On February 24, 2009, the Yale Daily News published an article about undergraduate filmmaking at Yale. A number of student filmmakers were interviewed for the piece, including a sophomore majoring in American Studies named Max Barbakow. The future PALM SPRINGS director spoke about his love of filmmaking for filmmaking’s sake. And when asked why he and his friends were making their short film CO-OP, Barbakow’s answer was simple: they wanted to. Later that year, a YDN review of the short described it as a “strange amalgam of elements that are simultaneously disturbing, disquieting and whimsical,” evoking both Darren Aronofsky’s REQUIEM FOR A DREAM and the Coen brothers’ BARTON FINK. Similarly disquieting and whimsical is Barbakow’s feature debut, the 2020 science-fiction romantic comedy PALM SPRINGS.

Barbakow met screenwriter Andy Siara in 2013. It was their first day as fellows at the American Film Institute and the two became fast friends, laying the foundation for a rich creative partnership. As Siara recently told a class of AFI Fellows, PALM SPRINGS “was born out of that friendship.” Upon graduating in 2015, Barbakow and Siara began attending what felt like an endless string of weddings in Southern California. The experience sparked a thought: what sort of situation would cause a commitment-averse person to suffer an astronomical amount of existential dread? Perhaps being stuck at a wedding for all eternity as a hopelessly single person. This hypothetical question led to three years of writing, rewriting, and refining. When Siara’s screenplay caught the eye of SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE alum Andy Samberg, the film had not only found its star but its producer. Samberg was crucial in getting PALM SPRINGS out of development and into production.

Cinematographer Quyen Tran was also crucial to the film’s production. She and Barbakow planned out each and every shot, sometimes using Playmobil sets belonging to Tran’s kids as stand-ins for Samberg and co-star Cristin Milioti. Inspired by the look and tone of Paul Thomas Anderson’s PUNCH-DRUNK LOVE, Tran used anamorphic lenses for the 22-day shoot. This choice gave every shot some fuzziness at the edges, bringing out the film’s darker, existential themes. Given the film’s relatively small budget, Tran relied on her documentary experience to capture some scenes in a single take without rehearsal, including the many forms of revenge taken by Roy Schlieffen, the character played with verve and intensity by J.K. Simmons. Tran also made sure to emphasize the heat of the California sun. “We were out there shooting with no coverage in the full sun,” she told Variety. “We didn’t want to beautify it at all.” Visually and tonally, PALM SPRINGS achieves this effect, carefully balancing lightness with darkness.

The film went on to have its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival on January 26, 2020. When the indie distributor NEON and the streaming service Hulu bought the distribution rights for a record-breaking $22 million, they planned for a theatrical release later that year. But their plans were canceled after the world-halting rise of COVID-19, making tonight’s screening of PALM SPRINGS doubly special. Not only is it a theatrical presentation of a movie primarily seen via streaming, but it’s also the world premiere of the one and only 35mm film print of the movie in existence. The newly-made print has now become part of the Yale Film Archive collection, joining the work of Bill Condon, Spike Lee, Billy Wilder, Tsai Ming-liang, and Donna Deitch—all directors whose films will be showcased in upcoming Treasures screenings. This is cause for celebration. In an era when movies and television can disappear from streaming services overnight, the work of film archives has become more important than ever. No matter the fate of the so-called “streaming wars,” rest assured that PALM SPRINGS will not only endure but thrive, time after time after time.

**DIRECTED BY** MAX BARBAKOW
**SCREENPLAY BY** ANDY SIARA
**CINEMATOGRAPHY BY** QUYEN “Q” TRAN
**DISTRIBUTED BY** NEON AND HULU (2020), 90 MINS.
**STARRING** ANDY SAMBERG, CRISTIN MILIOTI, J.K. SIMMONS, PETER GALLAGHER, AND JUNE SQUIBB

**FILM NOTES BY** SAM GALLEN