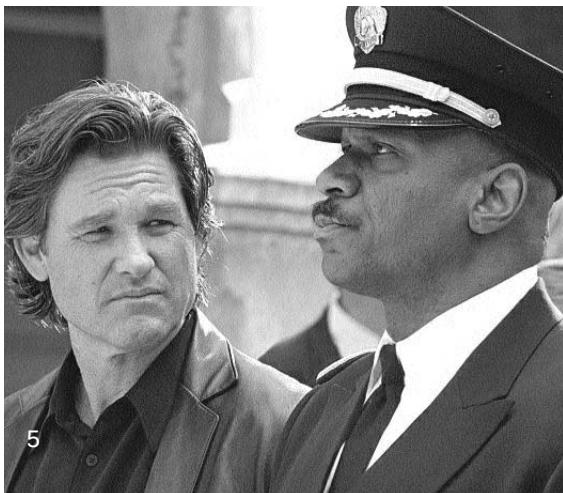




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Screenwriter's Monthly

Vol. 02 No. 03

April 2003

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Screenwriter's Monthly (ISSN 1542-3883) is published 10 times per year (January and July are off months). All articles and interviews represent the views of the authors, and not necessarily those of the editors, publisher, or producers. For advertising please call Joe at (702) 240-7759 or see our web site: screenwritersmonthly.com

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Screenwriter's Monthly

A Division of MoviePartners, Inc.

P.O. Box 9010

2139 North 12th st. Unit 10

Grand Junction, CO 81501-7600

editor's note dark blue script review

I think all we can ask of a screenplay is that the writer had something to say, even if the narrative ultimately lends itself to a formulaic construction that does little to move the genre forward, or for that matter, backward.

David Ayer's *Dark Blue*, from a story by James Ellroy, is familiar in both its setup and payoff, and does not go near as far in its treatment of the LAPD as his earlier script *Training Day*.

What I like about the script is the "gunfighter" mentality of the early westerns that it relies on. Where *Training Day* is the revelation of the street gangster mentality of a modern day cop, *Dark Blue* returns to its roots of the old westerns.

The story centers on Sgt. (later Lieutenant) Eldon Perry, Jr. (Kurt Russell) and his young partner Bobby Tedrow (Scott Speedman). Set in the days leading up to the Rodney King riots in April 1992, when four white officers were acquitted, Perry and Tedrow are members of an elite unit called Special Investigations Squad (SIS) and are assigned a high-profile quadruple homicide: a vicious attack in an oriental store where the bandits executed numerous people, including a child. A heated political climate, along with serious racial tensions, seethes underneath the top layer of a corrupt police department.

In stark contrast to *Training Day*, virtually every white cop we meet is, to some degree, corrupt; whereas, the black cops are not. They are all flawed characters, nonetheless. The main characters are: Tom Van Meter, who runs the SIS, a legend among the LAPD, and who works behind the scenes yielding an enormous amount of influence. He is corrupt through and through; Deputy Chief Barcomb, Van Meter's cohort; Assistant Chief Arthur Holland, a black cop who "fought his way to the top of a segregated LAPD"; and finally his black assistant, Beth Williamson.

I'm fairly certain from my recollection of the screening, that the movie waters down some of the racial tension in the script, removing numerous racial slurs used by Perry and others.

What attracted me to the story were the characters, all of which were well written. I liked Arthur Holland's character, played by Ving Rhames. Although, once again, the movie removes some of the political nature of the script by throwing out several scenes with Holland's character—scenes that carried narrative weight.

If you ask any director or editor they will tell you anything that isn't absolutely necessary to the story's spine, or any scene that does not "move the story forward," will be cut. Sometimes, though, in doing so, they remove layers from the story. There are subtle touches that some gifted writers can add to small scenes that have important significance to the characters, or even to the motivations of the story.

This watering down of the story's texture is sometimes detrimental to the narrative's makeup. I think we have one of these instances here, though it's not as altering as were some of the changes or "removals" from other recent screenplays I've read, such as David Self's *Road to*

Perdition, or to a lesser extent, Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation*. All of these are fine movies, but are examples where subtext and richness to the story were lost from omissions by the creative team, including the screenwriter.

Eldon Perry does the dirty work for Van Meter, including knocking off bad guys for crimes they didn't commit. Taking back the streets in these western towns in the modern police drama means getting down and dirty.

PERRY

I'd shoot unarmed men in the back. Fabricate evidence. Lie in reports. Lie to investigators. Lie in court.

In a world where the squeaky clean cops are ridiculed—today's audiences wouldn't accept such a depiction—these play-by-your-own-rules cops, in a weird way, are admired. It's an expectation of the genre that we have right now.

We're constantly told that our characters should have flaws in order for them to be real. Only now it's been overhauled to the point where cop heroes are not just flawed, but corrupt. Think of the "good badman" of the early silent era.

PERRY

I was raised up to be a killer by a family of killers. I made a career out of going after the worst, most dangerous, parasitic sons of bitches to walk the earth. I was happier than the devil in hell.

The word "killer" was changed by the shooting of the script to "gunfighters," but the meaning is still the same when Perry announces his twisted heritage and legacy as one more generation of western lawmen.

PERRY

...Law enforcement's been my family's business since Los Angeles was a frontier township. I sat on my grandfather's lap and listened to his stories... my dad was a gunslinger just like his dad. He put down eleven men with his service thirty eight. Pimps, murderers and robbers. Dad preyed on the predators that preyed on the city. There was never any doubt I'd be a cop.

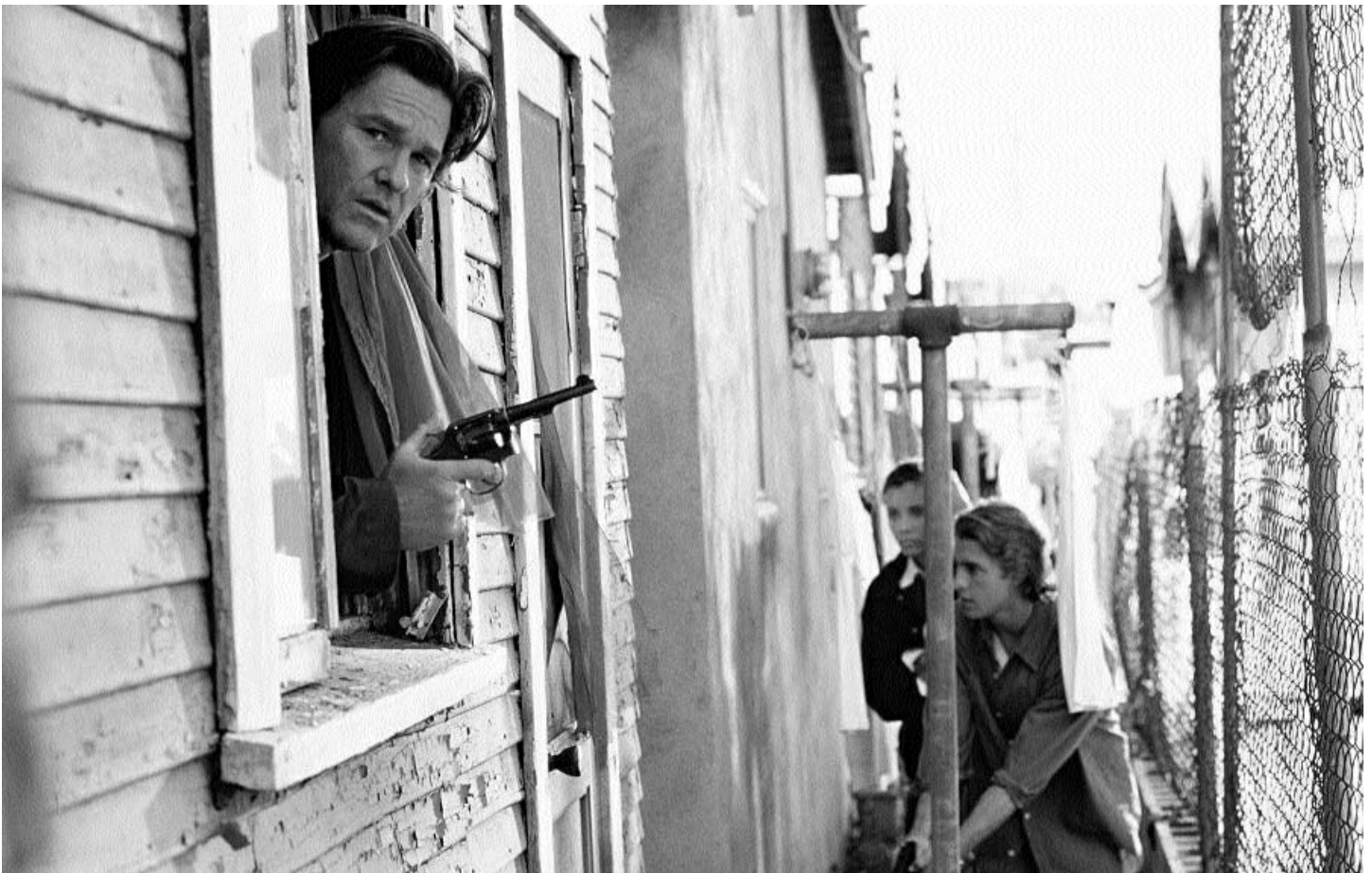
Today's police dramas almost always involve corrupt and crooked cops. The new cop anti-hero is a twisted individual that is sometimes redeemable (*Dark Blue*) and sometimes unredeemable (*Training Day*). The screen time given to the good cop is becoming significantly lessened in the face of the bad cop, who is now the focal point of the modern police drama. Part of that may be a change in societal views of a "policeman." We've come to accept them as not just flawed, but downright brutal. Is this a product of the environment or just the dressing up of a story in order to sell tickets? The answer seems obvious.

—Chris

David Ayer

Gets Dark

by Fred Topel



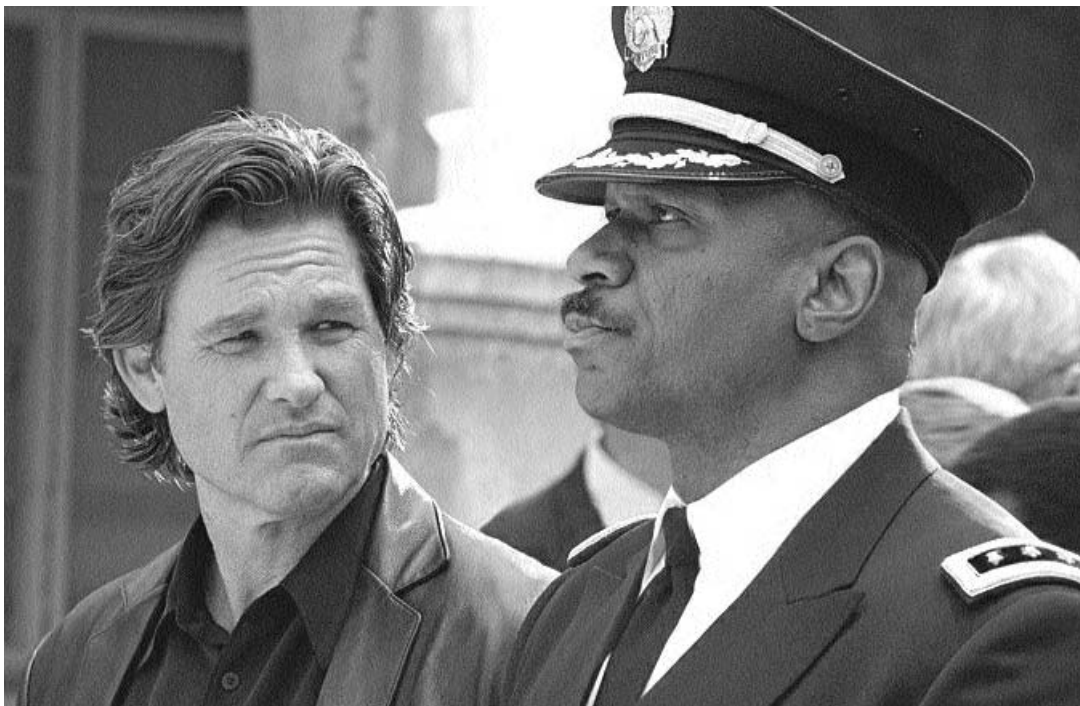
Kurt Russell as Eldon Perry in *Dark Blue*. All photos by Robert Zuckerman

David Ayer looks more like the guy his characters would arrest than the guy who wrote about the characters. With a shaved head and goatee, he fits the gangster stereotype. Talking to him, though, reveals a man of ambition and intellect. After a successful script-doctoring career and after writing the script that gave Denzel Washington his Oscar for *Training Day*, Ayer took on another sort of corrupt cop story, *Dark Blue*.

Set against the backdrop of the 1992 L.A. riots, *Dark Blue* tells the story of Eldon Perry (Kurt Russell). Perry is a third generation

police officer, practicing law enforcement his own way until he realizes the end might not justify the means. As he contemplates the ramifications of his tactics of planting weapons and shooting false suspects, it may be too late to do the right thing.

Ayer was an electrician when he started writing scripts. He didn't have any Hollywood connections, just a passion and the patience to see it through. He inherited the *Dark Blue* script from James Ellroy and made it his own. Find out what he thinks about corrupt cops and about the system of breaking into Hollywood.



Kurt Russell with Ving Rhames as Arthur Holland

Why make Holland's assistant a woman? Efficiency of combining two characters. Ving Rhames' character had had an affair in the past so I thought [to make it his assistant.] My mantra in writing is to make everything personal and to make it so claustrophobic and bring it in, make the circle of friends as small as possible. It was just screenwriting efficiency you could say. I kind of think of her as the only sane person in the movie because if you look at it, everybody else has the spin going on and their own personal issues and whatever. But she's kind of the voice of reason to a great degree and people revolve around her and lean on her, which I think is interesting. I always like that one character that's not messed up in a movie.

Are you the corrupt cop guy now? I've definitely been writing in the law enforcement zone for awhile now. I'm going to be the whatever-they-pay-me-to-write guy.

How did it work out that you did two high-profile corruption stories? Well, *Training Day*, I wrote that in '95. That was kind of like my calling card script. Then, based on that, I started getting other rewrite jobs. And Alphaville [production company for *Dark Blue*], I guess they weren't thinking very well at the time, they actually hired me. I was like nobody and really didn't have much experience rewriting. So, they took a big gamble on me. This was '96, so this project's been a while, been around a long time. I was proud to do it. I was lucky to get the job and glad it worked out.

Did you work with Ellroy? No. It's based on James Ellroy's first screenplay. I guess it was originally about the 1965 riots and then he had done some work to update it and converge all this to the '92 riots. Hopefully, we won't have to update it ever again for new riots. He wanted to work on other projects and he had taken the script as far as he could. And, you know, screenwriting is like the Pony Express. If a horse gets tired, you grab a fresh horse and keep going. So, it's whatever it takes to get the movie done.

Did you have free reign in adapting it? He had the basic story there, but it felt very novelistic. It was very dense, lots of storylines and my task was to narrow it down and make it more of a movie and pick the stories to focus on. Now, as far as execution, yeah, I made some major changes in the story. I consolidated characters. I changed Holland's assistant from a male to a female. She became Michael Michele's character. I made Bobby Keough, Scott Speedman's character, younger. It had been skewed to a 40-plus man and I felt that a guy at that age would know the ropes already and wouldn't be as susceptible to Eldon Perry's magic.

Did you write with Kurt Russell in mind? When I came on board, I was really working closely with Caldecot Chubb, the producer on this. And he had told me that Kurt was interested in this project. Jim Jacks, the other producer, is a good friend of Kurt Russell's and was kind of like, "Hey, buddy, do the movie." So, I never had any other actor in mind other than Kurt for the part. Normally, I try not to let thinking of an actor prejudice the role I'm writing and let the character be himself without being informed in that manner. But, I mean, I wrote this for Kurt. I saw him in the role. I think it was Kurt and I was ecstatic when the deal finally closed and he finally decided to do it. And then he knocked it out of the park and he's great. It's sick.

Was Eldon Perry less sympathetic in Ellroy's version? The original script was a lot rougher. Again, the scope was a lot bigger, but there were things that I didn't think you could quite pull off in a movie that you can get away with in a novel. Because a movie's a visual medium and you see it, things can be a little stronger than they are just on the page. So, there were things I pulled back. And Eldon Perry is a very harsh, misogynistic, racist, brutal character and he was even more so.

Were you in LA during the Rodney King beating? Yeah, I was here. I was living in L.A. and it just seemed like business-as-usual. The difference was that it got videotaped.

What do you mean "business as usual"? Well, I grew up in South Central. I lived there and LAPD operated in a certain manner at that time period. I'm talking about the '80s and early '90s. Those were the tactics they used. That was how they took down people who were not cooperative when they didn't want to blast them. They could have blown Rodney King out of his boots. This was pre-bean bag and obviously two tazers didn't work on him. Yes, a line was crossed. That's not clean law enforcement you can say.

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What is your relationship with the LAPD? I try and stay out of their jails as much as possible, but aside from that, the bottom line is this is a movie. This is fiction. It's loosely based on real events and it's an opportunity to tell a story and L.A. is a great arena. I think I write about the L.A. beat because A) I'm from L.A., and B) I think it's just more interesting than the traditional Sidney Lumet-esque kind of borough police corruption we normally see.

Do you feel the LAPD is fair game? I'm not coming after them with a shot gun. I'm not attacking the department or anything like that. I mean, I've met some amazing cops. I've met some heart-breakingly dedicated cops. I've just seen what the wrong kind of culture in a police department can do. Now, having said that, they've totally changed that culture. They've changed the makeup of their patrol force. I mean, they've gone to really great lengths. They've opened up to civilian oversight. So, this movie's a period piece in essence, almost a historical piece. I mean, look at the giant cell phones.

How did you write the riot scenes? I watched the riots. I sat on the Hollywood Hills and watched the city burn. I think at one point I counted 29 structure fires and you couldn't hear one siren. Then, I knew people who were on the streets. I read a lot of stories. I talked to people. I did the research. Kind of by osmosis, but people running around breaking stuff is people running around breaking stuff.

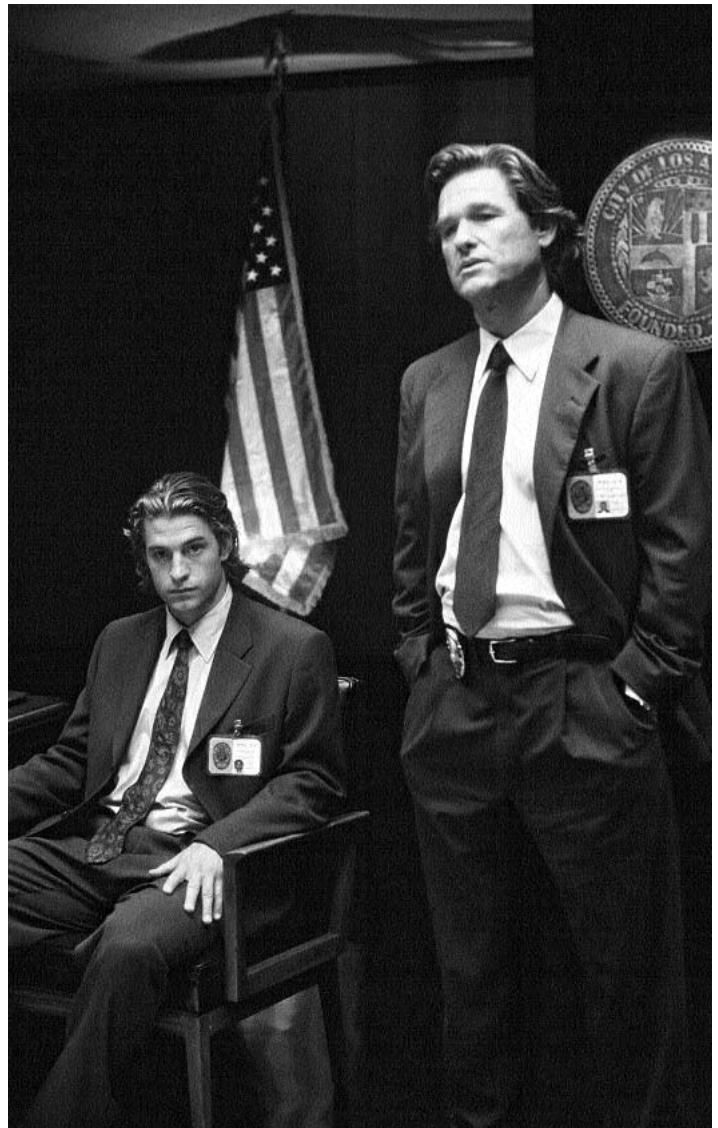
Were the riots ever a bigger part of the script? They were always a backdrop and this isn't the gestalt of the L.A. riots movie. This movie isn't about the L.A. riots. The riots are a backdrop. They're a ticking clock. They're a metaphor for the end result of what Eldon Perry's style of policing gets you. But I never try to get too deep into what that's all about. It is self-explanatory from the movie. There's definitely a lot of stuff addressed there.

Strip club scenes and cop movies seem to go hand-in-hand. Oh, it's mandatory. You gotta have a strip club scene. If your shoe leather trail isn't taking you to a dancer, something's wrong with your case. I had a thrill writing that.

Why wasn't Holland (Ving Rhames) a bigger character? He was. He had a really big scene in the beginning, but a movie has its own tyranny of pace. You've got to get into the story and you've got to get the story cracking and I tried to develop Holland as much as possible. I actually wrote him as a much larger, much more involved, much more politically rounded character. So, it was a little heartbreaking to see some of his scenes go, but the focus of the story is Kurt Russell. You've got to service your principals.

What scenes got cut? There was a scene of Arthur Holland being courted by Cleveland police commissioners. We kind of start to see Arthur Holland setting up his plans earlier and it makes him a little bit more formidable to see that he is a force to be reckoned with early on. But again, in the name of getting the story kicked off, you had to make hard choices.

Why was it important to redeem Perry in the end? Your other corruption movie doesn't redeem the corrupt cop.



Scott Speedman as Bobby Keough and Kurt Russell

Because the reason I was attracted to this project was I think it said that a man like Eldon Perry, someone so almost genetically predisposed to his attitudes and mentality, can change, can see the truth. If the scales can fall from that guy's eyes and he can change and have an honest transformation, then there's hope for all of us. That was the power of the message that I saw and that's why I did the movie. I mean, *Training Day* was more about the street level and was really a character study. I see this as almost a system study. The nuts and bolts of police corruption, the nuts and bolts of secret policing. The LAPD's networks are notorious for intelligence files on criminal personalities. I don't know if they still actively seek that kind of intelligence out, but they have incredibly sophisticated intelligence on it. So, you wonder what has happened to all that information and what has it been used for? I mean, it's an incredible amount of power and no civilians can ever unlock those cabinets. So, it's something that they guard very closely. They are just ruminations on how such a system can operate.

Does the end justify the means? Well, there's the infamous question they propose ethics students and that's if your wife is sick and you don't have the money for the medicine, is it okay to go to

Adaptation

the drug store and steal the medicine? I say yeah, absolutely. I'm not gonna let my old lady die. Having said that, policing is a different matter because you're talking about other people's lives and affecting other people's lives. This country hasn't cracked the code of law enforcement yet, and it's up against an astoundingly formidable enemy in the form of organized crime and gangs. If the rules aren't getting the job done, then we have to change the rules. That's the way I see it. Law enforcement needs a choice to get the criminal organizations out of the community which makes life bad for everybody. If they're breaking the rules, then let's change the rules or let's look at the tactics or let's modify something.

How did you get into screenwriting from being an electrician? I was working construction after I got out of the service and I went to wire up a screenwriter's house and told him sea stories. He thought I had something to say and talked me into writing a script. And I went and wrote my first script. To think someone of that caliber in the industry was interested in me, you gotta do it. To not take a chance would be a big mistake. I thought my first script would sell for a million and I'd never have to write again. I was really, really wrong.

Could you believe how big *Training Day* became? No. That was a shocker. I wrote that script on spec out of frustration. I was trying to make sales writing mediocre scripts, I guess, trying to anticipate what the studios would buy, and I wrote that for myself. I was tired of second guessing the system and I just wanted to say something.

What's it like to see Denzel give that performance and win an award? It was outstanding. I was happy to help him get there. It was a great feeling.

How was your original script for *Training Day* different from the final film? Vast amounts of it, amazingly, made it through the development process unscathed. There was more of an action ending that had to be added on so you could sell the movie to the theater owners, because they know what sells tickets. Action sells tickets. So, I had to graft on the action module.

How did your script end? Just very simply with Ethan Hawke's character, Jake, just dumping the money on the bed and walking away. I think we knew at that point that that was it. But that was the art movie version. That would have been a version no one saw. When you're going full freight on a studio project, come on, it's commercial speech. It's for the profit, not show art, so we've got to be realistic.

What advice would you have for screenwriters trying to get their scripts read? No good story is going to remain untold. That's axiomatic. If the script's good enough, it'll get made.

How do you get it to people? I think it's less a matter of access and more a matter of having quality material, because there's no conspiracy in Hollywood to exclude writers. There's no walls. It's not there. Hollywood casts a very wide net in search of good material.

How do you get an agent then? Write a great script. Spend thousands of hours learning how to write, re-write your script until it's great. Quit listening to your friends because they're probably not telling you the truth. "Yeah, it's good." Just learn the craft.

Have some life experience. Have a voice. Have something to say. Don't regurgitate other movies.

So what are people who have trouble getting an agent doing wrong? They need to spend 2000 more hours writing and learning how to write scripts. I'm totally convinced of that. I learned how to write by writing and writing and writing, having bad jobs and going home and writing and on weekends writing. Incessant writing. That's how you learn to write.

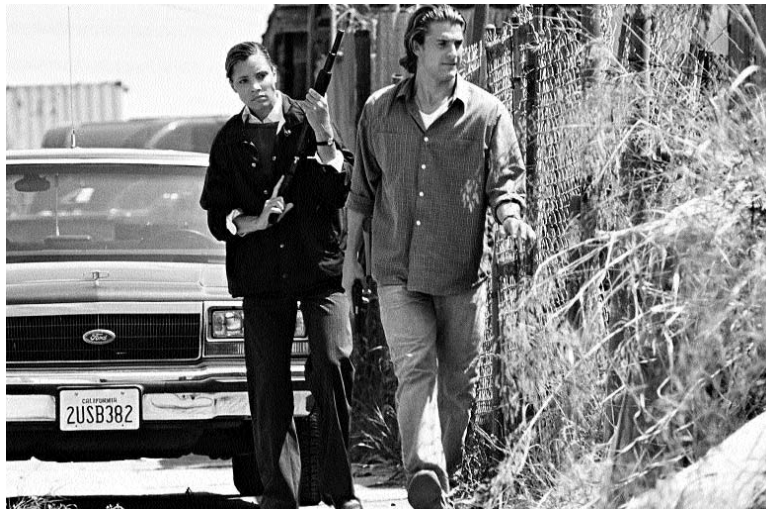
There's no way around it.

There's no shortcuts. You can't go to the right cocktail party and sell a script. That doesn't happen. The material speaks for itself. The material sells itself.

What are you writing now? I'm producing, moving into directing and I'm doing production rewrites right now for Warner Brothers. I don't know if I can say what project. I can say it's an Ethan Hawke-Angelina Jolie movie. No law enforcement.

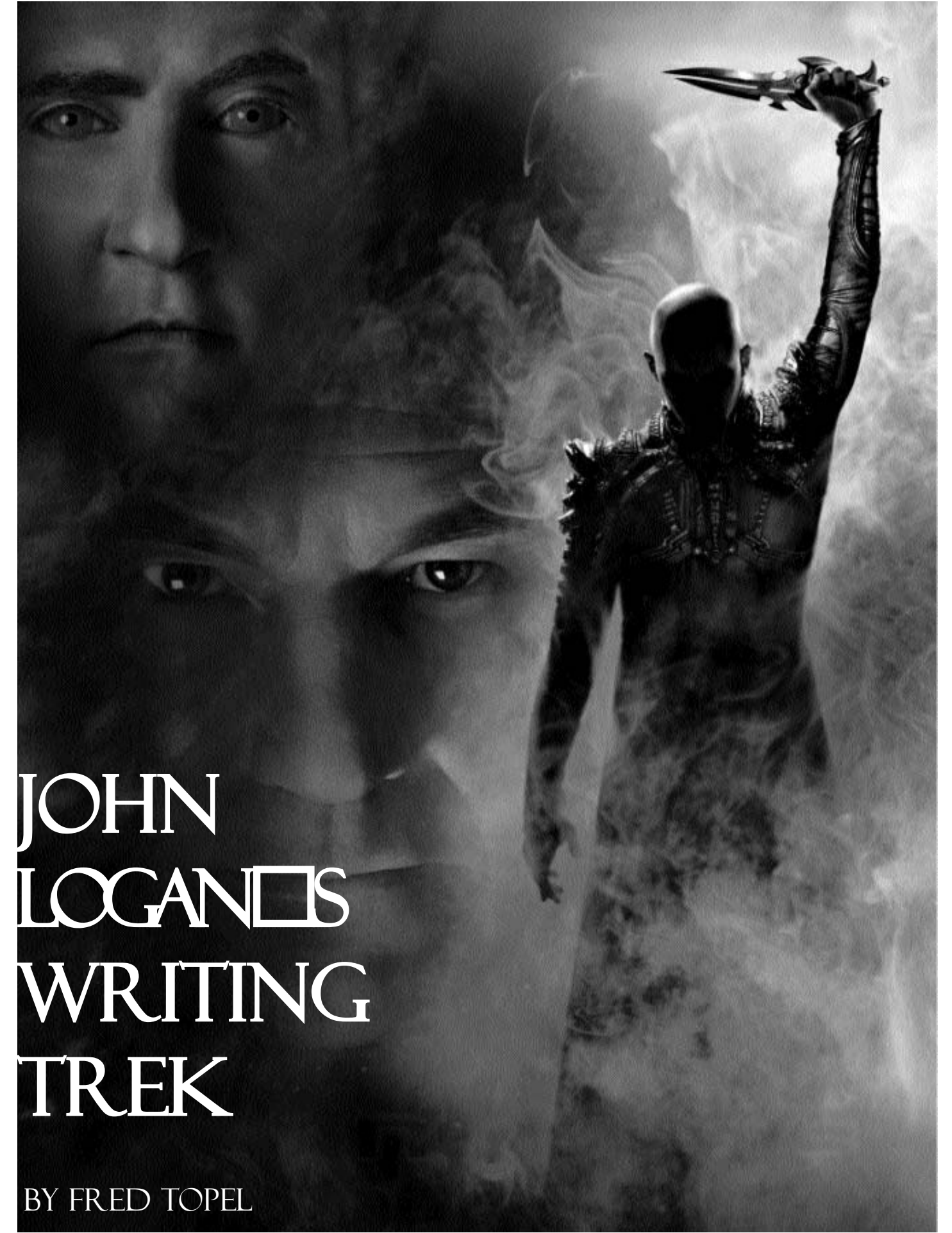
You're still script-doctoring? Script fixing, yeah. I did *Fast and the Furious*, *SWAT*, some other stuff, *U-571*. I have a knack for being able to tear down scripts and build them back up.

Do you enjoy that? Yeah. It's its own kind of reward, solving a problem. The cool thing about it is you get to go in, you get to save the day, everyone's happy and you walk away before the real problems start. So, it's real get in, get out. It can be a good life. It's tough work though, very difficult, and the pressure's astounding on an \$80 million movie. People are screaming down your neck and it gets pretty intense.



Michael Michele as Beth Williamson and Scott Speedman

Fred Topel is an experienced entertainment correspondent with a degree in Cinema and Photography from Ithaca College. He currently writes and has written for online news outlets and magazines such as *Herald Tribune Online*, *Daily Radar*, *eUniverse*, *Cinefantastique* and *The Hollywood Reporter* since graduating in May 1999.



JOHN LOGAN'S WRITING TREK

BY FRED TOPEL



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During the press rounds for the latest *Star Trek* film, *Nemesis*, John Logan was the only one who was genuinely excited. All of the cast and crew have been talking about *Star Trek* for at least 15 years, some longer, but this was Logan's first opportunity to share his love of *Trek* with the world. After writing hits like *Any Given Sunday* and *Gladiator*—for which he was nominated for an Oscar, and before going on to high profile projects about Abraham Lincoln, Howard Hughes, and a sequel to *Gladiator*—John Logan just wanted to write an episode of *Star Trek*. And with the 10th film in the series, he got his chance.

Nemesis pits the *Next Generation* crew against the Romulans, but not just any Romulans. There is a clone of Captain Picard named Shinzon. Only, without the guidance the original Picard had in life, Shinzon turned out just a little bit evil. So, Picard must face his dark side and prevent the destruction of earth, while he also faces losing his crew. Riker and Troi have gotten married and will command a new ship after this last mission. Data discovers an early prototype android named B4 that challenges his own idea of self. And, the whole thing ends in a giant spacecraft duel in the *Trek* tradition.

Logan collaborated with producer Rick Berman and star Brent Spiner on the story for *Nemesis*. When he spoke of his work, his genuine passion was clear from his enthusiastic explanations of the literary processes behind the sci-fi series. Logan has dealt with serious subject matter, but this was play time.

How did you get into *Star Trek*? My introduction to *Trek* was literally Captain Kirk on his initial voyage, first time, not even syndication. So, I was very fond of the original series.

How old are you? I'm 31 now so I was six or seven, clearly old enough to be grabbed for life. When I was a kid I think what caught my attention was the Technicolor of it all. It was Captain Kirk and he was fighting this big green lizard called a Gorn. There were

Klingons and these ships shooting each other. It was the swash-buckle of it that I think first drew me in. I think what kept me a fan was as I grew older I realized that *Trek* at it's best was a combination of phenomenal adventure with really interesting morality tales and really interesting character drama. To me that is always what *Trek* is when it's firing on all cylinders. It had kick-ass action and really compelling human stories at the same time.

Do you believe in the theory that even numbered *Star Trek* movies are good and the odd ones are bad? Not at all. Let's put it this way. I'm glad I did [write an even numbered *Star Trek* movie] but I don't believe in it at all.

So, were you a continuity freak during the preproduction meetings? Yes. I can't keep the fan in me down. I tried to whip him down and say that I'm a serious screenwriter but then we'd talk about something and I'd say, "No, we can't do that because in episode 47, Dr. Soong said this..." They would wait for me to finish and we'd dive back into our work.

As a fan, why was the wedding scene so important? The opening with the wedding was of primary importance because my approach all the way along with *Nemesis* was let's take some risks and be somewhat provocative in terms of this story. When I first got the job, a friend of mine said, "Well, it's a franchise movie and you have to leave all the toys in the toolbox when you're done." I said, "No, I have no interest in doing that" and thankfully Rick and Brent and Patrick [Stewart], everyone at Paramount was totally excited about the idea of being a little more radical and saying that time is moving on. These people don't live in a time bubble of the Enterprise. They have careers, they have lives. So, the genesis, if you will, of the idea was that time moves on and they deal with that. The manifestations of that are Riker is finally becoming a captain and getting his own command and Riker and Deanna are finally getting married. There was subplot with Beverly going off to head Starfleet Medical. All the way along those themes were of

primary importance because that's sort of what I wanted to do. To me one of the great moments of the entire *Star Trek* canons in *Star Trek II* when Captain Kirk gets glasses. You say, "You know, these people are getting older. Let's acknowledge that. We're getting older too. Let's just make this part of the story." So, the idea of opening with the wedding was really important to say to the audience, "That's what we're doing in this movie. You're not just going to be watching these same people in their same positions forever."

When Picard and the others were being chased by those Mad Max guys on the planet where they find B4, why didn't they set the phasers on wide shot and knock them all out? That's an interesting question. Anyone who's not a *Trek* fan, stop listening because we're about to get into it now. Ever since the original series episode, "A Piece of the Action" when we saw that you could do wide beam on the phaser, it has practically never been used since then. Because there are so many circumstances where you say, "They can do it from the ship. They can use wide beam and block a city block of people. Why don't you use it?" It's very rarely used and as a dramatist I know why, because as a dramatist it kills you. If you can use wide beam stun then you're heroes don't have to do anything.

Or use the transporter? Yeah, that's true. "Get me out of here." "They can't get me out of here for whatever [reason]." Half of my job is to say how can these things not work?

What is the philosophical heart of the story? As a dramatist my initial area of interest was, give the protagonist and the antagonist something to do. Give Picard a villain worthy of him. Find a really intense villain. And we eventually did that through a lot of work with Shinzon, creating I think a very compelling antagonist who has a very intense personal relationship with Picard because he is in fact Picard. As a dramatist, once that relationship was in place, everything sort of began to revolve around that sun of the choices we make and the destiny we get because of that. Shinzon never knew human beings. That's why it's so compelling when he says, "Tell me what it is to be human. I don't know." And he makes certain choices that lead him to his end and they obviously make Picard think about choices he made when he was a young man which led him to be the captain of the flagship of the federation. Of all those individual thousands of choices we make, we can either choose to make ourselves a better person or not. And that to me is what Captain Picard is about as a character. Make the right choices to make yourself better. That's all that matters. If you make mistakes, you make mistakes, but try to be better. That to me was always the philosophical core of the piece.

Talking vaguely about the end, so we don't spoil it, is it supposed to reflect to *Wrath of Kahn*? Oh, it is *Wrath of Kahn*. The echoes of *Wrath of Kahn* were intentional and I hope people recognize it. No one should deny that, my God. To me, it was always not an homage to *Wrath of Kahn* but it was a realization that the most dramatic manifestation you can get of the theme of change and choice and destiny is someone choosing to sacrifice their life, which is exactly what Spock did and is exactly what happens to a character in this movie. Those parallels to me were totally intentional and just realizing that they hit it properly, which is not to say that that is not the case in any dramatic structure. If you're going to kill someone, make sure it's for a really good rea-

son and done in the best possible way.

When writing it, did you have in your mind that this might be the last *Star Trek* movie? Certainly not. Not at all. At the end of the day if this is the last *Next Generation* [film], and I hope it's not, but if it is, I think we've given them a nice sendoff. I think we've tried to do it with honor. But that was never the intention going into it.

What was more exciting, getting nominated for an Oscar or writing a *Star Trek* movie? They were equally exciting. Exciting in different ways. Obviously, writing is more important than awards, so getting a chance to work on *Star Trek* was much more important than an award.

Is it true you called Rick Berman right after you got your nomination? Yes, immediately. Rick has become a great pal. I did my first *Star Trek* convention in Pasadena, California. I had such a good time. I was nervous because I'm not a public speaker. I'm a writer. But it was like 300 fans.

Did you give up any information? Oh no. My first film was for Oliver Stone. I never give out things. Conspiracy theory always. But what was interesting to me as I walked around the convention is people have a very strange response to Rick Berman. They don't know what he does. They know he's not Gene Roddenberry but they don't know who he is, they don't know what he does. My life mission now is to make people understand that if you like *Star Trek*, if you like any of the movies or any of the shows for the past fifteen years, you have one man to thank for it and that's Rick Berman. He has gone to the line time and time again and anything that is in *Nemesis* is part of Rick because he was involved from day one all the way through. Getting inside the belly of the beast as I got to do for two years, you really get to see the reality of the situation. He is the man.

What projects are you working on for Spielberg and Scorsese? I'm sort of dividing my time now between working on *Abraham Lincoln* for Steven Spielberg which I've been doing for about two years. I did a solid year of research and then three drafts over the last year and I just gave him the third draft. It's going very well, big movie about Lincoln, the Civil War years. I think it's great. Then *The Aviator*, which I'm doing for Scorsese, is a movie about Howard Hughes I originally developed with Michael Mann. Scorsese has taken it over to direct Leonardo DiCaprio as a young Hughes. It's hypothetically supposed to start filming in April or May. Ava Gardner does make an appearance at the end, because if you're doing Howard Hughes, writing Ava Gardner is irresistible.

How do you do *Gladiator 2* when Maximus is dead? He is indeed up at Elysium. Honestly, if I were to say anything about *Gladiator 2*, Ridley [Scott] would run through that door and strangle me. It is so top secret, but it is going really well. The development of the story I can say I'm delighted with so far.

Is it a prequel? I cannot say a word.

What is it like working with those directors? It's very exciting. What excites me about being a dramatist, what always excited me when I was a playwright slaving in the trenches of Chicago the-

atre, is collaboration. I'm not an artist. I don't sit in a garrote and paint paintings. My work comes alive only in collaboration with actors and directors and designers. So, to get a chance to work with Steven Spielberg or Marty Scorsese or Ridley Scott is great because it's like when you are playing tennis you want to play with the best possible people to make your game better. And they've all helped me become a better writer, so it's invaluable.

Fred Topel is an experienced entertainment correspondent with a degree in Cinema and Photography from Ithaca College. He currently writes and has written for online news outlets and magazines such as *Herald Tribune Online*, *Daily Radar*, *eUniverse*, *Cinefantastique* and *The Hollywood Reporter* since graduating in May 1999.

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A Screenwriting Life John Logan

Screenwriter John Logan spent ten years penning plays in Chicago before he hit box-office gold with scripts for the blockbusters *Any Given Sunday* (1999) and *Gladiator* (2000), and the multiple-Emy nominated HBO drama *RKO 281* (1999).

Raised as a Navy brat, Logan spent a peripatetic childhood until he entered Northwestern where he harbored dreams of an acting career. After taking a writing class, though, he quickly shifted gears and set out to be a playwright. Working steadily for nearly a decade, he churned out several plays that were based on factual events, such as 1985's *Never the Sinner* (about the famed Chicago-based 1920s killers Leopold and Loeb). *Hauptmann* (about the kidnapper of the Lindbergh baby) and *Speaking in Tongues* (about the murder of Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini).

By the 1990s, Logan had determined to break into film and had been penning spec scripts. When *Never the Sinner* was revived to acclaim in Chicago (it later was produced Off-Broadway in 1997), he utilized the attention as a calling card with movie studios. Asked to come up with ten movie ideas by an agent who liked his plays, Logan offered his idea of King Lear in the NFL. The agent liked the concept and urged the playwright to take a year off from theater work to concentrate on writing it. Turner Pictures purchased his spec script about football, *Any Given Sunday*, in 1996 and Oliver Stone signed on as one of the producers. (It eventually ended up at Warner Bros. after the sale of Turner.) *Pure Evel*, a biopic of daredevil Evel Knievel also attracted attention and it appeared that Logan would finally achieve his dream. But film development is a decidedly slow process and Logan's first produced script ended up being the teleplay for the 1996 Fox TV-movie *Tornado!*, a predictable disaster flick that capitalized on the success of that year's big-screen hit *Twister*. It took three more years before another of his efforts hit the screen, though. Logan followed up in 1999 with another less-than-stellar effort, the entertaining, but unoriginal horror film *Bats*, which he also executive produced.

By the time of that film's release, Oliver Stone had finally decided to make a film set in the world of professional football, combining three scripts owned by Warner Bros., one of which was Logan's. The director worked with Logan (who shared screen credit) and the finished film starring Al Pacino and Cameron Diaz earned respectable reviews.

Logan next landed an interview with director-producer Ridley Scott, who was developing a film about the making of *Citizen Kane*, a project Logan desperately wanted to be a part of. A long-time history buff, the writer enjoyed researching Orson Welles and his legendary motion picture, and wowed the skeptical Scott with his knowledge of and interest in the subject matter. Scott hired Logan on the spot to write the script for what would become the critically acclaimed, multiple Emmy-nominated HBO drama *RKO 281*. When Scott moved on to make an epic set in ancient Rome, he tapped Logan to co-write the story for that movie, too, resulting in the second Logan-Scott collaboration, the Oscar-winning *Gladiator*. Tapping his love of history, Logan helped craft an appealing and often powerful story—aided by Scott's eye-popping visuals—around the Roman soldier-turned-gladicator Maximus (Russell Crowe) and shared Academy Award nomination for Best Original Screenplay.

Demonstrating his love for the fantastic, Logan next adapted H.G. Wells' enduring sci-fi tale *The Time Machine* (2002) for the screen, with less successful results. Hampered by an uneven storyline and a director who was replaced in the 11th hour, the film

"Writing pair Tom Firestone and Martin Maunier have sold the pitch

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had some strong individual sequences but failed to gel creatively or commercially. As a devout fan of every incarnation of *Star Trek*, Logan leapt at the chance to pen the screenplay for the tenth feature film, *Star Trek: Nemesis*, he was introduced to the production team by his friend and franchise star Brent Spiner after he and Spiner cooked up a storyline for Spiner's android alter ego Data. The producers eagerly signed on the Academy Award nominee to add fresh blood to Paramount's venerable tent pole property. Logan's screenplay showed heavy influences from *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* and took a darker tone. Despite some missed opportunities, reworked themes and several deleted scenes, the film was received well by critics and hardcore followers of the franchise but failed to go to warp speed at the box office, grossing slightly more than \$40 million (unfortunately an all-time "Trek" low).

Notes:

"In 90 percent of the cases, history helps us out very nicely and is the spine from which we built the organs and the muscles. For that other 10 percent, it is pure invention... I thought as a fluke that I'd take a playwriting class, but the minute I did that, I knew it was my destiny. I've never looked back. I spent 10 years writing plays, but I've always had this incredible passion for movies; I thought it would be fun to give that a try."

— Logan in *MovieMaker*, April/May 2000.

Milestones:

1995 - *Never the Sinner*, his play about Leopold and Loeb, revived at Chicago's Victory Gardens Theater.

1996 - Sold first spec script, a football-themed drama called *Any*

Given Sunday to Turner Pictures, with Oliver Stone attached as producer.

1996 - Penned *Pure Evil*, a proposed biopic of daredevil Evel Knievel.

1996 - Wrote the screenplay for the Fox TV movie *Tornado!*

1997 - *Never the Sinner* staged Off-Broadway.

1999 - Executive produced and wrote the horror flick *Bats*, starring Lou Diamond Phillips.

2000 - Credited as one of the writers of the screenplay for the football drama *Any Given Sunday*, directed by Oliver Stone and starring Al Pacino and Cameron Diaz.

2000 - Scripted *RKO 281*, the Emmy-nominated HBO drama about the making of Orson Welles' 1941 classic "Citizen Kane"; executive produced by Ridley and Tony Scott.

2000 - Co-wrote screenplay for Ridley Scott's blockbuster *Gladiator*, starring Russell Crowe; shared Oscar nomination for Best Original Screenplay.

2002 - Hired to write the script for DreamWorks' adaptation of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*.

2002 - Penned the script for *Star Trek: Nemesis*, the tenth feature film in the franchise.

Awards:

Outer Critics Circle Award - Best Off-Broadway Play - "Never the Sinner" - 1998

Writers Guild of America Award - Adapted Long Form - "RKO 281" - 2001 - tied with *Tuesdays With Morrie*.

The Mentor Figure in the Modern Cop Film

by James Vejvoda

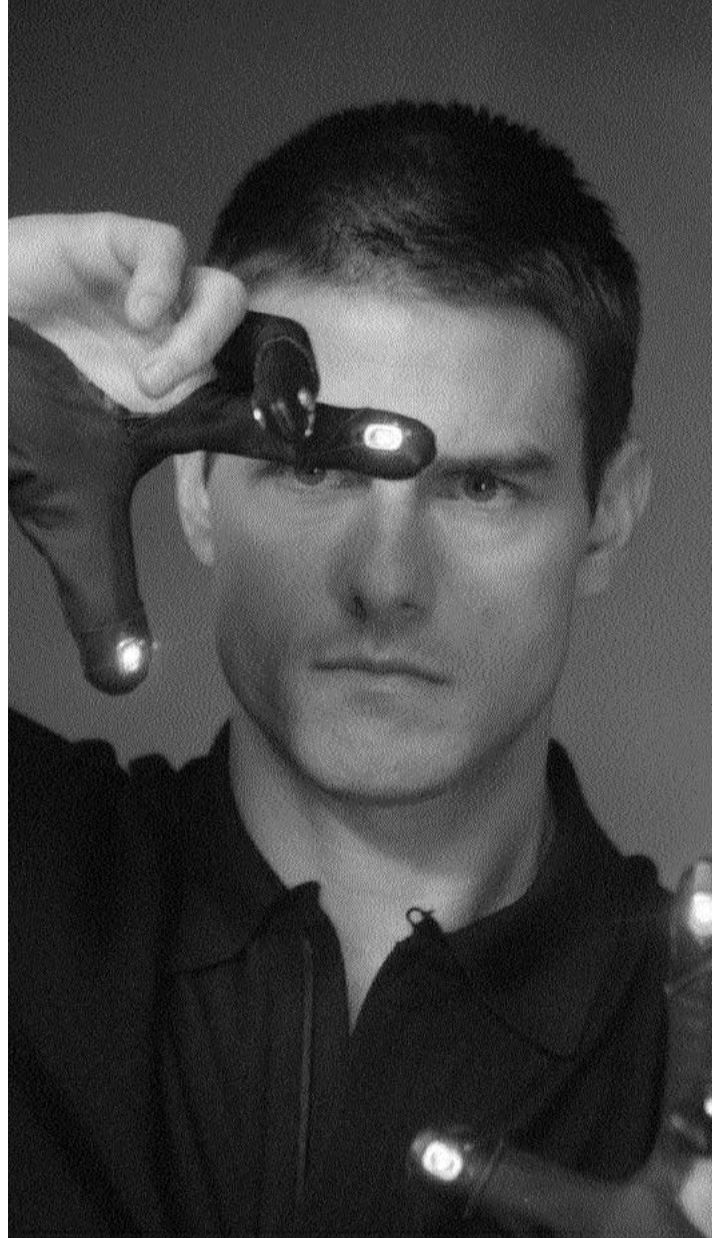
Recent police dramas such as *Q & A*, *L.A. Confidential*, *Training Day*, *Minority Report* and *Dark Blue* all feature a dark father-figure who mentors, and then turns on, a younger law enforcement protégé. A distinct narrative paradigm emerges from these films: an older, wiser but corrupt cop takes under his wing a younger callow officer whose mission ultimately leads to his betrayal by near, or actual, death at the hands of his father-figure/mentor. It is an almost mythic tale, reminiscent of Saturn devouring his children before they can grow up to depose him. It is up to the young protagonists of these police dramas to either destroy their mentor/father figures or risk becoming like them.

In each of the aforementioned films, the young cop hero's loved ones are seldom or never seen, usually due to separation or death. This establishes the hero's fellow cops—personified by the mentor/father-figure—as his only true family. It also makes the eventual falling out between the hero and his mentor all the more profound and tragic. This isn't always the case, however.

Training Day's Jake Hoyt has a family outside of the Los Angeles police department. His wife and baby are introduced early on in order to establish Jake's innate goodness and to motivate him to survive his dangerous encounter with his mentor, Sgt. Alonzo Harris, so that he can be reunited with his loved ones. More often than not, though, the hero's attachment to his father-figure/mentor is the closest he has to a familial tie. This dark father/mentor is aware of the significance of this bond for the hero and he exploits it, often tragically, to his advantage.

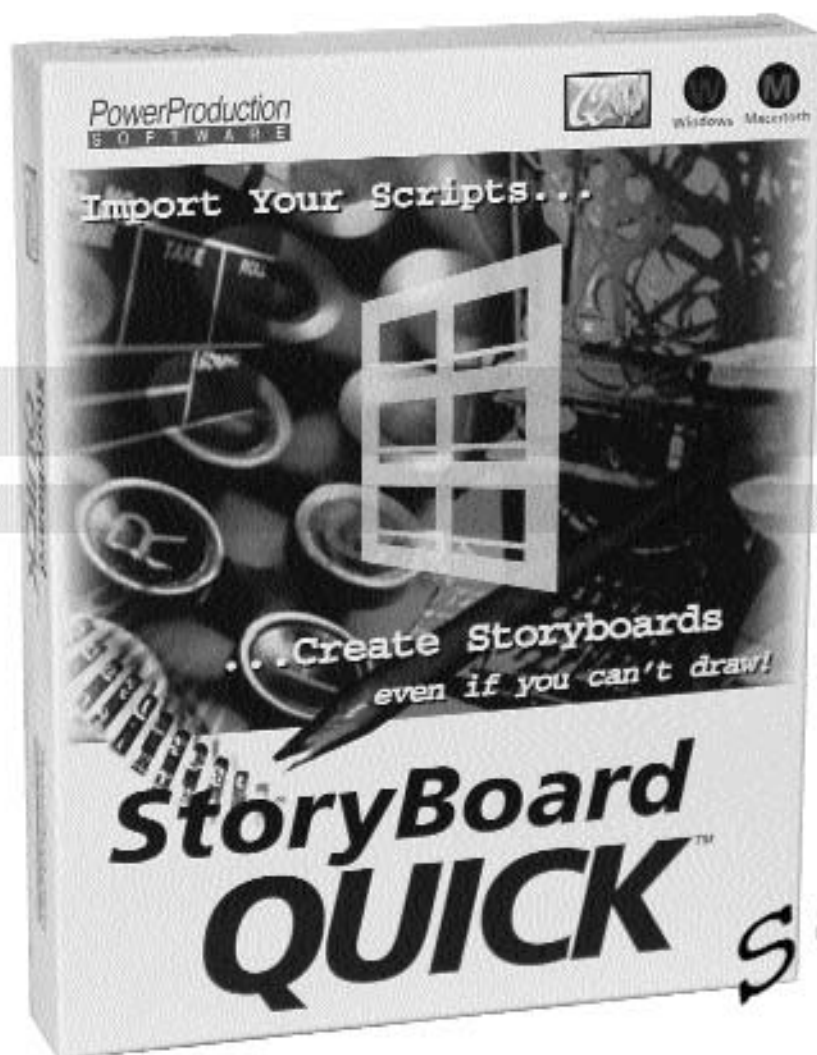
In writer-director Sidney Lumet's *Q & A*, Assistant D.A. Al Reilly is a former New York cop whose now deceased father was a well-known member of the department. Al's father-figure/mentor, Lieutenant Mike Brennan, often mentions the elder Reilly, which creates an association between the hero's actual father and his surrogate one—especially after we learn that Al's dad was a corrupt cop, too. While law enforcement may be the closest thing that Al has left to family, he has nevertheless severed ties with the NYPD by becoming an Assistant District Attorney. This new role requires him to investigate and, possibly, punish cops.

The troika of anti-heroes in *L.A. Confidential*—adapted from James Ellroy's novel by Oscar-winners Curtis Hanson and Brian Koppelman—have no real life or family outside of the department. We never see cynical lost soul Jack Vincennes do anything but police-related activities. Tough but tender Wendell “Bud” White tries to establish a relationship outside of the force by romancing prostitute Lynn Bracken but she proves to be inextricably tied to his investigation. Like *Q & A's* Al Reilly, the politically savvy Ed



Tom Cruise as John Anderton in *Minority Report*. Photo by David James

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Exley lives in the shadow of his deceased cop father and seems to live only for his own ambition. Ed, Bud and Jack all look to their father-figure/mentor, Captain Dudley Smith, for leadership, guidance, and aid. Smith is an old-school veteran whose corrupt agenda is behind the mysterious events transpiring in *L.A. Confidential*.

The futuristic *Minority Report*—adapted from the Philip K. Dick story by credited screenwriters Scott Frank and Jon Cohen—establishes a father/son, mentor/protégé bond between Precrime cop John Anderton and his boss, Lamar Burgess. Anderton, whose marriage disintegrates after his son is kidnapped, lives alone and plies himself with “virtual” drugs in order to ease his inner pain. All he has left to believe in is Precrime but that faith will be shattered along with his friendship with Burgess by the story’s end.

Dark Blue, scripted by *Training Day*’s David Ayer and based on a plot by James Ellroy, features two mentor/protégé relationships. Sergeant Eldon Perry tutors his partner Bobby Keough, who will eventually turn against him. Bobby is related to their boss, Jack Van Meter, who had helped mentor Eldon. Van Meter later tries to destroy Eldon in order to survive. This betrayal prompts Eldon to confront and defeat his mentor figure. As with Ed Exley and Al Reilly, Eldon Perry is also haunted by the ghost of his dead cop father. And like Dudley Smith and Mike Brennan, Jack Van Meter’s friendship with his protégé’s late father only bolsters the paternal association the student has with his mentor.

All five police dramas follow roughly the same narrative paradigm: the younger cop hero learns the grim reality of the street and/or what it takes to survive in his chosen profession through his relationship with his father-figure/mentor. The hero’s investigation eventually reveals his mentor’s culpability in the crimes that drive the narrative forward. He is later betrayed and marked for death by his corrupt mentor who must now destroy his “child” if he himself is to survive. In his heart, though, the protagonist has already realized his own need to betray his mentor. The ultimate confrontation between mentor and protégé results in the destruction of the former. This resolution might also allow the hero to overcome the memory of his real father and to become his own man. This final confrontation between the hero and his mentor can also result in the demise of the very system that helped foster such corruption.

As vile as the father-figure/mentor is, though, there is usually someone worse that he is subordinate to. *Q & A*’s Mike Brennan is in cahoots with the story’s true villain, District Attorney Kevin Quinn, who is concealing a murder of his own; *L.A. Confidential*’s Captain Smith may be behind the Nite Owl Massacre, behind the death of Jack Vincennes, and behind a host of other heinous crimes but he still doesn’t run the L.A.P.D. He is beneath both the Police Chief and District Attorney Ellis Lowe. In the end, these two men manage to protect their corrupt system from destruction, an accomplishment that even Dudley Smith might not have thought possible. Likewise, the mentors in *Training Day* and *Dark Blue* take orders from their higher-ups, “The Three Wise Men” and Jack Van Meter, respectively. *Minority Report*’s Lamar Burgess may be the director of Precrime but the survival of the system is of more importance than who runs it. Not all of these films actually destroy the system, or the individuals who outrank the mentor figure, but

Top 10 Cop Movies

1. **THE FRENCH CONNECTION:** Based on the novel by Robin Moore, adapted for the screen by Ernest Tidyman, this movie has grown in popularity and is widely acclaimed as one of the greatest movies of all-time. Gene Hackman plays hard-nosed New York narcotics detective Popeye Doyle. A superb character study of a “cop on the edge.” The car chase scene about half-way through the movie is also considered to be one of the best ever filmed. So authentic and vivid that some police academies show it during training. Directed by William Friedkin. 1971

2. **FARGO:** This one may be a surprise to some, but the Coen brother’s depiction of the consummate professional police officer, played by Frances McDormand, gets high marks especially from real police officers. When forced to fire at a fleeing suspect she shoots him in the leg, only wounding him, unlike most Hollywoodized cops who seek out vengeance at will. The film was exceptional. Written and directed by Joel Coen and Ethan Coen. 1996

3. **L.A. CONFIDENTIAL:** Writer James Ellroy has firmly established himself as an exceptional police drama writer. His books and stories have now been made into two fine cop movies, this one and *DARK BLUE*. A complex book was effectively and economically adapted for the screen by Brian Koppelman and Curtis Hanson. The cast of characters successfully unites all the stereotypes and clichés, from police corruption to redemption. Directed by Curtis Hanson. 1997

4. **SERPICO:** Al Pacino plays Frank Serpico in the true story about an honest New York cop who blew the whistle on police corruption, only to be turned on by his fellow police officers. It’s a dramatic and, at times, thrilling story. Mostly, though, it is a character study, and a fine one at that. The screenplay is by Waldo Salt and Norman Wexler. Directed by Sidney Lumet. 1973

5. **HEAT:** This epic tale is notable for its dichotomy of good-versus-bad. But more importantly, Al Pacino’s character (Vincent Hanna) is so consumed by his job that he leaves a wake of failed relationships and alcohol abuse. As a Los Angeles police detective, Hanna has become a very familiar character, especially in television. Here it is mostly relevant because of a fine performance by Pacino. Written and directed by Michael Mann. 1995



Denzel Washington in *Training Day*

they offer the hope that someday justice will be served, thanks to the hero's intervention.

The mentor's primary objective in these stories is to push the hero as close to the "dark side" as possible, either through a battery of tests à la *Training Day*, or by forcing the hero to confront him man-to-man. The choice for the hero becomes whether he will succumb to corruption like his father-figure/mentor has or remain true to his convictions. Each of the heroes in these five particular films face their ordeal in different ways.

In *Minority Report*, John Anderton has become a willing tool of the fascist Precrime department. Indeed, he is its most celebrated enforcer until, ironically, that very same system starts to hunt him. Anderton's moral dilemma is whether he'll only prove Precrime right by killing those responsible for destroying his life. It turns out that his mentor (Burgess) framed Anderton in order to conceal a past crime and to preserve the integrity of the Precrime system.

In *L.A. Confidential*, Ed Exley is out to bust those who think they can get away with murder but, in the end, it can be argued that he has, ironically, become what he despises. He shoots his corrupt mentor/father-figure Dudley Smith in the back and then goes along with a plan hatched by the Police Chief and the District Attorney to cover it all up. Exley is even rewarded, literally, for his

6. **TRAINING DAY:** This one makes it not so much because of how it portrays the good-cop/bad-cop dichotomy, but for the powerful performance by Denzel Washington and the edgy, dark script by David Ayer. A take-no-prisoners and no-holds-barred approach to the genre produced effective results. Directed by Antoine Fuqua. 2001

7. **DIRTY HARRY:** This classic good badman is a staple for anyone interested in the genre. Clint Eastwood is scarily natural playing Harry. An anti-hero all the way, Eastwood's *Dirty Harry* is tough and mean and the end always seem to justify the means. The story and screenplay are by Harry Julian Fink, Rita M. Fink, and Dean Riesner. Directed by Don Siegel. 1971

8. **48 HOURS:** The 1980s will be remembered for a lot of things, and one of them will be the reemergence of the "buddy cop" movie. This is a comedic and action-packed story of two misfits (Nolte and Murphy) who must work out their differences while working on a case. This formula has been copied time and again, though never with quite the same effectiveness as this original. Screenplay and story by Roger Spottiswoode, Walter Hill, Larry Gross and Steven E. de Souza. Directed by Walter Hill. 1982

9. **LETHAL WEAPON and DIE HARD:** The new action-police dramas were hard-hitting, but also starred different kinds of actors than the 1970s and Eastwood's *Dirty Harry*. Mel Gibson and Bruce Willis played flawed cops, but they were much different. They prevailed with guts and often only by the skin of their teeth. They always were bloodied in battle, and the action would undoubtedly resort to fisticuffs. Shane Black wrote *LETHAL WEAPON* (directed by Richard Donner) and Jeb Stuart and Steven E. de Souza wrote *DIE HARD* (directed by John McTiernan) from a novel by Roderick Thorp. 1987 and 1988 respectively.

10. **DARK BLUE:** Maybe David Ayer is the "cop writer" of the moment, having delivered two strong and poignant character studies about good cops and bad cops. His writing may not be a favorite among real life cops, but for those outside the system, there might be some truth to these stories. Regardless, his screenplays are rich and provocative and have rightfully earned him a lot of recognition. Here Kurt Russell gives perhaps his finest performance as flawed Los Angeles police detective Eldon Perry. A solid movie and an even better performance. Directed by Ron Shelton. 2002

— Harry Caul

participation in this cover-up. Ed may have done the right thing by destroying Smith, but has he only replaced one corrupt cop with another?

Through his relationship with the grotesque Brennan, Al Reilly comes to terms with his own personal corruption, namely, racism. Years before Al's racism had repelled his mixed-race girlfriend Nancy. Brennan's mentoring of Al, however, proves more philosophic than the literal "on-the-job training" that Alonzo Harris provides Jake Hoyt with in *Training Day*.

In *Dark Blue*, Bobby Keough endures a series of initiation rites in order to win Eldon's respect and to prove himself to Jack Van Meter. The ultimate test requires Bobby to kill an unarmed and innocent suspect in cold blood. Bobby can't live with himself after crossing that threshold—he simply can't stomach turning into either Eldon or Van Meter—and this is what prompts him to ally with their enemy, Assistant Chief Arthur Holland. The mentor/protégé paradigm is not strictly adhered to in Bobby's case, though, as he is the one who ends up dead, not Eldon. It is Bobby's slaying, and Eldon's realization that it was as a result of Van Meter's treachery, that causes Eldon to confront Van Meter in a large ceremony where, ironically, Eldon would finally be awarded a promotion to lieutenant. Eldon publicly confesses to the misdeeds that he has perpetrated at the behest of his mentor, Jack Van Meter, annihilating both himself and his mentor.

The police films analyzed here are not just concerned with catching the bad guy or cracking the case. Rather, they focus on the relationship between the mentor and his student, forcing the latter to examine his conscience and to remember why he wanted

became a cop to begin with. They are morality plays that require the protagonist to choose between being good or evil.

If the hero is to adhere to his own moral code then he must confront and destroy his father-figure/mentor who has come to symbolize all that is wrong with the system they are sworn to serve. By destroying this dark father-figure/mentor, the hero hopes to avoid turning into a monster himself. As a few of these films have shown, however, sometimes even a hero can be beyond redemption.

*James Vejvoda wrote the script review for **Daredevil** that appeared in the February 2003 issue. He is a graduate of the University of Southern California's Filmic Writing Program, where he received both the prestigious Jack Nicholson Award for Excellence in Screenwriting and the Abraham Polonsky Award. He has won The Writers Network Fiction and Screenplay Contest and was a quarter-finalist in the Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting.*

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The Last Word

by Jean-François Allaire

ANGER MANAGEMENT

In my teenage years two individuals, who have nothing in common, entertained me to a great extent. I grew-up watching Saturday Night Live and its amazing early 90's cast. Headlined by Mike Myers, Chris Farley, Dana Carvey and the irreplaceable Phil Hartman; they were the definition of comedy during my youth. My favorite Not-Ready-for-Primetime Player of that era was Adam Sandler. He was always a riot. Every sketch he would appear in was usually very amusing. Another icon of my youth was Jack Nicholson. I first saw him in *Batman*. Very rarely in history has such a villain command the screen like Jack. The next memorable encounter was *A Few Good Men*. Another show-stealing feat from him. I still am a very big fan of both actors. I liked *Mr. Deeds* and *About Schmidt*. Finally, someone read my mind and decided to put those two guys in the same motion picture. That electrifying confrontation of style is called *Anger Management*.

Soft-spoken Dave Buznik (Adam Sandler) is sentenced to anger management therapy after a confusing airplane altercation. His therapist Dr. Buddy Rydell (Jack Nicholson) is nothing but conventional. He looks like the one who would need serious therapy. Dave is put in a team with another patient who drags him into even more problems. The result has the Judge ordering Dave into Buddy's custody. The insane doctor invades his apartment and manages to make his life a living hell. He's even going after his girlfriend. Gradually, Dave's patience and control are reaching their boiling point. How will he get rid of the over-the-top annoying Buddy?

BUDDY

Holy! Look at that rump. Man, I'd like to take out my flute and turn that ass into a concert!

DAVE

Watch it!

BUDDY

(smiles ironically)
See? Notice the way you interpreted a compliment as an insult.
Classic URS

I'll admit that just imagining those two actors interacting while reading the script was a riot. David Dorfman penned a very humorous screenplay. I wouldn't say it's the funniest thing I have ever read, but it's extremely decent. The flow of the narrative is great, and there's never a dull moment. I like the way the two lead roles are written. I do need to address the ending. As strange as it sounds, it bears a resemblance to the finale of David Fincher's *The Game*. I won't say too much but it does work very well. It's a great final punch line to the mad ride. Like most Sandler movies, it features some sidesplitting cameos, this time by Ray Liotta, Roger Clemens, and Rudy Giuliani.

BUDDY

Is that sarcasm? Sarcasm is anger's ugly cousin. From now on, it's unacceptable.

Jack finally gets a chance to play it loose and fun. His latest characters have been dark and complex. This time around, he just goes for the laughs. It feels like a breath of fresh air for the aging superstar. We haven't seen him play this type of role in a while. I hope

he does a straight comedy every 2 to 3 years from now on. His chemistry with Sandler is fantastic.

DAVE

Are you actually ordering me to have sex with a gay prostitute?

The character arc for Adam Sandler's Dave is reminiscent of the Incredible Hulk. At the beginning of the tale, he's a mild-mannered Bruce Banner. Everyone and their mother steps on him. He slowly grows through the movie into a Hulk. We all know how funny the 'crazed' Sandler is. It's not a dramatic part like last year's superb *Punchdrunk Love* but it's definitely a step up from *Mr. Deeds*. Dave's relationship with his girlfriend is also very believable and it fits the story perfectly.

Judging from the trailer, they didn't stray too far away from the original material. This film has "blockbuster" written all over it.

HOLES

Harry Potter has sparked a frenzy in the children's book community. Everyone has been buying these properties left and right with hopes of landing the next big thing. Phoenix Pictures bought the rights to Louis Sachar's novel *Holes*. Andrew Davis (*The Fugitive*) was then tapped to direct the adaptation, written by Sachar himself and co-writer Brent Hanley (*Frailty*). This project is still looking for a North American distributor. Hopefully it will find one soon.

Stanley Yelnats (Shia La Beouf) is under a curse. A curse that began with his no-good, dirty-rotten, pig-stealing, great-great-grandfather and has since followed generations of Yelnats. Now Stanley has been unjustly sent to a boys detention center, Camp Green Lake, for stealing a pair of shoes from Hoops superstar Clive 'Sweet Feet' Livingston (Rick Fox). The nefarious warden of the Camp (Sigourney Weaver) makes the boys build character by spending all day, every day, digging holes exactly five feet wide and five feet deep. There is no lake at Camp Green Lake but there are an awful lot of holes. It doesn't take long for Stanley to realize that there is more than character improvement going on at the camp. The boys are digging holes because the Warden is looking for something.

I liked this script. It's not the most spectacular thing I've ever read, but it is good. It slowly moves in and once you're hooked you definitely want to know how this story ends. I omitted something important about the story in my synopsis. There are a lot of flashbacks in the screenplay. Most of them deal with Kissin' Kate Barlow (Patricia Arquette). At one point, I became more interested in her story than in Stanley's quest for redemption. How her story and the main storyline tie together is eventful and intriguing. It left me wanting more Kissin' Kate. That could be the script's only real flaw.

The warden is a mysterious character in the first act but gradually emerges in the story. It's a strong part for Sigourney Weaver. She steals the show in every one of her appearances. Her search for the treasure of Kissin' Kate Barlow is the soul of this tale. I'm curious to see how Weaver plays it.

Another very interesting character is Mr. Sir, the warden's second-in-command. The talented Jon Voight has that villainous role. The duo of the Warden and Mr. Sir is reminiscent of Madame Medusa and Mr. Snoops in Disney's *The Rescuers*. Actually, *Holes* reminds me an awful lot of *The Rescuers*, which is a good thing because I loved that animated movie. The other kids were well written. Each have distinct personalities and you could tell them apart. It was a nice touch from the writers.

In the end, the writers have done a really solid job. Now it's up

Article continues on page 27

P.O.V.

COPS & ROBBERS

by Michael B. Druxman

Cops & Robbers and Private-Eye movies have gone through considerable changes over the past 60-70 years, but I'm not quite sure that all of these modifications are for the better. Compared to some of the classic films of the genre, today's cop movie is grittier and more realistic, yet at the same time there seems to be a loss of texture. Solid storytelling has often surrendered to superficial characters, plot shortcuts and edge-of-the-seat action sequences.

Recently, I watched The Criterion Collection's DVD double-feature release of both the 1946 and 1964 versions of Ernest Hemingway's *The Killers*. Certainly neither of these films can be considered recent, yet a comparison will help to illustrate my point. The films share a similar plot outline and employ a flashback structure, but the specific details of each are quite different.

The 1946 version is one of the most revered examples of classic *film noir* and it made major stars out of Burt Lancaster and Ava Gardner. Its riveting opening scene is straight from the original Hemingway short story, with a pair of hired killers (William Conrad, Charles McGraw) invading a diner in a small New Jersey town and announcing that they are going to kill a gas station attendant (Lancaster). Warned that the men are coming for him, Lancaster does not run. He simply waits for the killers to gun him down. Enter Edmond O'Brien, an insurance investigator who looks into the killing and, with the help of a friendly cop (Sam Levene), slowly uncovers the reason why Lancaster was murdered. The rest of the plot is not important for the purpose of this discussion, except to say that, years before, Lancaster had been involved in a major payroll hold-up. There were a couple of double-crosses among the thieves. Then, Lancaster disappeared.

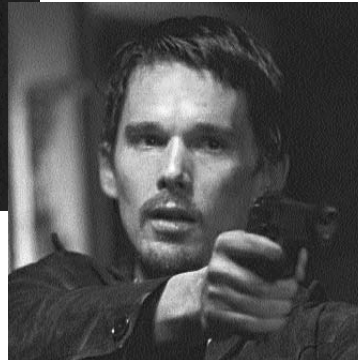
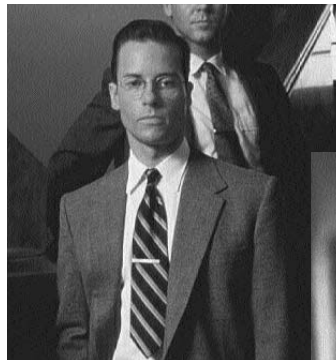
The 1964 remake also begins with the two killers (Lee Marvin, Clu Gulager) gunning down the central character (John Cassavetes), now working at a school for the blind. However, instead of introducing an outside investigator like O'Brien to lead us through the flashbacks, the killers themselves take on this task. Marvin, it seems, is baffled as to why Cassavetes did not try to get away and is determined to uncover the reason. Whereas this alteration in the approach to the material is a unique and clever one, its actual execution has its drawbacks.

In the 1946 original, Lancaster starts out as an enigma. Investigator O'Brien has no idea who he really is or why he was killed. He follows his scant clues and, over the course of several interviews with some colorful characters, peels back the layers of this intriguing mystery to discover its solution. Conversely, the bulk of the information that it took O'Brien at least half the picture to uncover is revealed in one long early scene in the 1964 version. Following the killing of Cassavetes, Marvin and Gulager relax on a train and Lee tells us that, via the underworld grapevine, he knows Cassavetes' real identity and that he was involved in a big robbery years before.

This 1964 scene speeds up the action film considerably, but why the rush? The mystery aspect of the story has now all but disappeared. All that's really left to learn in this version is: What happened to the stolen money?

That's not to say that this newer version of *The Killers* is a bad movie. It's not. In itself, it's a very good action thriller with some excellent performances by Marvin, Cassavetes, Gulager, Angie Dickinson, and, in his final movie role, Ronald Reagan, playing his first screen heavy.

However, the 1964 film is not a great film, while the 1946 version most definitely is. If you don't believe me, buy or rent the Criterion DVD, and you'll appreciate the difference.



PHOTOS: (left to right) Guy Pearce as Lt. Exley in *L.A. Confidential*. Ethan Hawke as Jake Hoyt in *Training Day*.

It's interesting how the role of the "cop" has changed in movies over the years. Actually, the police drama, as we know it today, didn't really become a film staple until after the Second World War, arguably beginning with *The Naked City* (1948). Prior to that Oscar-winning film, we had gangster movies (*Little Caesar*, *Public Enemy*) and private-eye movies (*The Thin Man*, *The Maltese Falcon*), but the cops in these films were secondary characters.

An exception was the Government cop, such as the FBI or Secret Service agent. Semi-documentary movies like *G-Men* (1935), *The House on 92nd Street* (1945), and *T-Men* (1947) exulted their bold exploits. Even the basic character of the police officer has gone through several metamorphoses. From being the honest, straight-



Ray Liotta as Detective Oak and Jason Patric as Detective Tellis in *Narc*

forward law enforcement officer in movies like *The Naked City* and *Dragnet* (1954), he developed a world-weary quality, often underscored by a personal tragedy, e.g., wife and/or child killed by bad guys. Frequently, this guy would have a drinking problem.

Later, with Charles Bronson and Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry*, we were introduced to the "rogue cop," who would invoke vigilante justice to bring down the legally untouchable bad guys. Finally, in today's movies like *L.A. Confidential*, *Training Day*, *Narc*, *Dark Blue*, and TV's *The Shield*, cops are corrupt in one form or another. This may or may not be true, but it certainly doesn't speak highly of the society in which we live.

My first produced script was a cop movie. However what finally appeared on the screen bore scant resemblance to what I actually wrote. Indeed, though I am the film's only credited writer, others re-wrote me, and when I finally saw the finished picture I literally had to ask one of the stars to explain the plot to me. He couldn't.

The good news is that the picture gave me my first professional writing credit, and I've made more money from that film in residuals than the movie grossed in theaters. After fourteen years, checks still arrive once or twice every year. Writing the "cop movie," is no different than writing any other film. But there are certain elements that should be in your story if it is to work.

In most films of this type, there's a mystery involved. Unlike working with many other kinds of scripts where you can let your characters lead you to your conclusion, you have to know how your story is going to end before you start writing. If you don't, you're liable to wind up with a screenplay that meanders and is full of plot holes.

Plot your story backwards, so that each scene brings your lead characters a step closer to the mystery's solution. In the original screenplay of my cop movie, I had a scene in which the detective went to the home of a witness where he learned a key piece of information. A moment or two later, the bad guys blew up the house, killing the witness. A car chase between the cop and the killers ensued.

After my script was re-written, that scene was virtually intact, except that the house was blown up before the witness gave out with the vital clue. Ergo, in the final film, the scene had no purpose. It did not advance the story. It only provided an excuse for a very badly executed car chase.

Since detectives usually work in pairs, most cop movies today are also "buddy movies." The partners don't necessarily have to be two cops working together. In *48 Hours* (1982), for example, your leads are a police detective (Nick Nolte) and a convict (Eddie Murphy). In my cop movie, which was, in all honesty, intended to be a geriatric version of the Nolte/Murphy hit, my "buddies" were a police detective and an elderly, retired mobster. *Training Day* and *Dark Blue* kept their characters "in house," giving us a corrupt older cop paired with a younger, idealistic one.

The key in determining the personas and the relationship of your partners for this kind of story is to follow the advice of playwright Neil Simon when he discussed his classic comedy, *The Odd Couple*. To paraphrase: You put two people who you know will not get along into the same room, then let nature take its course.

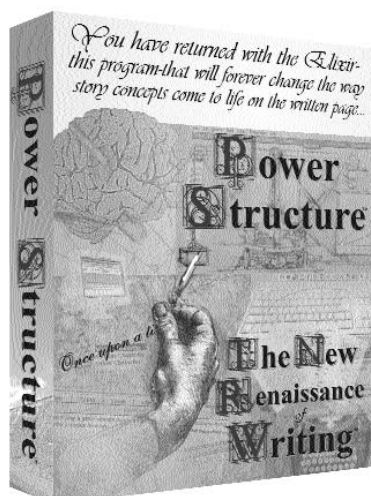
But, whether you're writing a gangster movie, a private eye movie or a cop movie, the one thing to avoid is mindless action. A car chase or a shoot-out, no matter how spectacular, must advance your story or it will stop it cold. Case in point: Remember *The Rock* (1996) with Sean Connery and Nicolas Cage? That could have been one of the great action movies of its decade, but about a half hour or so into the picture, the producers threw in a fantastically-filmed car chase that had absolutely no story purpose whatsoever. Others may have found the scene thrilling, but I thought it was a bore. Indeed, the film lost me at that point and I was never able to get back into it again.

But, that's just my point of view...

Michael B. Druxman is a screenwriter-director whose credits include *CHEYENNE WARRIOR* (1994), *DILLINGER AND CAPONE* (1995) and *THE DOORWAY* (2000). He is also a produced playwright, a published novelist, and the author of *THE ART OF STORYTELLING* (The Center Press, 1997), which is used as a writing textbook in several schools and colleges

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Origins of the Modern Police Drama

by Chris Wehner

The origin of the buddy-cop movie may indeed go back to the 1930s and 40s, and then evolved from there. Regardless, like most genre fare, it's periodic. The "police drama" goes back even further to the silent era, and the western.

The Great Train Robbery (1903) was a police drama, but more specifically a western. In the silent film, a couple of outlaws rob a train by blowing up its safe. A chase ensues when a posse of lawmen and volunteers head off to capture the robbers. The bandits are surrounded by the posse after a gunfight where several men are shot. The last scene of the film has the gang's leader (Barnes) aiming his pistol at the lawmen (from the POV of the audience) and firing his weapon (aimed directly at the camera). Thus implying the death of the gang in one last and stupendous gunfight.

Not just the film was black and white, but the plot lines were black and white as well. You always knew the good guys were the lawmen and the bad guys were the robbers. The good guys wore the white hats, and the bad guys the black ones.

One of the first important screenwriters was C. Gardner Sullivan. An ex-newsman, Sullivan showed up in Hollywood around 1914 specializing in Thomas Ince's two-reeler westerns starring William S. Hart. He ended up writing twenty-two films for Ince. Sullivan is widely accredited with introducing to screenwriting the concept of the "good badman." For example, in Sullivan's 1916 screenplay *Hell's Hinges*, the description of the good badman, Blaze Tracey, played by Hart, is rich and provocative for the era:

BLAZE TRACEY, THE EMBODIMENT OF THE BEST AND THE WORST OF THE EARLY WEST, A MAN KILLER WHOSE PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE IS SUMMED UP IN THE CREED Shoot first and do your disputin' afterwards.

Very few of Sullivan's screenplays have survived, but one of them we do have in our *Screenwriter's Monthly* library, *Satan Macallister's Heir* (1915). In it the good badman is Satan, a truly despicable person with an appetite for beer and killing. Note the instruction Sullivan has for the director, and that this short scene also allows for a bit of humor:

SCENE 4. EXTERIOR SALOON: WESTERN

Satan comes on from the sideline with a sneer—have a lonesome looking dog sitting before the saloon door—Satan boots him of the picture and smiles cruelly as he hears the dog yelp—he looks about for something else to abuse but finding nothing, exits into the saloon.

Essentially the good badman was someone, regardless of how bad they were, who could redeem themselves by the stories' end and always did.

By the 1930s, the police drama was dominated by gangster pictures (*Scarface*, *Little Caesar*). But by then, the good badman, the gangsters, had no salvation and always had to be sacrificed at the end. The gangsters were the stars of pictures.

Most of the hardboiled private eye and cop movies (*The Maltese Falcon*, *The Big Sleep*) of the 40s and 50s involved the hard, tough, streetwise detective and his dame—who usually needed to be saved. He was her protector.



Frances McDormand as Capt. Marge Gunderson in *Fargo*

By the 1970s, and with the character Dirty Harry, the police drama changed again. At the time, New York critic Pauline Kael described *Dirty Harry* as "a remarkably single-minded attack on liberal values." Dirty Harry reflected more of the old school cop than he did the squeaky clean lawmen of the 50s. This new lawman worked alone, a lone desperado, reminiscent of the new westerns, also made popular by Clint Eastwood.

By the 1980s, with the introduction of *48 Hours*, *Beverly Hills Cop*, and *Lethal Weapon* the genre shifted yet again back to the buddy-cop situational dramas—but laced with humor and wit, thus combining the best elements the genre has to offer. When you can bring together two characters that naturally would conflict with each other, and place them in harms way, it produces effective results. Recently, *Rush Hour* has shown us that the comedy buddy-cop movie still produces at the box office. While *Shanghai Knights* takes a similar approach matching Jackie Chan and Owen Wilson.

But the current trend seems to indicate stripping away humor from the genre and replacing it with gritty, dark, and streetwise characters, as represented in *Training Day*, *Dark Blue*, and *Narc*—who are distant relatives of the good badman. But unlike their predecessors, these new good badmen are only sometimes redeemable.

At the moment, if you're considering writing a police drama, there seem to be two obvious choices: 1) the situational buddy-cop movie laced with humor; or 2) the dark and gritty street version of the original lawless lawmen. But be careful. Writing with a trend in mind usually will not produce the desired effect. It doesn't mean your script will sell. What we most likely need today is someone to find a new angle or take on the genre.

GUNSLINGERS, GANGSTERS, GUMSHOES, AND G-MEN

BY

NEILL D. HICKS

COWPOKE COPS

Today's Cops & Robbers movies are the direct outgrowth of the white hat vs. black hat cowpuncher morality plays of Tom Mix, Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry, and a posse of other good guys who, in turn, were the heirs of real-world buckaroos. "Wild Bill" Hickok, Wyatt Earp, Buffalo Bill Cody, and other gunslingers became legends when their adventures were embellished in the dime novels of the late 19th Century. These fictionalized, larger-than-life escapades became the mythological articulation of our national psyche, not because they were factual, but because they declared who we *believed* ourselves to be—the self-reliant champions of right against wrong.

Ironically, though, it is the very autonomy of the knight errant that civilization ultimately rejects. For while he shares the value of cooperation that makes a society function, his personal qualities are the same as the enemies of organized culture—violent domination, disdain for hierarchy, and explosive unpredictability. Although the enigmatic gunfighter Shane is the only force strong enough to protect the fragile sod buster society, his use of violence means that he can never be fully trusted by that society. Likewise, the Harry Callahan and Vincent Hanna rogue cops are volatile misfits in their modern day social orders. They will always be on the fringes, never trusted enough to be wholly welcomed into the safety of domestication.

WHO ARE THOSE GUYS?

Western heroics demanded a fair fight, the one-on-one standoff between good and evil where each side knew its place in the order of things. The early horse operas built their notions of right and wrong on the late Victorian view that mechanical order reflected fundamental character. Crooks 'fessed up when they were caught—"I'm a bad 'un, Mr. 'olmes. It's gaol for my sort"—so that Autry, Rogers, and Mix could enforce justice by blowing the shootin' irons plumb out of the villains' hands.

However, the increasingly swollen cities, the Prohibition era, and the Great Depression gave birth to the immigrant criminal. Not content with their second best lot in life, these ghetto hardened thugs weren't just asking for a piece of the American pie; they were strong-arming it. Justice could no longer be left to the straight-shootin' amateurs. The reckless brutality of the urban gangsters demanded a new class of professional lawmen, hunters as fanatical as their quarry.

As the eye-to-eye shoot-out in the dusty western street

became the urban territory wars of Prohibition mobsters, the precision of the six-shooter gave way to the bloodbath of the Thompson submachine gun. Any untrained rube could sling lead with a chopper, and slugs-per-second quickly became a deciding factor at the box-office as well as on the street. From the original *Scarface* through today's over-the-top gunplay, Cops & Robbers films have mainlined heavier and heavier loads of boom-and-bang. (In fact, in most cases, the excesses of movies such as *Lethal Weapon* bear no resemblance whatsoever to day-to-day law enforcement. But in one astonishing example of life imitating art, a 1994 bank robbery in North Hollywood, CA came unnervingly close to a similar heist in *Heat*.)

Contemporary Cops & Robbers movies, then, are an amalgam of the traditional western story together with the urbanized gangster films. A stranger/rogue (Shane; Harry Callahan) uses his martial skills and firepower (Will Kane; Martin Riggs) to save a threatened society (the clapboard town; the Nakatomi building). Evil is defeated and law and order maintained, but although society is grateful, the rogue enforcer (the man with no name; Popeye Doyle) will always remain an outcast (The Magnificent Seven; Vincent Hanna).

Like other members of the Action-Adventure genre, Cops & Robbers begin with the premise that action is required immediately in order to save a vulnerable society. The antagonist already has the upper hand and will triumph unless the protagonist cop succeeds in stopping him. The cop is required to act because of the immediate pressure, because the cop is sworn to uphold the law, and because the cop has a personal code of behavior that does not allow for hesitation. Imagine, for instance, that John McClane in *Die Hard* is not a police officer. Even if Hans Gruber and his gang of master thieves remain unchanged, the story ceases to be a Cops & Robbers film because non-cop John McClane is not forced to carry the action. As unequivocal as the original cowboy movies, then, Cops & Robbers films express a firm goal—the complete destruction of the bad guys.

THE SHADY SIDE OF THE STREET

The moral confusion caused by the Great Depression and the two world wars, however, split the cinematic pursuit of justice. The lock-and-load cops, inheritors of unquestioned white-hat right vs. wrong, continue to enforce order by overpowering evil. But as society came to recognize that evil was not always so easy to defeat, or even to identify, the detective character, an existential gray knight, began to prowl the sleazy underbelly of civilization.

The might-makes-right cop and the who-done-it detective have evolved into such different protagonists in such diverse stories that each resides in a separate genre. Cops & Robbers are in the Action-Adventure genre together with most war movies, westerns, and historical epics such as *Braveheart*. Detective films, on the other hand, are a genre unto themselves and owe their genesis to the crime fiction of writers like Raymond Chandler and

Dashiell Hammett, as well as to the short-lived *film noir* films. Although the screen detective might be a badge-carrying cop or private eye, as in *Silence of the Lambs*, *Se7en*, *The Usual Suspects*, and the classic *Chinatown*, the detective character could also be a scientist as in *The Andromeda Strain*, a psychiatrist in *Sixth Sense*, or an attorney in *The Verdict*. Unlike the Action-Adventure cop who will decisively win out over evil, the only certainty for these detective characters is the irony that good and evil are far from clear cut.

Of course, there are similarities between cops and detectives. Action-Adventure cops have to find clues, and detectives sometimes have to get tough, but fundamentally the two are different characters who function in very different stories. The clues for Action-Adventure cops, for instance, are not so much information as confrontations that lead the protagonist cop closer and closer to the final showdown with the antagonist. Conversely, the detective works from traces, inklings, and suspicions that, as often as not, obscure the antagonist. For all her F.B.I. point-and-shoot cop training, Clarice Starling is a detective who, like Jake Gittes, is caught in a maze of doubt and ambiguity. For John McClane, Martin Riggs, or Popeye Doyle, though, there is very little hesitation about who the bad guy is and what action must be taken to stop him. The movie cop's tools are strength, stamina, fists, and firepower. The detective's resources are intuition, persistence, and strategy.

Where the cop is physical, the detective is intellectual. Where the cop batters down the door, the detective looks for a crack in the window.

BAM! BIFF! POW!

Both the movie cops and detectives are characters who have grown as representatives of real-world anxieties that are reflected in the popular entertainment of movies. Today there seems to be new breed of law enforcement emerging from our contemporary moral mish-mash. Borrowing from the clarity of the Action-Adventure genre and the improbability of the Comedy genre, the comic book Super Hero provides a bulwark of safety against the outsized evil of a world gone mad. Perhaps we have come full circle, yearning for a return to the clarity of a steadfast white-hat hero who reassures us of the fundamental values that have been obscured by the ashes of random dread.

Neill D. Hicks is a screenwriter whose groundbreaking work on defining film genres has made him a leading script analyst both in this country and abroad. To suggest films for analysis or questions about genres to address in this column, please e-mail screenwritersmonthly@iscriptdb.com

The Last Word continued from page 21

to Davis and his cast to see if they can build on this and make it Great.

IDENTITY

Trapped by a dangerous rainstorm ten strangers are stuck seeking shelter in a deserted motel. One by one, they are killed off. There's a killer among them. Soon enough, faced against an enemy within, the strangers discover they all share something together. That fascinating secret brings another dimension to this sordid tale. Who will make it out alive?

Playwright Michael Cooney wrote a fabulous screenplay. One of the hardest genres to write these days is horror. Specifically, serial-killer stories. They have become so widespread and generic that freshness needs to be rewarded. Ever since 1996's *Scream* resurrected the whole spectrum, we have witness in recent years all the possible twists: 2 crazed teenagers, a trio of killers, a demented sailor, a doctor, the demented sailor's son, the innocent victim's girlfriend, the schizo, the bad cop. We have seen them all. Michael Cooney grabbed my attention and, more importantly, did not disappoint me. It's so good that director James Mangold (*Copland*, *Kate & Leopold*) decided for the first time to helm a screenplay that he had not written.

I need to discuss the twist of this script. Don't worry, I won't spoil it. The surprise happens around page 82, almost an hour and a half into the film. Till that point in the storyline it's a very effective thriller. You're always left wondering who's going to drop dead next. It's one of the most suspenseful screenplays I've had the chance of reading. The bombshell brings another facet to the film. Up to that point, it was mainly a *Ten Little Indians* remake but the revelation turns into something even more intriguing. I'm sure some folks will be frustrated but I think it's a great mind-boggling twist. You're dying to know what it is? Sorry, you'll have to pay ten bucks to see it.

ED

So, if we just stay inside and do nothing for the next eight hours, we'll all live through the night.

PARIS

Bulls**t. We're all dead. We stay here, we get picked off. You try and leave, we're f**ked. It's just a matter of who's next. You wanna take bets? On Who's next.

John Cusack plays Ed, the main character of this story. He's the limousine driver for Caroline Suzanne (Rebecca De Mornay), a semi-famous B-movie actress. He misguidedly crashes into a minivan. They search for help at the motel where they unluckily get stuck. We also essentially witness the 'twist' through his character. He has lined-up some great roles after this one. He follows this one with the lead in *The Runaway Jury*, the villain in *School of Rock*, and, finally, the husband in *The Stepford Wives* remake. Having read all of them except *School of Rock*, he's on a roll.

Identity is a decent thriller with a captivating twist. The film also features an all-star cast. You shouldn't miss it if you're a fan of the genre.

At only 23 years old Jean-François Allaire has become a respected entertainment journalist, with his columns appearing in such major websites as *Corona's Coming Attractions* and *Scr(i)pt* magazine. Hailing from Montreal, this young writer is determined to dig up all the details on the movies before they hit your local theater. Make sure to read his weekly film column at *TNMC* (www.tnmc.org).

A Screenwriting Life: David Ayer

A self-professed graduate of the school of life, screenwriter David Ayer has made a specialty of creating hard-boiled, testosterone-heavy screenplays that pack both a visceral kick yet also deliver poetic moments dipped in machismo. Born in Champagne, IL, Ayer bounced around the country with his family until he was a teenager, when he was deposited at the home of some cousins living in South Central Los Angeles, a predominantly black urban environment plagued by poverty and violence. He attended high school in the gang-plagued Rampart district, which would in the late 1990s become synonymous with police corruption.

Although he learned street smarts to adapt to the rough area, he joined the military to escape the harsh life he found there. Dropping out of high school, Ayer became a top sonar man for the U.S. Navy, stationed aboard a nuclear attack submarine during the last days of the Cold War. After being honorably discharged, he returned to Los Angeles, taking on jobs as an electrician and in construction while writing short stories in his spare time. In the early 1990s he met A-list screenwriter Wesley Strick while working construction on Strick's home, and Strick convinced Ayer to write a screenplay based on his experiences in the Navy—Strick also pointed him to Syd Field's book *Screenwriting* and provided many scripts for Ayer to study as he learned the form. After many attempts to create a script he thought producers would buy, Ayer—now living again near the Rampart District—decided to write something personal, building on an earlier short story he had penned.

By 1995 the story had evolved into the screenplay *Training Day*, following the exploits of a intensely corrupt African American detective and his new rookie protégé and trying to capture modern Los Angeles' little-depicted gritty side. The script earned Ayer an agent and the attention of Hollywood, but was not made. Instead the strength of the script couple with his Naval experience earned him a rewrite job on the WWII submarine thriller *U-571*—although director Jonathan Mostow had already decided to hire him before learning of his background as a submariner. Ayer followed up the well-received film with a script-doctoring stint on a street-racing film called *Redline*, which evolved into the surprise hit *The Fast and the Furious* (2001).

By then, revelations of real-life police corruption in the Rampart district had made headlines and Ayers calling-card script *Training*

Day began to glow red-hot, going into production under director Antoine Fuqua with Denzel Washington in the lead role and Ethan Hawk as his partner. Upon its release in 2001, *Training Day* earned critical accolades for its ferocious, untamed look at the harsh side of law enforcement in the urban jungle (despite a too-conventional thriller ending) and resulted in an Oscar nomination for Hawk and an Academy Award win for Washington.

Ayer's next project was equally edgy, teaming him with novelist and L.A. noir maestro James Ellroy (*L.A. Confidential*), who wrote the original story for *Dark Blue* (2003) which Ayer developed into a screenplay for director Ron Shelton. The story also focused on a corrupt LAPD officer (Kurt Russell) and his rookie partner (Scott Speedman) who become caught up in a tangled web of politics, personal emotions and misguided justice at the flashpoint of the

1992 Los Angeles riots. Starting strong with vivid character and seemingly complex plots, the movie ultimately unraveled with another unfulfilling ending, but acutely demonstrated Ayer's ability to create vivid dialogue and morally ambiguous characters who are nevertheless sympathetic.

Milestones:

Joined the U.S. Navy and became a sonar man aboard a nuclear attack submarine.

Honorably discharged; returned to Los Angeles.

Early 1990s - Met screenwriter Wesley Strick, who became his mentor.

1995 - Completed calling card screenplay *Training Day*, which earned him an agent and writing assignments.

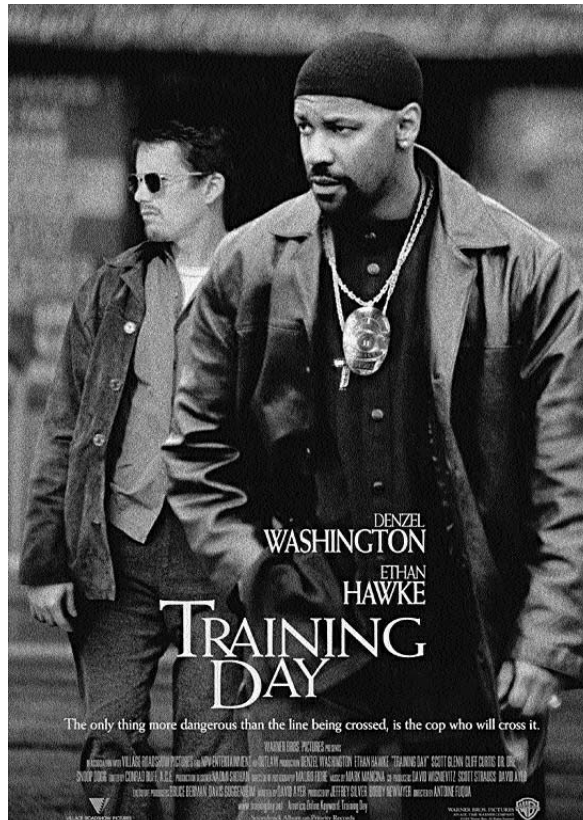
2000 - *U-571*, Ayer's first produced screenplay, was released.

2001 - Rewrote script for *The Fast and the Furious*.

2001 - *Training Day*, directed by Antoine Fuqua and starring Denzel Washington, is produced.

2003 - Wrote screenplay for corrupt cop drama *Dark Blue* from a story by James Ellroy.

2003 - Created a new draft of the screenplay for the police action thriller *SWAT*.



All data from Baseline-FilmTracker. For more biographical information on Charlie Kaufman or other writers, directors, actors, and producers, please visit www.baseline.hollywood.com.

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Rush Hour Screenwriter Ross LaManna

by Chris Wehner

After *Rush Hour* became a hit, Ross LaManna knew he could pretty much do anything he wanted. But instead of going for the money, he did what he always wanted to do—write a book.

In the early 1990s Ross first landed a term deal at United Artists, where he wrote *Chrome Soldiers*, a USA Network movie starring Gary Busey and Yaphet Kotto, which first aired in 1993. He then worked on several projects for Carolco Pictures, including *Universal Soldier* and *Cliffhanger*, starring Sylvester Stallone and directed by Renny Harlan. His original screenplay, *Arctic Blue* became an HBO world premiere movie (1995) starring Rutger Hauer and directed by Peter Masterson. His spec script *Rush Hour*, starring Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker, became one of the top ten films of 1998 and broke several box office records.

Is there an event that made you want to be a writer, when did you know what you wanted to do?

Pretty earlier on. My stock answer is that, “I was fundamentally unemployable,” what else do you do right? [Laughs] But I think in high school I realized I had an aptitude for it. I was very interested in the movies. Even back then I was very impacted by movies, and saw how movies impacted those around me. Not in terms of the message, but in terms of the community of emotion. You can make people happy. That’s very cool to me.

You’ve written mainly sci-fi and action comedy stuff. What led you there?

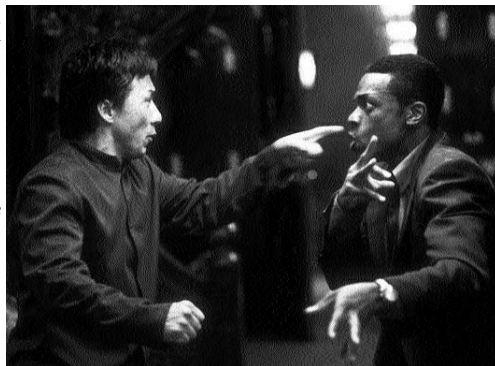
I think it’s mostly what I like. I stay close to home in terms of what I like. I have to have a passion for it.

Was *Rush Hour* your first spec sale?

No, I had written a spec a couple of years before that that ended up being on HBO called *Arctic Blue*. Before that I did *Chrome Soldiers*, which was an assignment. When I first started, about ten years ago, I wrote a spec script that never was made called *Family Honor*, sort of a mob comedy. Columbia picked it up and that got me going. And then, when you’re sort of the new kid, they throw a lot of rewrite assignments at you, which I thought was cool. I made a lot of money and everyone was real nice to me. But soon I realized that even though I felt I did my job well and improved the script, I was stuck in the development business and I wanted to write my own movies. So I went back to writing specs.

How important was your USC education to your career?
Not very, but I’m glad I did it.

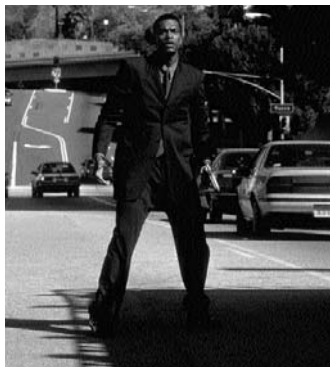
Did it give you any credibility when you were starting off?
No. Where it did help me was getting my first day job in the business to support myself. I got a job at a small studio working in the legal department [laughs]. I worked during the day and at night wrote, like everyone else.



Jackie Chang and Chris Tucker in *Rush Hour*

What about with query letters early on? I would think being able to mention that you went to the USC film and screenwriting school helped.

Yeah, well, I’d love to say it did as I loved my experience at film school. But the fact is, as a screenwriter, your script is your degree. It’s your film school. It’s all about that script. For aspiring directors I think film school is more valuable. School provides the structure for directors. So I’m not putting down film schools. As a screenwriter you do gain a lot of valuable knowledge from professionals, and that’s important. I’ve done some teaching myself.



How did you come up with the idea for *Rush Hour*?

I wanted to do a kidnapping story, but it was like, “What the hell do I do to make it fresh?” Then it came to me, “What if the victim was from a foreign country that’s unfriendly to us. That’ll add some jeopardy.” And what if the people investigating are also foreign to each other, wouldn’t that sort of up the ante on the buddy comedy genre? In *Lethal Weapon* it’s fun and a good thing. But all they really [Gibson and Glover’s characters] don’t have in common is that one guy is a nut and other guy is grounded. They really didn’t make anything out of the racial differences. So I thought about everything that would be different between two guys working on the same case from different countries. They wouldn’t even speak the same language. Then what happens? So I was just looking for a fresh spin on the genre.

How hard is it to write the action/buddy/comedy movie? On the surface it may look easy, but there only seems to be a handful of writers who can pull it off.

That brings me to what I think is a good point. We all know how good the actors were in the movie, but let’s not forget Brett Ratner, the director. Tell me how many directors do comedy well, how many can do action well, and then name me how many can do both

well? This guy is on a very short list and is very talented. There are very few decent action and comedy directors, and he does both very well. It's hard to do since you're juggling both. You have to keep the plot going, the jeopardy up, and you're able to take a breath and have a laugh. It's hard to do.

How was the rewriting process with *Rush Hour*?

My early drafts were definitely darker, and would have been more of an action thriller than a comedy. Once Disney bought it they said they could get Jackie Chan, and it started down the road to more of a comedy. Because as soon as you have Jackie you can retain the stakes, but the violence and relationships are going to be different and it's going to be a whole different kind of movie, just because of him. So you sort of have to act accordingly.

Would you have liked the darker layers of that early draft left in?

Once Jackie was aboard it was a different movie. His part was much smaller in my original drafts. The Chris Tucker part was more Wesley Snipes or Bruce Willis, a little edgier. The bottom line, "Was the movie any good?" And it was. So if you're going to be rewritten, you hope for a good movie. But on the other hand, you just cringe when you get rewritten. I was delighted with *Rush Hour* and what they ended up doing with it. I'm a big Jackie Chan fan.

You write a hit movie, and then probably had some good offers for rewrite assignments. Instead you write *Acid Test*, a book. You didn't go for the money. That's not the norm.

Yeah, half of my friends said, "Dude!" and the other half said, "You're nuts." But I view that as buying me freedom. Because I did establish a sort of successful franchise, and I guess I've moved up the food chain a little when I'm pitching a project. I always wanted to write a book and I thought this was my opportunity. *Rush Hour* was a great thing, and what it did most off all was buy me time. I did do some screenwriting. I worked on a few drafts of *Hogan's Heroes*. I also did some T.V. stuff. So I felt like I did exactly what I wanted to do. I see some writers take that upward trajectory and it sometimes winds up taking them further away from their own definition of success. That's why you see a lot of cranky screenwriters. They throw money at you, assignments, but you're not getting any satisfaction. It all comes down to following your own definition of success. And my definition is simple, "I do what makes me happy." I have an office thirty feet from my house. I have breakfast and dinner with my kids. That's my definition of success. I went for happy, and I've made plenty of money. I'm very lucky.

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