe's learned to bond with Jax over Greek astronomy and mythology. She's covered their ceilings with glow-in-the-dark stars arranged in constellations. At bedtime, they gaze at those stars while Zoe tells Jax stories about the Greek heroes and beasts who reside among them. Still, they clash often and depend on their crotchety neighbor, GLORIA to negotiate between them. Zoe's never been close to MARILYN, her wealthy, many-times married mom. Zoe spent most of her teens running away from Marilyn but now that Jax needs help Zoe can't give him, Zoe's forced to turn to her. The results certainly won't be pretty and may well be disastrous.



MARILYN

MARILYN has never understood her daughter, Zoe. As a kid, Zoe was wildly noise sensitive and fixated on numbers. Back then, autism wasn't a mainstream topic but even if it had been, Marilyn wouldn't have had time for Zoe's dramatics. She was focused on finding rich husbands to take care of them. Never again would she and Zoe huddle in rat and gang-infested tenements as they did when Zoe was a toddler and Zoe's drug-addict father disappeared for weeks on end. When Zoe became an angry teen, she repeatedly ran away. By that time, Marilyn was on her third rich husband, living the pampered life she'd always dreamed of, but the luxury didn't help the time she spent waiting for Zoe to come home, particularly when Zoe stopped coming home at all. Marilyn's desperately missed Zoe during their years of estrangement. Jax is Marilyn's second chance at parenthood. She's determined to seize that chance no matter what the consequences.



JAX

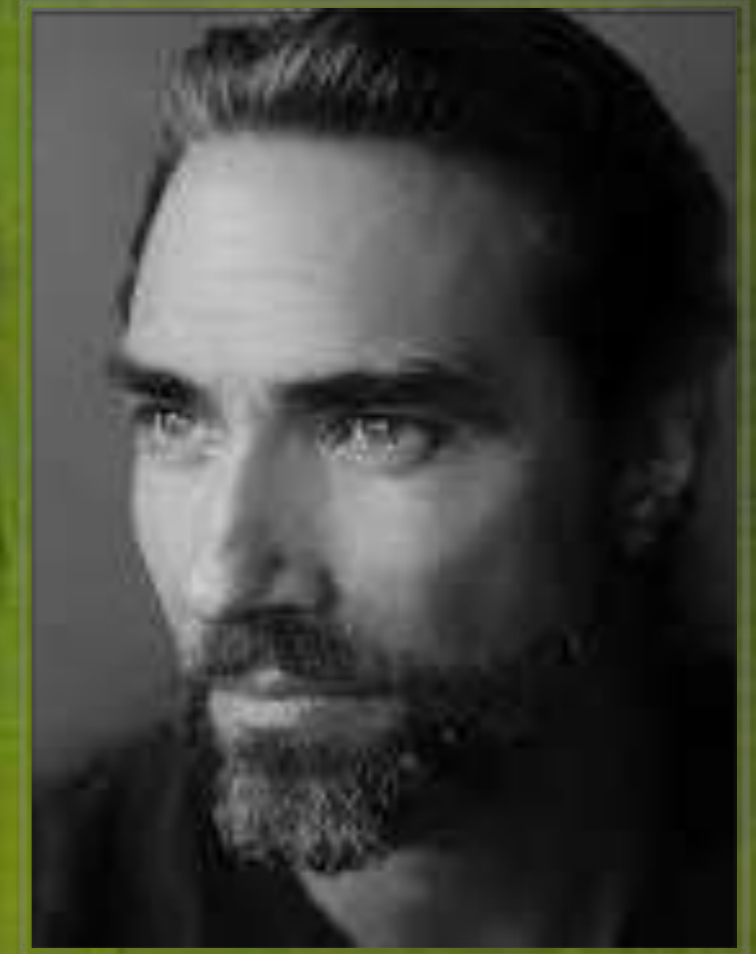


JAX (8) usually doesn't miss having friends because his crosswords make a lot more sense to him than kids do. Besides, his beloved babysitter, Gloria, also loves crosswords. He and Gloria are in training for the American Crossword Tournament. Jax is going to win Juniors and Gloria's going to win Seniors. His mom will be proud of him and finally understand that crosswords' order and challenge help soothe the jangly emotions that often crowd his head. He goes to a scary place when the jangly stuff takes over. His crosswords keep the jangly stuff away. Bedtime is the one time he happily makes room for anything other than crosswords. When he and Zoe lie together gazing up at the glow-in-the-dark stars, he feels safe. And loved. It's his favorite time of day. He's never told Zoe that. She should just know what he's thinking, right?



PETE

PETE is a dedicated neuropsychologist who's buried himself in his work since his six-year-old daughter, Isabella, died from cancer the year before. He and his ex-wife, **CARLA**, couldn't make their marriage work after Isabella died because they grieved so differently. Carla has thrown herself into remembering Isabella in every way possible, even becoming a docent at the zoo, Isabella's favorite place in the world. Pete can't even look at pictures of Isabella. Forget walking into the zoo. He's tried. Many times. But he can't be around happy families when his no longer exists. His work sustains him, helps him forget for a time that he's alone and Isabella's never coming back. When he meets Zoe and Jax, he makes a connection with them that he's never made with patients before. He sees how much they're struggling, how little they know, and he remembers feeling that helpless. If he can take away Zoe and Jax's pain, maybe his own will disappear.



ZOE & JAX'S APARTMENT



MARILYN'S HOUSE



ZOE'S DINER/PETE'S APARTMENT



THE TEAM



Lisanne Sartor
DIRECTOR

Lisanne Sartor is an award-winning writer/director whose short films have screened all over the world. Her short **SIX LETTER WORD** screened at over 55 film festivals, including Telluride and the American Pavilion at Cannes. In 2012, she was one of 8 women selected for the prestigious AFI Directing Workshop for Women. In 2016, she was one of 40 women to receive a renowned Hedgebrook residency and one of 9 writers to be a WGA Feature Writer Access Honoree. In 2017, she was one of 25 women to be selected for the AFI-Fox Bridge Program, designed to get more women directing studio features. Her original screenplay, CLEAVERVILLE aired on Lifetime as an MOW. She was a DGA assistant director, graduated from Yale and has a UCLA Screenwriting MFA. She teaches screenwriting at UCLA, Stephens College and the AFI DWW, and is Board President for **The CineStory Foundation**, a screenwriting education non-profit. For more information about Lisanne, please click [here](#).



Tani Cohen
PRODUCER

Tani Cohen is an independent producer whose most recent film, NO PAY, NUDITY, starring Gabriel Byrne and Nathan Lane, was released theatrically in November 2016 and is currently airing on Starz. She is in post-production on the indie feature, OFFER AND COMPROMISE, starring Tom Cavanagh and Bellamy Young. Cohen started her film career working for Brian DePalma's Fetch Productions. Her first venture into producing was the critical Sundance indie hit, INSIDE MONKEY ZETTERLAND. Cohen is Emmy nominated for the Showtime feature, SNOW IN AUGUST, and HBO documentary, MR. CONSERVATIVE: GOLDWATER ON GOLDWATER. Overall, she has produced 16 feature films. Additional producing credits include two pilots with Fox and multiple shorts. She sits on the board of the screenwriter-mentorship organization, The CineStory Foundation, and is a graduate of Loyola Marymount University.

THE TEAM



Meg Morman

Sundy Boling

MORMAN BOLING CASTING

Meg Morman and Sunday "Sunny" Boling met in the Feature Casting office of 20th Century Fox, working on a variety of films, including ICE AGE, DUDE, WHERE'S MY CAR?, FROM HELL, ONE HOUR PHOTO, UNFAITHFUL and BEHIND EMENY LINES. They opened their own shingle in late 2004.

Credits include the award winning films HELLO, MY NAME IS DORIS (starring Sally Field, Max Greenfield, Stephen Root, Tyne Daly), AMERICAN FABLE (starring Peyton Kennedy, Richard Schiff,

Kip Pardue, Zuleikha Robinson), NATURAL SELECTION (starring Rachael Harris, Matt O'Leary, Jon Gries), I BELIEVE IN UNICORNS (starring Peter Vack, Natalia Dyer), TAKE ME HOME (starring Sam Jaeger, Victor Garber, Lin Shaye), DEAR LEMON LIMA (starring Melissa Leo, Beth Grant, Elaine Hendrix, Meaghan Jette Martin, Vanessa Marano), MAGIC VALLEY (starring Scott Glenn, Kyle Gallner, Alison Elliott, Brad William Henke and Will Estes), and MISSISSIPPI DAMNED (starring Malcolm Goodwin, Tessa Thompson, DB Woodside, Malcolm David Kelley). Meg and Sunny also cast the hugely successful feature WAITRESS (starring Keri Russell, Nathan Fillion, Jeremy Sisto, Cheryl Hines and Andy Griffith), which premiered at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival. In addition, STEAL ME and ME & YOU & EVERYONE WE KNOW were both official selections of the 2005 Sundance Film Festival; ME & YOU & EVERYONE WE KNOW also went on to win the Special Jury Prize for Originality of Vision as well as the Golden Camera Award at Cannes.