2003 SCREENWRITER'S MARKET GUIDE pp. 15-38

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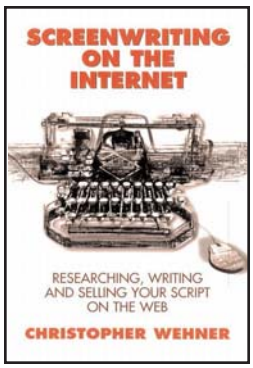
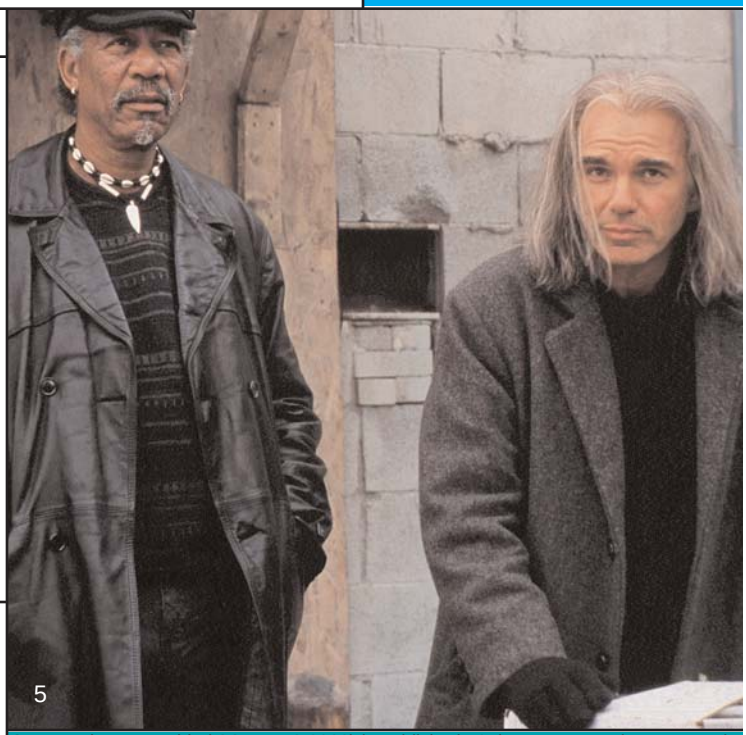


Several sections of this issue are from *Screenwriter's Monthly* editor Chris Wehner's book, *Screenwritnig on the Internet: Researching, Writing and Selling Your Script on the Web*. Published by Michael Wiese Productions. For more information about this book, or how to order a copy, see www.mwp.com.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Ed Solomon directs actress Holly Hunter. All photos by Jonathan Wenk

Finding LEVITY

by Fred Topel

Many screenwriters dream of directing their own screenplays, but only a handful do. Ed Solomon joined the field of writer-directors when he brought his script *Levity* to the screen. The writer of such comedies as *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, *Men in Black* and TV's *It's Garry Shandling's Show* wrote a drama about a freed convict (Billy Bob Thornton) seeking redemption.

This is not Solomon's first drama. *Leaving Normal* was also a drama. But with a resume that also lists *Super Mario Brothers*, *What Planet are you From?,* and *Charlie's Angels*, as well as *The In-Laws*, a drama may seem out of place. Solomon will explain in this interview that it's not as drastic a turn as one might think.

Soft-spoken, Solomon practically whispered into a tape recorder during an interview before he spoke to a group of aspiring writers at the Writer's Guild of America. Preferring to keep his speech off the record so he could be candid, he nevertheless opened up in this interview about his work.

Were you just itching to do a drama? I'm always writing a lot of different stuff and I'm not really thinking too much in terms of "well, this is a drama, this is a comedy." I just try to think in terms of what is the story and how does it seem to want to be told. I've written other dramas too. They don't sell as often so it seems so anachronistic, but in fact it's not a career choice or a statement of any kind of direction. It was just a story I was working on. That's all.

Why have the comedies sold more? They're more commercial. They're more fun to watch. They don't require as much.

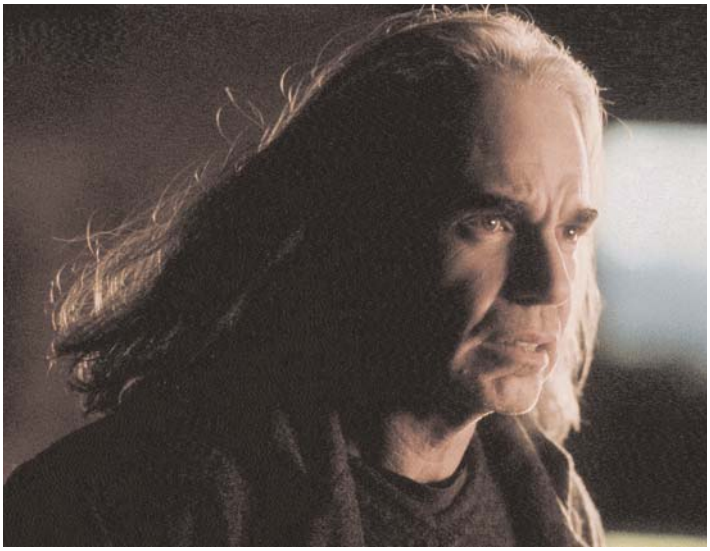
Was it a challenge to separate the Writer from the Director? Yeah, a lot of times. It was very difficult at times. When you're working with the kind of people I was working with, if you don't make the separation, they're going to do it for you soon. I'm talking about the level of cast I was working with, the level of crew. Morgan [Freeman] would often say to me, "I don't want to talk to the writer. I want to talk to the director." Meaning, he didn't want the version of me that was married to what the movie was supposed to be. He wanted the version of me that

was shepherding what the movie was. That's the person's attention he wanted. To me, it's all writing. You're writing from where you put the camera. You're writing with how you cast the film. You're writing how you edit the film. It's all writing. But, the key I think in making the transition for me was knowing how to let go of preconceptions while still keeping in mind what the scenes are about and what's the internal thrust of the scenes. That's where being a writer really helped me. In the confusion, I always had a sense of what the direction of the scene was. So many things change on your feet, you have to be willing to let it evolve.

Would you recommend writers directing their own scripts? Yeah. I think absolutely. Or work with somebody who can take your vision further than you can. It's always good to work with people who can bring it further along. Sometimes you can. Sometimes you're not the right person for it.

Were there any great scenes you had to kill? There were no great scenes I had to kill. I killed a lot in the whole production of stuff that I had envisioned. None were great scenes, but they were initial concepts that I couldn't do either because I didn't have the time to shoot them or the budget, so I cut the script from 118 pages to 95 before shooting. I shot basically a 95-minute movie and I shot the script as I saw it, as I imagined it being at the end. I didn't shoot a lot of scenes I didn't use. In fact, there are no scenes I didn't use.

Why did you shorten the script? Because we didn't have the budget, time, or the logistics to waste footage. So, I said, "What am I going to really use at the end of the day? And what is the movie I actually can shoot that still is the movie? What is the movie?" I was happy to shoot less footage with more care than a lot of footage with less care. That's what I wanted to do. That was the reason.



Billy Bob Thornton plays an ex-con freed from prison after serving 19 years for killing a teenager during an attempted robbery.

When you did *Bill and Ted*, did you have any idea it would be such a cultural icon? No. We didn't even think that it would get sold when we wrote it. I remember when we were sitting across a coffee shop table cracking each other up writing it. Chris [Matheson, co-writer] looked over and said, "Somebody could actually read this. Maybe someone would even option it." We had no idea. And then it sat on a shelf and went through quite a few years before anything happened with it.

Did *Super Mario Brothers* turn out the way it was intended? I don't know. I was the seventh of nine writers. There are a lot

Morgan Freeman (left) plays a minister. Thornton (right) stars as Manual Jordan.

of movies where I was one of a lot of writers and I'm one of credited writers. I mean, I worked for three weeks on *Super Mario Brothers*. I don't know.

What was your role in *What Planet are you From*? I did an interim draft in the middle with Garry. Garry Shandling and Michael Leeson did the initial draft, and then Garry and Peter Tolan did the final draft. I was right in the middle, so I worked on some of the stuff with Annette Benning. Again, it wasn't my vision. It was Garry's.

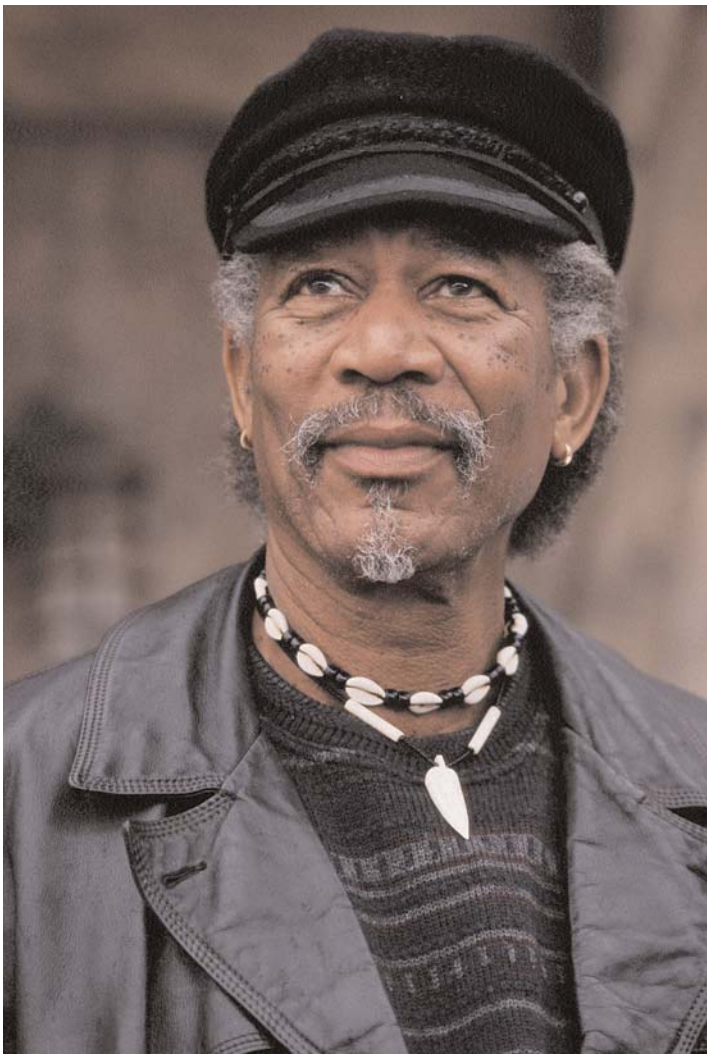
Were you involved in changing the title of *The Wedding Party* to *The In-Laws*? No. Again, I was an interim writer. Nat Mauldin did the main work on it. It was Nat's idea to do a remake of *The In-Laws*. When I was working on it, it wasn't even called *The In-Laws*. It wasn't called *The Wedding Party*. It was called '*Til Death Do Us Part*. I didn't work on it as *The In-Laws*. I worked on it as *'Til Death Do Us Part*. I worked from that script, and then the director Andy Fleming did a subsequent rewrite after me. I wasn't involved with calling it *The In-Laws* or anything.

You never looked at the original? I didn't use the original film. I was using Nat's script. I did a few weeks of work on it. I worked as hard as I could on it, but my job was not to go turn it into *The In-Laws*. It was fulfilling some of their notes.

What films are the closest to you? The scripts always are. When you're working on the scripts, they're very personal. *Leaving Normal* was a very personal one. Both *Bill and Ted*'s, the first one in particular. *Men in Black* definitely was. *Levity,* obviously, because I directed it. But the screenplays, when I'm working on it, it's always personal. It always feels that way, even when you're only there for a few weeks, it feels personal during the time. Everything is approached with the best intentions, trying to do the best job you always can. That always is the nature of the work. In terms of me as a writer, Chris Matheson and I wrote the two *Bill and Ted* movies, I think those are us. And the second one doesn't work as well because we never got the script right.

Why do you say that? Lots of people like the second one better. There's some stuff that works well in it but the first one is more cohesive. I was quite disappointed. Our initial vision of the movie was much rougher, more raucous kind of film, not as polished. The sequel has some really good moments, stuff with Death I really like, but we never got the second half, the last 40 percent of that script, we never really got right. But it was way better reviewed. The first one was trashed. The second one was really well reviewed but the first one's held up better.

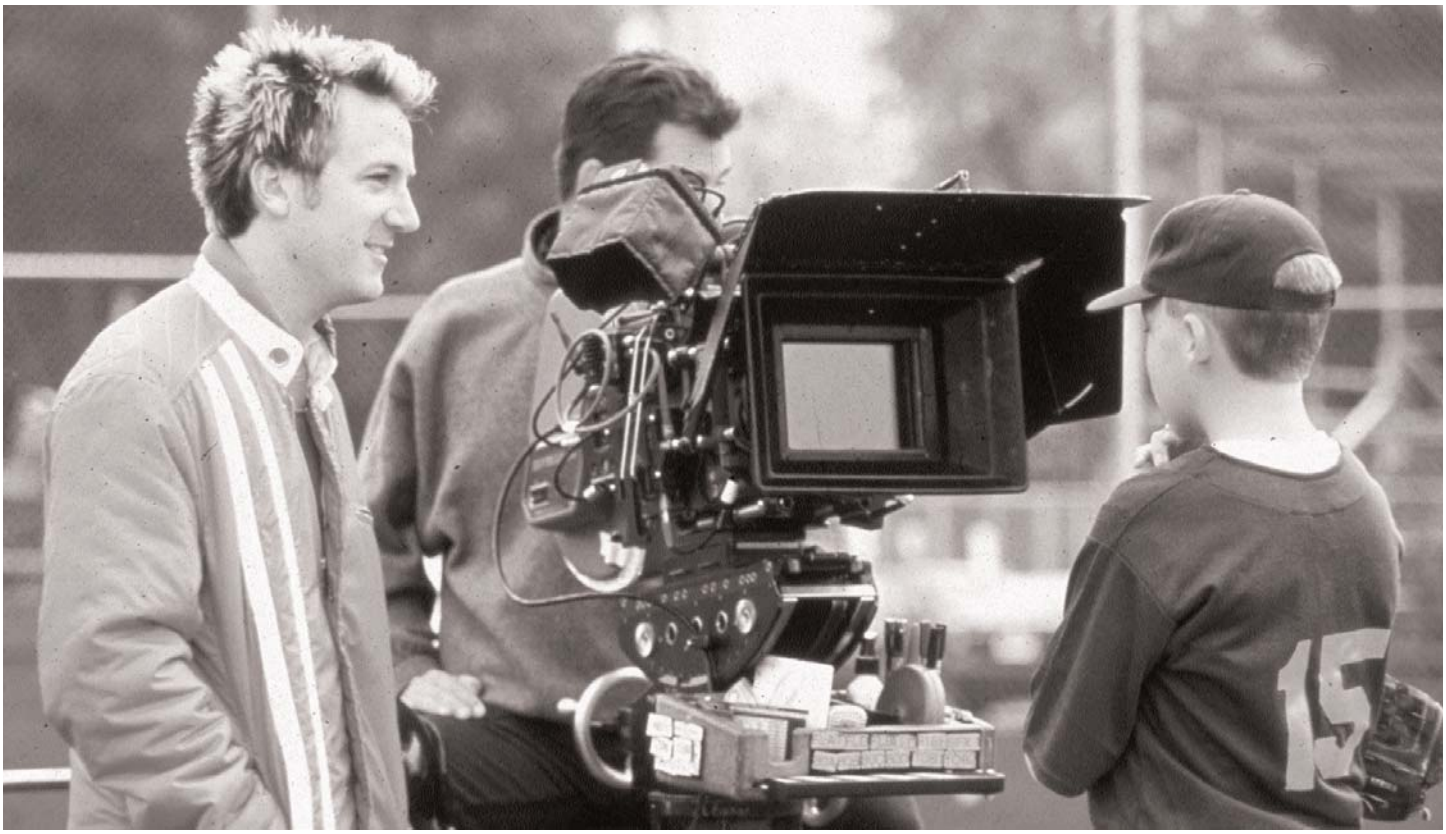
Fred Topel is an experienced entertainment correspondent with a degree in Cinema and Photography from Ithaca College. He currently writes and has written for online news outlets and magazines such as Herald Tribune Online, Daily Radar, eUniverse, Cinefantastique and The Hollywood Reporter since graduating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



Top to Bottom: Holly Hunter as Adele Easley and Morgan Freeman as Miles Evans.

Writing Comedy: SOL GOODE

by Harry Caul

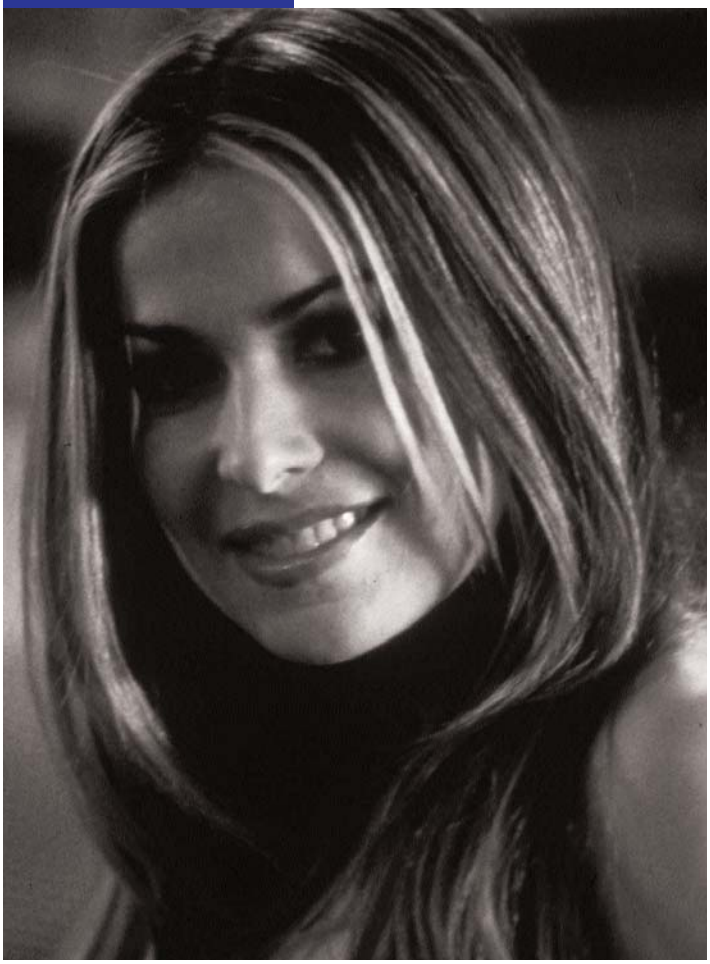


Writer-director Danny Comden (Left)

After an already arduous acting career started to dry up even further, Danny Comden decided to take matters into his own hands. Inspired by Cameron Crowe, he decided to gather the blood, sweat and tears and make a movie about the lives of he and his friends. After many incarnations, the dream finally became a reality. Danny took on the challenge of writing, directing and co-starring. *Sol Goode* was a labor of love that attracted a stellar cast that includes Balthazar Getty, Jamie Kennedy, Katharine Towne, Johnathon Schaech, Natasha Gregson Wagner, and Tori Spelling among others. While working on an ABC pilot, *The Johnny Chronicles* for Touchstone Television, *Screenwriter's Monthly* caught up with Danny to ask him a few questions about *Sol Goode* and writing comedy.

What is it about the likeable loser (who is a ladies' man) that people seem to like? I think people relate to flawed characters. To me, they are the most exciting to watch. As long as they're likable, charismatic, and not malicious, you want to route for them. I remember watching *Shampoo* for the first time, seeing Warren Beatty play the eternal ladies man, you knew he wanted more. That all his conquests meant nothing. And when he finally falls for Julie Christie. We're routing for this to happen, at least I was. Why? Because he was so charasmatic and likable. Yeah, he was a selfish bastard, but he just couldn't help himself.

You seem to have some good connections, I was amazed by the number of "name" actors you got to do cameos. It's funny



Carmen Electra appears in *Sol Goode*.

because everyone thinks I was friends with all the actors prior to the movie. I guess because we had such a good time making this movie, it appears on screen like we we're all best friends. In actuality, it was the script and a great casting director that got the majority of our cast.

Some good humor in the movie and the characters were funny and dead on, were they based on past experiences/friends? Unfortunately, yes! I'd say that over half of *Sol Goode* was based on actual characters and events. Which is really pathetic, I know. That is why I had to write about it. The character I play in the movie, Cooper, is based on my best friend Richard Ehrlich. The infamous Duraflame scene and the Viagra scene, true stories.

How hard is it to write effective comedy? Balancing the comedy between simply being obscene and trite, but sensitive as well. I think there is a fine line with how much you can get away with in comedy. My objective was to push the envelope as far as I could without going over. The second you push it too far, you've lost your audience. I hope I didn't do that. In order to keep the movie grounded, you gotta have heart. I grew up on all those John Hughes movies. He was the master. One second I'd be laughing my ass off and the next I'd be sheading tears.

You mixed character based comedy and situational comedy very nicely. The comedy is unearthed by their dysfunctional nature as characters. My whole life I've been surrounded by dysfunction junction. So I guess I'm just drawn to dysfuctional characters. I love taking heighten situations and playing them real. I think that's the key, taking rediculous situations and keeping them grounded in reality.

I'd almost call this a comedy driven story. Your emphasis is clearly on the characters and the comedic situation of the story. *Sol Goode* is definately a comedy driven story with the emphasis on the characters. Unfortunately, these days most comedies are driven by some big "hook". So the characters tend to be secondary and very generic.

What is your writing background? My writing background consisted of basically nothing. I started as an actor. I was completley frustrated by the process. I always thought that to be a writer you had to write an epic like *Gone With the Wind*. But after seeing the movie *Bottle Rocket*, I finally realized you can write a simple story and it's ok. That movie was so inspiring to me.

How did you get into the business? I started acting in T.V. commercials. That lead to small parts in terrible movies. I Got really frustrated and decided to take the bull by the horns. So I wrote *Sol Goode* as a vehicle for me to act in. Soon I realized that I wanted to direct it as well. Cut to five years and many incarnations later and my dream came true.

What advice would you give aspiring writers who are attempting to write comedy? Dilegence is key. Writing can be lonely and brutal at times, but you gotta power through it. There's no better feeling than when you catch a groove and things just fall into place. It's like putting a puzzle together. I've seen a lot of my friends start to write something and give up. You've got to follow through. Make yourself do it. And don't give up.

Harry Caul is a staff writer and can be reached at: harry_caulx@yahoo.com

P.O.V.

Learning From the Past

by Michael B. Druxman

Not long ago, I was chatting with some film students at USC and, in the course of our conversation, I happened to mention Spencer Tracy.

"Who?" one of them asked. By their blank stares I could tell that the others were asking the same question.

"Spencer Tracy," I repeated, an incredulous tone creeping into my response. "He starred in *Captain Courageous*, *Boy's Town*, *Adam's Rib*, *Inherit the Wind*. He was Katharine Hepburn's favorite leading man and won two Academy Awards."

They just shook their heads.
"Haven't you seen those movies?"
"No."
"My God," I said, "This man was possibly the greatest of all film actors. He defines the art form."
"Maybe so," the student replied. "But what does he have to do with now?"

Okay, I know that teaching geography, history, or even current affairs is not a priority in public schools today. I mean, just watch Jay Leno one night when he's quizzing his "Jaywalking Stars"—or whatever he calls them. One can laugh at the fact that these people have no idea who Winston Churchill was, don't know the name of our current Vice President, or don't know what country is located immediately north of the United States. The frightening thing is, though, that these bozos are allowed to vote. Some of them may even be running our country some day. On the other hand, the USC students are supposed to be knowledgeable. They've gone beyond public school. They're in college, studying cinema, which they, ostensibly, are planning to make their career. If you want to become an attorney, you study the history of the law. If you're going to be a doctor, you learn about the scientific discoveries of the past and how other physicians found the cures for diseases.

Therefore, shouldn't these USC students be familiar with the great directors, writers, actors, and other professionals who have come before them? Shouldn't their instructors have required them to study their work?

I also threw the names "Humphrey Bogart" and "Clark Gable" at these students. One of them said that Bogart's name "sounded familiar." Another knew that Gable was in *Gone with the Wind*, but he hadn't seen the picture.

Orson Welles never went to film school. According to what I've read, he learned his craft by watching great movies, particularly John Ford's *Stagecoach*, over and over again. Then, he went out and made *Citizen Kane*, arguably the greatest of all American films. All of the USC students knew about *Citizen Kane*, but none had seen it. "It's in black-and-white, isn't it?" one said with a grimace. I'm certainly not about to put myself in the same league with Orson Welles, but I didn't go to film school either. Yet, I've sold several of my original screenplays, been hired to write others, and have even directed my own scripts.

So, how did I learn my craft? By watching movies ever since I was a little kid. But, while my friends went to see the latest capricious Elvis Presley, Sandra Dee or Pat Boone picture, I was sitting in the out-of-the-way theaters that were screening the classics, like *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *White Heat*, *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, *Red River*, *Sergeant York,* and *Yankee Doodle Dandy*.

Without realizing it at the time, I was learning to appreciate good storytelling that did not depend on extended, over-the-top action sequences to hold an audience. My subconscious was gathering valuable insights on how to properly structure a story, how to write naturalistic dialogue, and, on a technical level, the basics of film editing. I learned from studying the masters, something that many of today's aspiring filmmakers don't care to do. How can you truly understand any art form unless you have studied the finest examples of that art?

Once you have gained an appreciation of what constitutes "the best," you can then utilize your own unique talents to build on what has come before you. In fact, you can borrow aspects from these earlier works, improve upon them, and make them your own.

Don't get me wrong. I enjoy movies by Steven Spielberg, Tim Burton, Ridley Scott and many of today's other hot directors just as much as anybody else, but let's wait a few years. Twenty years hence, will *Gladiator*, *Black Hawk Down*, *Sleepy Hollow*, *Edward Scissorhands*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* or even *E.T.* still be able to hold an audience? I don't know. Maybe. Maybe not.

Casablanca, *High Noon*, *On the Waterfront*, *Roman Holiday*, *The Best Years of Our Lives* and countless other films that are fifty-plus years old still do, and all of them are in black-and-white. Once again, if you want to learn to write and make good films—ones that will stay in an audience's memory forever—then study the great ones.

For example, do you want to write comedy? Forget Adam Sandler, Mike Myers, or the other guys who rely on bathroom and other low brow humor, even though they dominate the field today. Funny as they may be, their work has not yet passed the test of time. Instead, go watch some movies by Preston Sturges (*The Lady Eve*, *Sullivan's Travels*, *Hail the Conquering Hero*). Or, take a look at the films that Billy Wilder wrote with I.A.L. Diamond, such as *Some Like it Hot* and *The Fortune Cookie*.

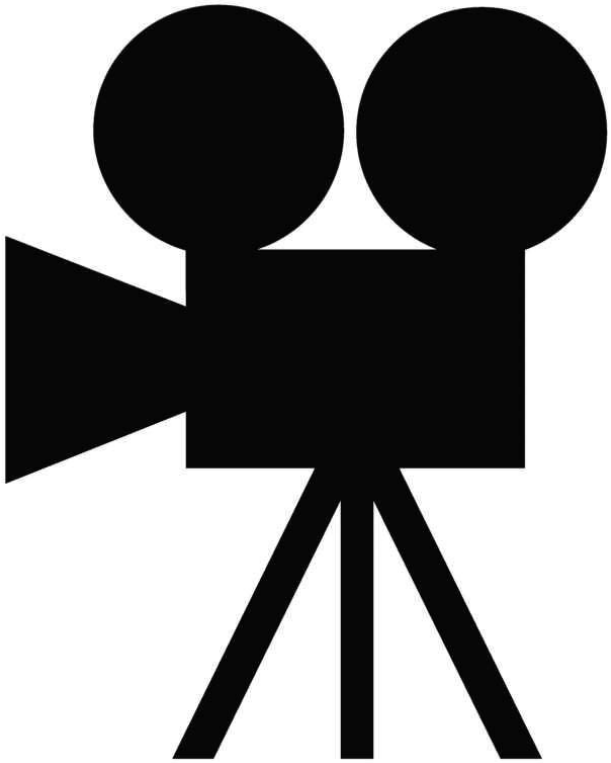
The humor in these films evolves from well-drawn characters, clever plots, and witty dialogue. Indeed, these classics are just as viable today as they were when they were first seen fifty or sixty years ago. Maybe a mystery story is your interest?

John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*, the quintessential private eye film, will still keep you guessing. And, there isn't even a car chase or a gunfight in it. Film noir? We're back to Wilder again. His *Double Indemnity* defines the genre, and his *Sunset Boulevard* is still one of the greatest films ever made. Undoubtedly, there are many films that have come along in recent years that will, someday, be ranked along with the older classic films that I've mentioned. *The Godfather Trilogy*, *Tootsie* and *Fargo* are among those that have already achieved that status. See, classics can be in color, too.

I can virtually guarantee that the talented folk who were responsible for these movies and other relatively recent successful movies watched those old films and probably still do. Often, when they are being interviewed, they talk about how they were inspired by the likes of Bogart, Tracy, or Jimmy Cagney. I wonder if those USC students have ever heard of Cagney.

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



Write Right

Goldman's Law

by Neill D. Hicks

The smartest thing ever said about the Hollywood screenwriting business is William Goldman's well-known adage that "Nobody knows anything." On the page, however, print fails to fully convey a dimensional inflection to Goldman's Law. It is not that we in Hollywood know *nothing*, but that we don't *know* anything. If you eavesdrop in the executive corridors of every Hollywood production company, you can hear the timeless mantra of management, "If I cross all my fingers and all my toes and hold my breath, my movie *will* be a hit. I hope, I hope, I hope." Earnest incantations have about as much to do with the success of a movie as all the endless rewrites, big-name casting, and audience previews put together.

No matter what screenwriter you ask about virtually any aspect of Hollywood, as a business, their answer will be wrong. And right. Like the blind men and the elephant, everyone understands what the beast is, but nobody *knows* anything about it. What follows, then, are some business-of-screenwriting Corollaries to Goldman's Law:

Nobody Knows What They Want. There's not a single production executive, director or actor alive who can clearly articulate exactly what they want in a film. The incessant notes and purgatory of development come as a result of chronic indecision, uncertainty and second guessing. The irony is that the gate keepers are waiting for you to tell them what they want, to produce the magic bullet that will put an end to their muddle. The experience is absolutely crazy-making, but look at it this way: if they knew what they wanted, they'd be writers.

Everybody Can Write Better Than You Can. After you've created something from the nothing of the blank page, there isn't a soul alive who isn't confident that they can do it better. People who would not dare perform their own hemorrhoid surgery, or trek the wilderness without a compass, never question that they can write better than the professional who has spent years learning the craft. The sheer audacity of this conceit is astounding. Everyone knows that the act of filling pages with words is so simple, that actually paying a writer is absurd. "Hell, I could do this myself if I just had the time."

"No," Is Always the Answer. *No* is safe. *No* does not risk a job. Throughout the long process of script to screen, there are countless numbers of people whose duty it is to say, "No." Ninety-nine percent of the time, *No* will be the correct decision. Sure, you may be turning down the next *Star Wars* or *Dances With Wolves*, but by and large, an executive maintains a secure corporate niche by sending everything south. If he responds with even a tentative *yes*, he's sticking his neck way out. Should the picture fail for any reason, chances are he'll be wagging a 'Will Work for Options and Company Limo' sign outside the studio gates.

Your task as a screenwriter, then, is to take as much risk out of the project as is in your power. There are countless ways to shrink the gamble, from attaching a star to bringing in partial financing. But most of us most of the time don't have control of those assets. All we as writers have is a hundred or so pieces of paper. The strongest defense against the "No" answer, of course, is to create a script that absolutely overwhelms the reflex rejection. Alas, Corollary #1 makes this amazed reaction inherently improbable. In fact, to some extent, the more enthusiastic the response to a script, the greater the risk because such a powerful personal reaction demands corroboration. Like it or not, the best way for a writer to cut down on the uneasiness factor is to submit a script that has a ring of familiarity. You want your reader to say, "It's just like _____, only better." If _____ was a hit, the decision maker will be much more likely to look favorably on your script.

Entropy Increases as Gamble and Originality Degrade to an Ultimate State of Inert Uniformity. Tactically, one of the disadvantages you can create for yourself is to declare that your script is unlike anything ever done before. The reader is going to be immediately wary. Even if your script is like nothing ever done before, you have to find a way to make the reader comfortable that he isn't endangering his position by approving a piece that's so radical no one can identify with it.

No One Has the Power You Think They Have. Power fills a vacuum, and Hollywood is a labyrinth of voids. For many of the players, if you aren't something, you must be nothing. The ebb and flow of something to nothing and back again can happen in such a quark's instant that from the outside it may look like the structure is atomically locked. Inside the Hollywood molecule, though, instability is the only law. So, don't count on your friend the agent-producer-director-actor to get your script read. On the other hand, never hesitate for a second to use that friend's name to get your script read.

The Most Important Factor in Making a Film is Dumb Luck. Timing is everything. Many, if not most, films make it to the screen simply because all the elements happen to be in place at the right time. The star is available. The director's looking for a project. The money is in the bank. There's a need in the

distribution schedule. All these disparate elements come together by cosmic serendipity. Of course, neither you nor anyone else will never know what the correct timing is. It is a mystery. The best way to cope with the capriciousness of timing is to develop a calloused shrug and hopeful grin. "Next time for sure."

All businesses face similar unpredictabilities; the more risky the business, the greater force these unknowns have. Even if a script were green-lighted today, it would take a year or more until a motion picture made its appearance on the screen. In that time, public taste and world events can significantly alter the likes and dislikes of the mass audience. Many aspects of manufacturing, finance and retail have comparable lead times and equally maddening strokes of good and bad fortune. As a screenwriter, you are in the movie business. When the vagaries of fate seem discouraging, it's heartening to keep Goldman's Law in mind, together with another famous aphorism, Woody Allen's Law: Seventy percent of success in life is showing up.

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

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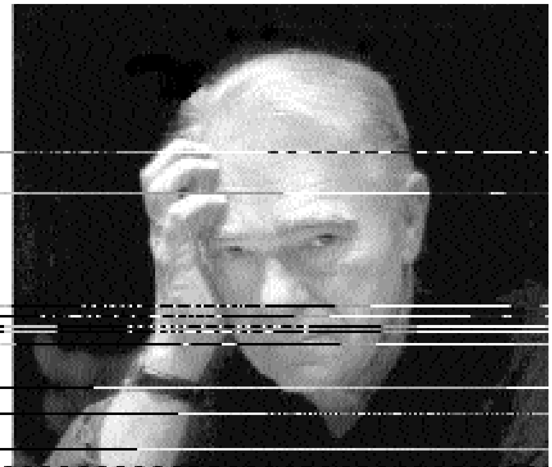

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Robert McKee is the bestselling author of "Story" (HarperCollins). Currently in its 10th printing in the U.S., Story provides insight, knowledge and inspiration for screenwriters, TV writers, novelists, playwrights, journalists and anyone with a story to tell. During his famed, "near legendary" (THE WASHINGTON POST) STORY SEMINAR McKee brings the material to life in an intense, three day course that illuminates the art of story and screenwriting.

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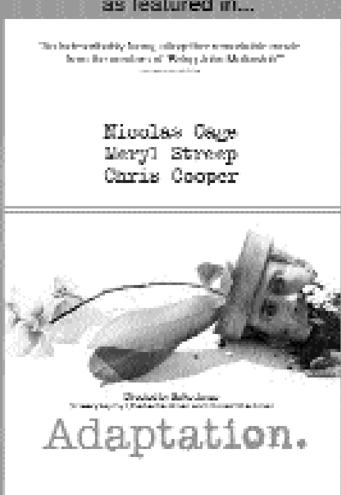
Robert McKee's Story Seminar as featured in...



AGENDA

DAY 1

- The writer and the art of story
- The decline of story in contemporary film, television, theatre and literature
- Story design: the meaning of story, the substance of story, the limitations and inspirations of story structure and genre, the debate between character versus story design.
- Premise Idea, Counter Idea, Controlling Idea
- Story Structure: beat, scene, sequence, act, story
- Mapping the Story universe: Archplot, Miniplot, Antiplot
- Shaping the course of story energy and ...

DAY 2

- Act design: the great sweep and body of story
- The first major story event (the inciting incident)
- Scene design in Story: turning points, emotional dynamics, setup/payoff, the nature of choice
- Ordering and linking scenes
- Exposition: dramatizing your characters, the story setting, creating back story
- The principles of antagonism
- Crisis, climax and resolution

DAY 3

- Putting the elements of story together
- The principles of character dimension and design
- The text: description, dialogue, and poetics
- The spectrum of story genres
- Story adaptations
- Scene analysis: text and sub-text; design through dialogue versus design through action
- The writer's method: working from the inside out; the creative process from inspiration to final draft
- How it all works: the principles of the previous 2-1/2 days applied in a 6-hour, scene-by-scene screening and analysis of *Casablanca*

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2003 1st Annual Screenwriter's Market Guide

The Art of Pitching

by Christopher Lockhart

It seems a cruel irony, after months and months of carefully plotting story, creating vivid characters and structuring a hundred and twenty pages in such a way for maximum dramatic impact, that screenwriters must become orators if they are to convince anyone to read their screenplay. But with hundreds of thousands of scripts, books, and ideas floating around Hollywood, dreaming of making it to the screen, there is little time for executives to consider every project. So, the agent or producer must be influenced into reading the screenplay. The purest way to achieve this is with a "pitch," a carefully planned seduction that will convince the executive to clear two hours of calendar time and commit to a read. "Pitching" is the art of presenting the story in a truncated and intriguing manner that piques the listener's curiosity, resulting in the solicitation of the screenplay. This can be done via a query letter but is most effective when done as a verbal presentation. However, this often terrifies screenwriters because the notion of telling their story is intimidating. Odd, since screenwriters are storytellers. But comfort should be found in the fact that pitching does not require the skills of a raconteur. With the popularity of film festivals, screenwriting expos, conferences, and "pitch marts," aspiring writers are finding unprecedented access to Hollywood executives, wherein they are able to pitch their wares. But there are no minor leagues in Hollywood screenwriting, and struggling scribes go toe-to-toe with Oscar winners as pitches are thrown. Whether feared or despised, pitching is part of the journey of turning a screenplay into a movie, and the screenwriter must be able to effectively pitch or risk losing the vital opportunity of a Hollywood read.

A pitch begins with the performance. Although it doesn't have to be delivered with the dramatics of Sir Lawrence Olivier, it does need to demonstrate passion for the project. Many pitches are delivered monotone or with a professorial slant or, worst of all, with diffidence or apathy. If the pitch is not delivered with passion, it will not be received with enthusiasm. Zeal, confidence, and control are essential elements of the pitch.

The bigger picture must also be considered. There is a possibility that the executive will not like the pitch, but he may conclude that the writer fits a project currently in development. The executive is not simply listening to a pitch; he is summing up the screenwriter. Is this a writer the executive would like to work with? Are the personalities a good match? A pitch session is also a job interview, and the basic skills of interviewing apply here.

The key to effectively pitching a screenplay is organization. Think of the entire story as a big box. Within that big box is a smaller box that represents a less complicated version of the story. And inside of that box is an even smaller box, representing an even more uncomplicated version of the story and so on. Common sense dictates that we open the biggest box first in order to get to the smaller boxes. So, a pitch often dives right in and struggles to present the story as a whole, much like one would tell a joke to a friend or read a book to a child. A once-upon-a-time pitch is unwise. A pitch hits upon the most crucial aspects of the story. Long and intricate details bring about a quick and painful death to a pitch. A pitch must avoid opening the biggest box and, instead, begin with the smallest. As the pitch progresses, bigger boxes are opened as it becomes necessary. It should slowly blossom from rudimentary to more complex. The listener must understand the arithmetic of the story before the calculus.

The first order of business is to present the genre. This is often forgotten. The genre is crucial if the listener is to correctly interpret the story. Many ideas can be developed in different directions. For instance, the notion of planet earth meeting its demise by a comet/meteor was explored as melodrama in *Deep Impact* and sci-fi action-adventure in *Armageddon*. If genre is not specified, a World War II POW drama like *The Great escape* could be misconstrued as a comedy like *Hogan's Heroes*. This type of error could bring about an early death for the pitch.

Pitches often begin with a question to create an initial desire in the listener. As an example, a question for a romantic comedy about unrequited love might go, "Have you ever yearned for someone who clearly wasn't interested?" This is a way to personalize the pitch and engage the listener. Of course, like an attorney, a question should never be asked without knowing the answer in advance. Since the executive could answer with a response other than anticipated, the pitch must be prepared with a retort for the unexpected. Regardless of the executive's answer, the pitch must use it as a seamless segue. Avoid questions that get too personal, could embarrass the listener, make him uncomfortable or cause indifference. To avoid the possible pitfalls of question/answer, a pitch can simply ask a rhetorical question or make a statement that will produce similar effects. Using *Liar,Liar* as an example,

a pitch could state, "Imagine a conniving lawyer who is compelled to tell the truth for twenty-four hours…." This could be considered the smallest of the boxes.

After creating a desire in the listener, the pitch must present the screenplay's rudimentary storyline. This box would be slightly bigger than the previous one, because it contains more information than a rhetorical question. The easiest way to achieve this is with the "log line." The log line conveys the dramatic throughline of the screenplay in the most abbreviated manner possible—one sentence. Starting with the log line orients the listener in the most basic elements of the narrative. A log line example for *The Wizard of Oz* could go: "After a cyclone transports a lonely Kansas farm girl to a magical land, she sets out on a dangerous journey to find a wizard with the power to send her home." This presents the dramatic throughline in the most simplistic form possible leaving out many details.

Using a more complicated story, like *Minority Report*, a pitch with an opening rhetorical question and a log line could go like this: "What would the future hold if crime could be stopped by catching the perpetrator before he commits the offense? This is a sci-fi actioner about a cop who arrests criminals before the crime occurs. However, when he is framed for a murder he has not yet committed, he goes on the lam to prove his innocence." This brief question and log line present a rather complicated story in its most simplistic form. The pitch can now move on to opening a bigger box.

Once the listener is oriented in the dramatic principles of the story, the protagonist can be introduced. In the intro for the *Minority Report* pitch, the only reference to the protagonist was "cop." It would have been too confusing to refer to the cop by name and give a brief character description. However, now that the stage is set, the pitch can present the details of the protagonist. A succinct protagonist intro might go: "The story revolves around John Anderton, a cop who remains despondent over the fact that his young son was kidnapped and never seen again. This leads to drug addiction and the deterioration of his marriage. Because of his pain, Anderton fully supports the notion of nabbing perps before they commit the crime. He wants others to avoid the hell that his life has become." This portion of the pitch can also present the fundamentals of the protagonist's arc.

At this point, a savvy executive is bound to be curious and ask questions like, "How do the police have the ability to predict crime in advance?" "How does the cop get framed?" These kinds of questions are a good sign; they mean the executive is curious. It is not a good sign if the executive asks, "Could you explain that part to me again?" However, the pitch must stay on track. If the presentation includes the answers to these questions, the pitch will satisfy his curiosity. It is no different from a good movie. An audience anxiously inquires about the hero's strange behavior, "Why did he just do that?" If the audience patiently waits, that question will be answered during the film. A good pitch raises questions, and questions create suspense—an essential tool of the dramatist. If a quick diversion is taken to answer the question, the pitch must get back on track.

After revealing the basic elements of the story, including the protagonist, the pitch can move on and present a more detailed account of the story throughline, using the log line as a road map. This is a bigger box. The pitch must boil the narrative down to the most important beats and present the story in a crisp and fluid manner by hitting upon the major bullet points of the story. The pitch could sound like: "Our farm girl, Dorothy, dreams of going over the rainbow. And through a freak cyclone, she and her farmhouse are transported to Munchkinland. There, she learns the only way back to Kansas is to meet the Wizard of Oz, who has the power to get her home. So she sets off on a dangerous journey. Along the way she meets a Scarecrow, a Tin Woodsman, and a Lion. And they travel with her. However, Dorothy has made an enemy of a Wicked Witch, and she and her three friends…." The pitch must proceed along a simplistic route, covering the major narrative conflicts and taking the story to its conclusion. If the screenplay has a "twist" ending, it may be best to reveal it. If it is truly an inspired climax, it will only whet the executive's appetite even more. Trying to playfully bait the executive with, "You'll have to read the rest," is not an effective way to deal with a person who already has a stack of screenplays on his desk.

With a clear understanding of the story's beginning, middle and end, a larger box can be opened by coloring the pitch with a few details. For instance, particulars can be given involving the Scarecrow's desire for a brain, the Tin man's desire for a heart, and the Lion's need for courage. But the foundation must be built first before the decorating begins. The pitch must be sparing when providing information on secondary characters and sub-plots. It should avoid delving into those details unless absolutely necessary. For instance, it may be compulsory to share the romantic sub-plot—since the romance is an important factor in Hollywood films. It may not be important to include the villain's back-story. Overall, it is vital that the pitch only present the exact information necessary for concise comprehension. Since the full story is not being told, lots of information can be withheld. The pitch must avoid the desire to tell too much. Many go awry because too many details are crammed into the presentation. If the listener is overloaded with information, it will not bode well for the pitch.

One important element to remember is that verbal storytelling is different from dramatic storytelling. And a pitch cannot necessarily be presented in the same manner in which the story unfolds on the page. For instance, it could be suicide to pitch the non-linear *The Usual Suspects* in a non-linear manner. For the sake of comprehension, it may be wiser to tell the listener that the screenplay is non-linear but pitch it in a linear format. After all, it is easier to digest a serpentine story like *The Usual Suspects* over the course of an entire screenplay than it is in a five-minute pitch.

Throughout the pitch, it is imperative that the presentation not go off on tangents. Once the pitch strays from the heart of its story, it flatlines and could be impossible to revive. For instance, a recent pitch presented a martial arts action-adventure loosely based on the children's story "Peter Rabbit." However, the pitch digressed as it chose to present the details of the classic bunny saga instead of simply pitching the screenplay, which had absolutely nothing to do with Flopsy, Mopsy, or Cotton-tail. Science-fiction pitches are infamous for taking the listener on esoteric, intergalactic diversions that would put Stephen Hawking

in a coma. If the pitch wants to offer background information, it should be done in an introduction, before presenting the log line, and handled with the utmost clarity and brevity.

Certain stories are easier to pitch. For instance, a high concept screenplay ('high concept' is a concept that immediately conveys a movie and can offer a great deal of conflict using very few words) like *Bruce Almighty* lends itself to a more effortless presentation than something like *Gosford Park* or *About Schmidt*. (A.) Certain screenplays warrant different pitch strategies. In the case of *Gosford Park*, along with a log line, the pitch could present the "world" in which the story takes place instead of presenting a particular character, since it is an ensemble piece. The dichotomous world of servants and aristocrats is at the heart of *Gosford Park*, and it should certainly be included. Although the "world" of Oz is important in the *Wizard of Oz*, it is not the linchpin of the narrative; the world is not as important to the comprehension of the basic storyline as compared to *Gosford Park*. Some science-fiction stories will require a brief and simplistic presentation of the world in order for the listener to understand the context of the storyline. In a character study like *About Schmidt*, the pitch has to offer a more detailed character description, since a true appreciation of the piece relies heavily on understanding the titular role and not the limited story concept.

Some pitches use visual aids to provide greater comprehension to the listener. For instance, pitches can use photos to represent the various characters that may be introduced in the course of the presentation. In order to pitch something like *The Matrix*, the presentation may include sketches to enable clear visualization of the very unique world. If pitching *Pollack*, the presentation could provide copies of the artist's paintings. In the late eighties, *The Ticking Man* (an unproduced spec) was introduced across town when the agent sent out alarm clocks to executives with a banner saying, "The Ticking Man is coming." In an offbeat pitch about a writer's true-life struggle of dealing with her husband's untimely death, the presentation included laptop video of the man's corpse. Any aid or device can be used if it enables the pitch to go as smoothly and memorably as possible.

A pitch should concentrate on presenting the dramatic and cinematic elements of the narrative and avoid the desire to express the theme of the piece. "This is a story of triumph over tragedy." "This story explores different shades of evil." These generic statements do not allow the executive to "see the movie." A lucid pitch of the dramatic storyline enables the listener to extrapolate the theme of the piece without being told. A pitch often includes a "hybrid" to allow the listener to understand the tone of the story. In Robert Altman's *The Player*, we heard such hybrids as, "It's *Ghost* meets *The Manchurian Candidate*" and "*Out of Africa* meets *Pretty Woman*." Although some seem to take offense to this practice, it is widely used throughout the industry and remains an effective way to communicate the "feel" and tone of the story, both of which can be difficult to understand without actually reading the script itself. Careful thought must go into creating a hybrid. Commonsense dictates that obscure and unsuccessful movie titles be avoided, along with unintentionally goofy hybrids—like *Mary Poppins* meets *Caligula*.

It is imperative to remember, "Less is more." Simply put, the more the writer says, the more the listener can find objectionable. Although it is an odd contradiction, the actual craft and writing of a screenplay can be appreciated even if the story itself is not. If the pitch goes awry and the executive rejects an opportunity to read the script, the writer is denied the chance to show off his craft. Without the producer discovering the writer's talents, the

scribe cannot be offered a development deal, for instance.

Skilled story executives can easily diagnose a pitch. Based on a short presentation, strengths and weaknesses of the entire screenplay can be easily determined. A pitch is a byproduct of the screenplay. If the screenplay has congenital defects, they will appear in the pitch. Writers often blame a poor pitch on their inability to effectively present the story verbally. However, a difficult pitch is often the result of a poorly constructed screenplay. The fact that an executive does not respond favorably may not be proof that he is clueless but could be evidence that he knows more than the writer. Conversely, a pitch can go splendidly but still fail in its objective to entice the listener, because the story may not be what the producer is shopping for.

When the pitch is over, perhaps two minutes have passed, perhaps twenty minutes, but, within that time, the writer has spun his story and opened just enough "boxes" that the executive's corner office resembles Christmas morning on a budget. In the best possible scenario, the pitch is never completed, because the executive interrupts the presentation, snatching up the script or, for more experienced writers, buying the idea itself. More realistically, the writer may have to move on to another story idea and begin the process all over again. In Hollywood, every executive, agent, producer and manager searches for the next great script. The power is in the project, and executives enter meetings hoping the writer and his story will provide that empowerment. Before a screenplay can be appreciated in the form it was intended, it must be successfully translated into a pitch. With an organized and controlled presentation, prepared and practiced in advance, a writer can succeed at convincing a busy agent or producer to invest the time into reading yet another screenplay. Writers must accept and master this process and transform, what could be, a pitch-black experience into the perfect pitch.

Christopher Lockhart is the Executive Story Editor at ICM, a leading talent and literary agency, where he finds projects for a small roster of clients including Mel Gibson, Denzel Washington and Michelle Pfeiffer. He is the creator of STORY CONFERENCE, a series of free screenwriting workshops in Los Angeles, where writers are given the opportunity to pitch to Hollywood executives. He is a regular contributor to the online screenwriting co-op www.twoadverbs.com, and he lectures around the country. Christopher earned an MFA in dramatic writing from New York University's Tisch School of Arts.

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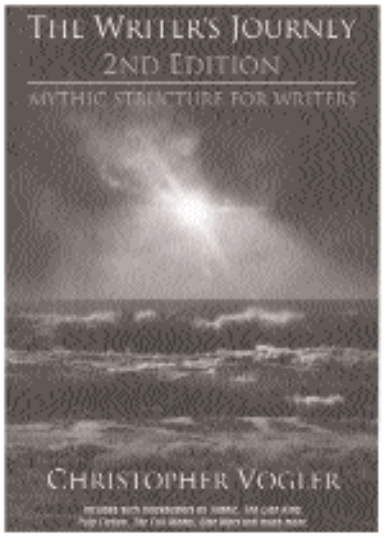

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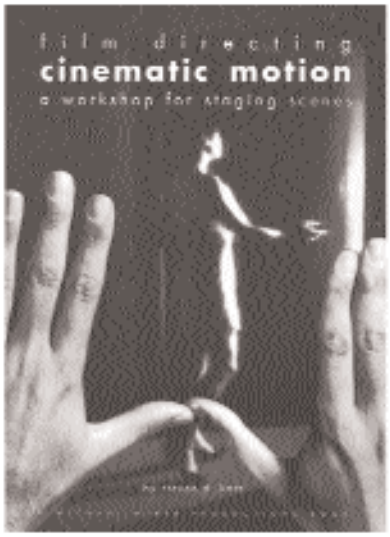

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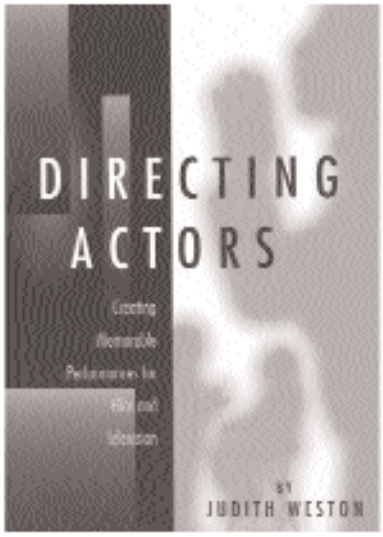

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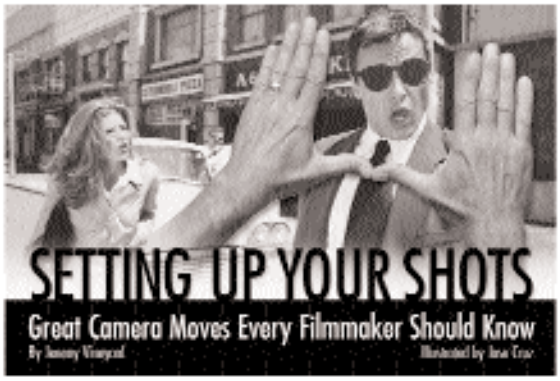

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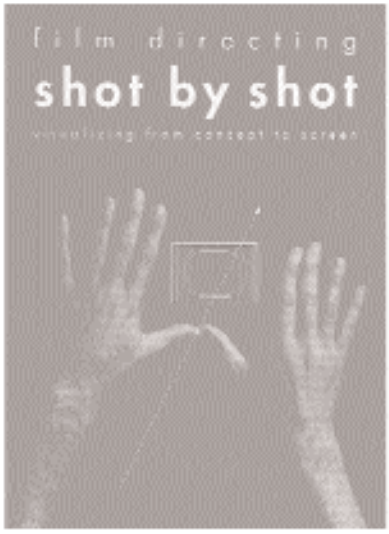

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The E-mail Query

by Christopher Wehner

You've written a half-dozen screenplays—at least—you've honed and crafted them to the point where you're now ready to start submitting. Finding the right agent, producer or production company to submit your project to will be the hardest part. You will find that the blood, sweat and tears of the past two or three years have been nothing. You are now going to face rejection, and lots of it. You will not have your phone calls returned, that's if you're lucky enough to leave a message with anyone of importance. You will also find that the gatekeepers will happily slap up wall after wall to slow you down. Soon after you'll start to doubt yourself.

With that said, you can do it. After reading this chapter you will have increased the odds of your email query having success. You can get your screenplay in front of a set of eyeballs that are attached to a head that is resting on the shoulders of someone who could either buy your screenplay or sign you as a client.

Email is the most popular written form of communication in the world. Over 30 million reach there destination every day. Email is used on a dialy basis to conduct business.

Some of you are using email to contact agents and producers without giving it a second thought. Yet when you send off a letter, you're reviewing screenwriting text books for *how to* information on query letters. Your email query must be give the same amount of thought and respect. When you query an agent or producer through email there are some things you should know. There are strategies that you can use to increase your odds of success.

THE LETTER VERSUS EMAIL

My strategy is different with email querying compared to the letter form. Email is a relatively new way of contacting agents and producers. The rules are not yet clearly defined. There are dozens of books that offer tips, suggestions and out right rules for writers interested in querying with a letter.

Writer/Producer Richard Finney has noticed a consistent "System" developing among the more experienced writers who contact his company. "They email me and request the opportunity to query me. They usually include some information about themselves. Sometimes they mention the genre of the material. I reply by email that I am open to queries. They write again with their ideas, or a brief description of their script or treatment. I look at it and usually respond within a day."

Producers like Richard Finney have been utilizing email for years, and even prefer it over letters and faxes. The main reason, email will wait for them. They can check it at their leisure. "I can respond to a (email) query upon my convenience," says Finney.

"I prefer email queries. Email is easier to read, respond and delete," confirms Director of Development for Simon Tse Productions Jill Nowak.

Meetings, phone calls, faxes and certified mail arriving constantly, it's not hard to imagine why. Finney agrees, "The ranking of contact methods for me personally goes like this—email, phone, fax, letter. Certified mail seems over the top." More and more producers and agents are turning to email as not just a means of doing business, but as a primary way of establishing relationships with writers and other professionals..

"It's weird how by using email you can strike up a relationship with an executive or a producer that you might never achieve over the phone," remarks Finney. "Last night I was sitting with a director that we are shooting a movie with who told my producing partner and I that the first contact he had with us was through our web site."

Frederick Levy, former Vice President of Development at Marty Katz Productions, sees email as only continuing to be a more significant force in the movie making process, "Instead of calling back and forth a million times per day, I can email back and forth. We're doing a movie right now called *Frailty*, that Bill Paxton is directing, I can email the director, other producers on the project, and my line producer."

Email is a completely different beast than the letter. A letter is more formal, more elegant. I concede it is still the best way to contact agents. But with that said, the first agent I signed with was a contact I made from an email query. Still, just because you are sending an email does not mean it is less of an important document. Take your email correspondences seriously, because the producer or agent on the other end will.

Perhaps the most significant thing about email is that it usually finds its way to the producer, not some assistant. Anything that comes from the mailroom or fax machine is almost always first dealt with by an assistant. "I have a story editor who deals with all of the fax and query letters. But I read all of my own email," says Levy. Your goal is to circumvent as many middlemen as possible, and email can help you do that.

I think more than anything the phone is the biggest loser in today's Internet world. Especially with the proliferation of voice mail, you almost never can get an agent or producer on the line. They will always be screening their calls.

This chapter is primarily focused on contacting the independent producer, and/or the smaller production company. You will not have any success emailing Miramax chairman Harvey Weinstein — thatt's if you even had his email address. Focus on the smaller production companies and independent producers, like the ones listed in the next Chapter Six.

In the traditional query letter you're allotted 3 or 4 paragraphs. It's recommended that you open up your letter with your premise statement, your log line, or central question. Your movie idea is best presented if it is of the *high concept* variety. You'll also want to introduce the main character(s), then some kind of a hook. The genre and title of the work must be apparent as well. It is also recommend that you provide a little information about yourself and what, if any, credentials you have. Then the letter is wrapped up with a plea for whoever it is to read your script, along with your contact information.

In a typical letter query your goal is to separate yourself from the pack in a few paragraphs. With email, you don't have that much time! The majority of producers and agents that you'll run into on the Internet will not read email of excessive length. No one likes to get a full page of email from someone they do not know.

COMMON SENSE STILL APPLIES

There are some commonalties between email and the letter. Always be on the lookout for scams. *You should never have to pay for an agent or production company to review your screenplay.* Never, ever. here are some other common sense things you should know:

- Never send your script without permission. If you send an unsolicited script it won't get read, it won't even be opened. Do not attach an entire script to an email. I once had a very respectable producer ask me to submit the first ten pages of my script to him via email. I did, but do not recommend it. I can't imagine someone asking you to do that.
- Don't be arrogant in your communication, avoid proclamations: "I can write better than what I've seen at the movies;" "I'm the best screenwriter nobody's ever heard of;" "My script will win the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay."
- Pay attention to details and follow instructions. You see a post on a "Writers wanted" board, or find a company's Web site, be sure to look closely for submission guidelines. "I posted on Hollywoodlitsales.com that we were looking for scripts," says Michael Grace. "I asked that everyone place 'RE: Hollywoodlitsales' in the subject header, and only about 20 percent bothered to do it. Writers need to pay attention to details. If they can't pay attention to details when querying, how well do they do it in their script?"
- Do not instruct them to visit your Web site to read your log lines or synopsis, they will not go. Do include a link at the bottom of your email in your signature file, but do not get lazy and ask them to go there and read something. If they are curious about you they might visit your home page. Leave it up to them.
- Be professional, patient and courteous.

If you're pitching a comedy script, try to do so with some humor. But avoid using jokes, especially bad ones. I would also eschew from witty monologues or catchy phrases unless it is somehow worked in to your comedy pitch. I used to have a saying attached to my *email signature file* (see below) that read, "If you're not a part of the solution, then you're part of the problem." I had emailed a producer who promptly responded by cutting me down to size. He informed me that he could tell I was an amateur by my "unprofessional" email, and obviously had no idea how to approach someone of his stature. Well, needless to say he did not request my script. He was harsh, but he was also correct. Don't risk offending anyone. Also, be patient. It takes a little time for agents or producers to get back to you. Be courteous, even when rejected. Always be the bigger person, you'll feel better in the end.

EMAIL SIGNATURE FILE

An email signature file appears at the end of your email and is automatically placed by your browser. While in Netscape go to: *edit* > *preferences* > *Identity*, and there you will see a signature file window. Then enter the location of your signature text file. Here is an example:

You Name
Your Email
Your Home Page
Telephone Number

Your signature file usually consist of your contact information, home page, the stuff that you want attached to almost every email and want to avoid having to type every time. If you do not want your signature file to go out with a particular piece of email, simply erase it from the message window after you click on *new message*.

YOUR CONTACT PORTFOLIO

The goal of your email query is to procure a response, even if it's a "No-thanks." You need to build a portfolio of contacts. I guarantee you that your list of email addresses will be greater than postals. Being organized will make a big difference. You do not want to email the same person the same message twice. Keeping track of who you have contacted, how long ago, and what the outcome of the contact was will be very important. By keeping a portfolio of each contact's name, email, web site, mailing address, date of contact, outcome, and follow-up information you can chart your contact movement.

WRITING THE EMAIL QUERY

Keep your email query short and to the point. Think of your short email correspondence as an exercise in word attrition. That's a big difference between the letter and email. Do not describe your story in any way, shape or form until asked to do so. Sometimes you can start right off with a your log line or synopsis. Producer Adam Kline requests that you send "a 5-7 sentence summary of each feature length script," but for the most part you'll want permission. Here are some basics for a successful email query letter:

- Address who it is you're contacting personally. If you don't have a contact name, address your email to 'Development" or "To whom it may concern." (Note: it is a very big plus if you can address someone specifically.)
- Do not announce you are a screenwriter, that will be obvious.
- Are you repped? This is important, if you're lucky enough to have an agent mention that right away. It places production companies and producers more at ease. They like to avoid lawsuits, and when material is submitted through a WGA sanctioned agent there are protections involved. Also, if you're good enough to sign with an agent, right away you've seperated yourself from the pack.
- Make a connection. [See below]

- Tell them the genre of your story, but do not describe it until asked to do so.
- Ask the question, "Are you acceptiong screenplay submissions?" (If you know they are then omit this part and get right into your pitch.)
- Thank them for their time.
- Shut up and do a spell check. (Avoid misspelling someone's name, they will likely not respond if you can't even spell their name correctly.)

MAKE THE CONNECTION

I truly feel this is far more important with email than a letter. Email is easily deleted, that's another reason why it is liked. You have to grab their attention right away, and be quick so as not to lose them. If you mention a film produced by the company, or a successful client who you admire, this will increase the chances of soliciting a response. When you do your homework and can mention credits or perhaps name drop, you make a connection that most beginner writers do not bother to make. When an agent or producer sees someone who has gone the extra mile, they respect that, and often will respond.

Research can easily be done by visiting a company's web site, visiting message boards and by checking out the rumor mill on ***news:misc.writing.screenwriting***. Here are some excellent resources for you as well:

Internet Movie database – easily look up credits. (imdb.com)
4Filmmakers – another great resource to find out what a production company has under development. You do have to register, but it's free. (4filmmakers.com)

Normally you're not going to have much success when you send your drama piece about abortion to someone known for action films. Name dropping and research are not the only ways to make a connection. Often you will provide everything that is necessary for a connection to be made. You'll write a marvelous synopsis or log line, you're a produced writer with credits, or you're a fresh young writer with some credentials.

CREDENTIALS

You don't have to be a produced or optioned screenwriter to have *credentials*. Have you placed in a screenwriting competition? Any writing competition for that matter. Do you have any filmmaking experience? Even if it was in high school, or maybe as a kid you used to take your parent's old 8mm camera, write up a script, and shoot 5 minute short films. You can find a way to work that in. Perhaps you were published, even if it's a small local paper. Maybe your play was produced by a local college or high school. These are all credentials and can be mentioned.

EDUCATION

I do not mention the fact that I have a degree in History and attended graduate school. I really feel it is a waste of precious time and space, and does not increase my standing as a screenwriter. However, if you graduated from NYC film school or the UCLA screenwriting program, of course mention that. To me that type of experience falls more under *credentials*. You've really accomplished something, and most likely completed a short film or entered a prestigious school writing competition.

THE QUERY

I've given you as much detail as necessary for constructing your email query. It's time to provide some examples. Remember, what I've outlined above are not rules, but starting points. You'll develop your own style, and you'll find that incorporating what you've learned here will be a major part.

Here's an example of a short query I've used with much success:

> Dear John Jones,
>
> I am represented by Sign, Sealed & Delivered Literary Agency in Bel Air. I am interested in submitting an Action/Adventure screenplay to your company. I really enjoyed your film _____, and I feel I have something you might be interested in. Are you currently accepting submissions? I'd be happy to a send log line or synopsis. Thank you for your time.
>
> Sincerely,
> Screenwriter

I used the above query when I had no idea if a company was accepting submissions. Here's another possible query offering a little more information.

> Dear John Jones,,
>
> As a winner of the Screenwriting Showcase Awards, and fledgling filmmaker with several short films completed, I would like to submit my action script to your company. I really enjoyed your film _____, and feel I have something you might be interested in. May I send more information to you about my screenplay including a log line and one page synopsis?
>
> Sincerely,
> Screenwriter

This producer makes action films. With the first email I've made the connection by mentioning one of his films. I also let him know I am represented, and I ask the question. In the second query I do not have an agent so I start off strong with a couple of my biggest accomplishments. I was purposely vague about my filmmaking, but honest. I make the connection, I do not ramble on, and the question is proposed. Very clean, simple and straightforward. He may not be interested in reading my script right away, or he may not be accepting submissions at this time, but if he responds the door is still open.

As it turned out he was in the middle of *developmental hell* on a new project. He asked me to contact him in three months. I did and managed to stay in touch with him. For sometime he was someone that I could submit to when appropriate. If I had been pushy and kept emailing every week, he would have stopped corresponding. Don't always assume a producer is blowing you off just because they do not want to read your script immediately.

Here is an example of a query letter to an agent:

> Dear Sally Agent,
>
> As a winner of the Screenwriting Showcase Awards, and fledgling filmmaker with several short films completed, I would like to submit my action script to your company. I really admire your client _____, and feel I have something you might be interested in. May I send more information to you about my screenplay including a log line and one page

synopsis? I have eight screenplays completed that can be reviewed.

Sincerely,

Screenwriter

With agents you may find that they will ask you to send them a formal letter query. But generally, if they list their email on a Web site or you find it in an online directory, you should give email a shot first, before a letter.

GETTING A RESPONSE

Even if you get a "no thanks," continue to query when you have something that you feel they would be interested in. For example, I contacted a major independent production company and got a response from a secretary who informed me that they "do not accept unsolicited material" — you know, the usual. I emailed her back, thanked her for responding and politely asked if there was anyone who would read my script. Sometimes the people most interested in reading you are the ones not officially doing it, like secretaries. She asked to read it and eventually passed it on. Everyone in Hollywood thinks they can be a producer..

Opening a line of communication can sometimes be the difference between getting your first break or not. Don't ever be afraid to *ask the question*. After all, all they can do is say "no."

Here's an example of a response from one of my email queries:

Dear Chris,

Thank you for your submission inquiry. Please follow up with a short paragraph(s) or logline(s) describing what your screenplay(s) is about. If we are interested in seeing the material, we will e-mail back our submission form with our address. If you do not receive a response, the material does not meet our current development needs. Please feel free to send other inquiry e-mails for any future projects.

Sincerely,
Mr. Big

This company must get a fair share of email as this appeared to be a *form* letter that was sent out in response to my query. Notice that they requested a "short" paragraph or "log line." If they're interested I will hear back, if they're not I won't, simple enough. So I crossed my fingers and sent them my best log line. I received this response:

Chris,

Thank you for your query. The attachment is our submission/release form. Please read, sign, and enclose with submission.

Thanks for sending us your screenplay for consideration.

Feel free to e-mail to check the status at : development@directnet.com. Please keep in mind we will not return scripts unless a self addressed, stamped envelope is enclosed with your submission.

Scripts not under consideration are recycled.

This is one of the best responses I could hope to get. Not only did they request the screenplay, they offer an open door for contacting them as I can email to check the status of my submission.

There, I've passed the first test. If I can write a professional and well-crafted query, log line or synopsis, then chances are I might be a decent writer and the company I'm contacting will often respond.

THE OUTCOME

After mailing off your screenplay give them two weeks, then email to verify it was received. Wait another four to five weeks, by then hopefully you get a call and it's good news.1 If not, email concerning its status. You should get a response that offers a specific explanation as to why you have not heard from them. It would not be good news if they offer no real information on the status of your screenplay. I'd give them another two weeks and email a final time. Keep your emails short when inquiring the status of your script (like one or two sentences). If they give you a run-around, it's time to move on. The fact of the matter is this, if they're really interested in your screenplay they will call you. Good news never comes from the mailman and the same goes for email. They will call if they're really hot for your screenplay, to be sure. (Note: Agents will sometimes send a letter requesting your script in response to written queries, sometimes they call.)

FINAL THOUGHTS

One thing to avoid is mass querying. It's easy to send out thirty to forty emails in a couple of days. I recommend resisting this temptation. Be patient. What you'll find when you mass query is that your quality of query goes down significantly from number one to number thirty or forty.

The one time I massed emailed I got a lot of responses, but had a hard time keeping track of who was who. An even bigger problem I had was finding time to write my log lines, synopsis and treatments. When you get a response from a producer email them back as soon as possible. If it takes you a week to get back to them you're old news. Keep your number of queries to around ten a week, that's plenty. Of those ten you hopefully get three or four responses. Plus always count on a few returned to you from your email server. Producers and agents change email a lot, especially when they start getting sixty or seventy emails a day.

Avoid sending out your script when it's not ready to be seen. (It's the patience thing again.) A script that is not ready to be seen can just kill you. Especially in today's Internet world where *script coverage* can change hands very quickly and easily. You could ruin your chances with that producer or agent for good, as well as many others. Hopefully you belong to a screenwriters group and can have other experienced writers read your screenplay and give you feedback. A good script alone is not enough. Have your log lines or premise statements completely developed. You should have log lines memorized for each script. Also have a well-written one-page synopsis prepared and your pitch well thought out. If all of these are completed and your screenplay is as good as you can get it, then start querying. Remember, you should have two or three screenplays that are ready to show before you start querying producers or agents. Sometimes they'll ask for more then one from you.

Finally, always save your rejection letters. Whenever possible have an attorney review anything you sign, even release forms. If an Independent producer buys or options your screenplay they will really try and get it made. They do not option material unless they are extremely serious about it. They simply do not have the money to throw around. Signing with an agent, or optioning a screenplay to an independent producer could just be that foot in the door you always wanted. Ouch!

Anatomy of an Irresistible Query Letter

by Don Vasicek

The query letter is a marketing tool that can get your script read and you recognized in the highly competitive world of Hollywood. Condensing your 100-plus page script down to a one-page letter exhibits your ability as a writer. To have the skill to write a compelling query letter defines who you are as a writer. It must be written just as creatively and professionally as you write your script.

If you are unable to attract readers to your script through your query letter, it is unlikely you will be able to attract anyone to your script. When you are on the firing line in the film business, there isn't any room for the inability to write creatively and succinctly. Either you are able or you are not able. And it can no better be illustrated than in your query letter.

So, how do you write a query letter that is irresistible to readers and will impel them to want to read your script? You have to achieve two goals. One, hook readers and reel them through the letter. Two, make the letter so compelling that readers will want to read your script.

Suppose we examine the query letter below. With different content, it was sent to thirty producers, agents and production companies. Twenty-six of them called and requested the script. Part of the structure is from Kerry Cox, former editor of *The Hollywood Scriptwriter*; another part by an unidentified writer and the third part, I wrote. The content is mine.

January 2, 2000

Hollywood Player
Hollywood Player Films
111111 Wilshire Boulevard
Beverly Hills, CA 90210

Dear Hollywood Player:

FIRST SENTENCE: Last night, Generation Y Jenny Black ate lasagna and salad with her mom and little brother. When the door bell rang she answered, went outside, and never came back.

SECOND SENTENCE: Why?

THIRD SENTENCE: It's a question that Lt. Icabod Poe has to answer fast. FOURTH SENTENCE: The chilling fact is, the more he learns, the more he realizes that she is living two lives...one as a normal daughter and sister, a high school honor student and budding artist; the other as a reclusive teenager who is depressed over her recently murdered dad ...and she is terribly attracted to the moon.

FIFTH SENTENCE: And Jenny might be gone forever if Lt. Poe doesn't come up with a reason soon why she disappeared.

SIXTH SENTENCE: DARK MOON JENNY is a suspense thriller with a strong female protagonist, a deeply terrifying antagonist and a series of disturbing surprises that build to an ultimate shocker of an ending. SEVENTH SENTENCE: It is also a story of love, trust, betrayal, courage and redemption and the fine line that separates the normal from the abnormal.

EIGHTH SENTENCE: I'd like to submit DARK MOON JENNY for your consideration. NINTH SENTENCE: I've been around the block twice with other screenplays. TENTH SENTENCE: Two, STUPID AND STUPIDER and THE GIRL HUNTER, okay, not Sundance or Nicholls' award winners, were made into movies. ELEVENTH SENTENCE: DARK MOON JENNY was a winner in the "Writer's Digest" Scripts Competition and a semi-finalist in Chesterfield Film Company's Writer's Film Project.

TWELFTH SENTENCE: If you would like to read DARK MOON JENNY, you canreach me at 123-456-7890. THIRTEENTH SENTENCE: I look forward tohearing further from you.

FOURTEENTH SENTENCE: Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Don Vasicek

Now, let's dissect this letter.

FIRST SENTENCE: By establishing a time in the mind of readers, this makes the story look more immediate and real. When you introduce your main character immediately and tell readers something about them, this hooks readers into your character and story and your query letter to seduce them into wanting to read on. And evil is also implied here, a sure recipe to entice readers to read on.

SECOND SENTENCE: Asking the question, "Why?", here, and separating it from the first paragraph, makes it stand out and gives readers hope that they will find out more. This will cause them to read on.

THIRD SENTENCE: In this sentence, you put readers on edge with the word, "fast". It gives them a sense of urgency particularly since you have already gotten them concerned about your main character and they can't wait to get to the next sentence.

FOURTH SENTENCE: The word "chilling" in this sentence sets up the rest of the sentence. It hooks readers once again and reels them through the sentence. What they see is the heart of the story and character. Jenny Black, a high school junior, seemingly normal, misses her dad and adores the moon. Wouldn't you want to read on? I'm sure readers do because now they have a stake in Jenny. They know her, they likes her, they see that she has possibly befallen some horrible experience and they want to help her.

The fourth sentence raises questions that they want answered.

Why does she like the moon? How does her depression over losing her dad fit in here? Does it have anything to do with why she disappeared and why he was murdered? Is she a female werewolf?

How does Poe know Jenny is lost and not dead? Why does he think she disappeared? Maybe she ran away. Or was spirited away by the moon to communicate with her dad. How can he find a reason why she disappeared?

The more questions you raise in the mind of readers, the more they are going to want to read on. By now, in this query letter, readers are going to finish reading it with interest. So, you don't want to lose them.

FIFTH SENTENCE: The words, "gone forever" and "soon" give an even greater urgency to Jenny's dilemma. This ups the stakes and tightens the tension. Readers will want to read on now more than ever because they wants to help Jenny and the only possibility of doing that is by reading on.

SIXTH SENTENCE: By identifying the genre and the gender of the protagonist and one other main character, it gives readers information they can use regarding the marketability of DARK MOON JENNY. It certainly dispels the question as to whether Jenny is a werewolf or not. If she were, the genre would be horror instead of a thriller.

They know that this movie needs a a 30's actor and a young actress and a thriller audience. The description of the villain gives them an idea that Lt. Poe isn't only dealing with someone who opposes him in finding Jenny, but also the potential exists that something very bad has happened to her. Utilizing the word "series" creates the image that there is even more to the story. And just to top things off, giving a hint of how the ending is going to be by using words like "ultimate shocker" and "ending" is just enough to tease them into reading the next sentence.

SEVENTH SENTENCE: This sentence shows that the story is multi-dimensional, dichotomies with love, trust and betrayal and abnormal and normal. It also implies of evil and whets readers' appetites for more.

EIGHTH SENTENCE: This humble, but confident and professional request increases interest for readers by asking them to see the script.

NINTH AND TENTH SENTENCES: A light approach like this helps readers learn something more about you as a screenwriter and shows them that even though you're serious about your career, you do have the ability to laugh about it too. These sentences personalize you and helps readers "bond" more with you.

ELEVENTH SENTENCE: This sentence should identify any awards and/or recognition DARK MOON CHRISSY has received. Be creative here. If it hasn't won any professional recogntion, but your aunt loved it, try to tell readers in a creative way that shows your aunt is as capable of rendering a learned opinion on your script as anyone else. Afterall, wasn't it screenwriter Willim Goldman who said nobody knows anything in Hollywood?

TWELFTH SENTENCE: This sentence is utilized by sales persons. It calls readers to action. They utilize it to close the deal. You ask readers to call you. This request is simple, to the point and gives readers the opportunity to read the script. The utilization of "you" personalizes the call to action and gives readers a good feeling that perhaps they are special in that you haven't let anyone else in on your script as yet.

THIRTEENTH SENTENCE: The purpose of this sentence is to inform readers that you think highly enough of them that you want to continue your communication with them.

FOURTEENTH SENTENCE: This sentence is a courtesty that you aren't imposing on them. It gives readers a feeling of respect and professionalism.

Putting this form of query letter into service cannot quarantee that you will sell your script. It can, however, improve your chances that readers will request your script. And what more can you ask for as you move forward in your screenwriting career?

A graduate of the Hollywood Film Institute, Don Vasicek was a writer/consultant for MGM's Warriors of Virtue, screenwriter for Incline Productions, Inc.'s The Crown, writer/associate producer for American Film Corporation's The Lost Heart and Born To Kill. Mr. Vasicek also writes screenwriting columns for Hollywood Lit. Sales, Moondance International Film Festival's E-zine, Screenplace, Screenwriters Forum, Screenplayers Net, Screenwriters Utopia, and Spraka & Kinsla (Swedish). He also founded Olympus Films+. He wrote, directed, and produced Faces and Oh, The Places You Can Go... through his film company, Olympus Films+, wrote and published How To Write, Sell, And Get Your Screenplays Produced, and The Write Focus and over 500 articles, short stories, and poems.

Working the Web

WritersScriptNetwork.com

by Christopher Wehner

There's a website on the Internet that every aspiring screenwriter should know about. Over the past 12 months it has helped 17 writers option or sell their material. "You've got reputable agencies who can't do that," says the website's founder Jerrol LeBaron. If that's not impressive enough, consider this: over the same time period they also helped another 48 writers gain representation from ligament agencies. This website also helps short film writers sell material.

The *WritersScriptNetwork.com* is setting the standard for online script sites. There are dozens of online options for writers interested in marketing their material, but *WritersScriptNetwork* (WSN) is outperforming them all, combined. More sales, more options, more everything.

Over the past year websites like Francis Ford Coppola's American Zoetrope, Hollywoodli-tsales.com, and dozens more, have all played their part in the creation of a global literary marketplace. There was a time not too long ago that whenever I would start talking about the Internet as a viable selling tool for aspiring screenwriters and filmmakers, I would invariably be confronted with doubt and skepticism. And, at the time I would think, with good reason. Not so anymore.

"I had never used the Internet before," says screenwriter Karima Bennoune. "It took some time for the right person to see my script. I had sent out a million query letters. Not a lot responses, and only a few requests that always ended in rejection." But the World Wide Web changed all that for Karima, though she hasn't made it big time yet, she's got a real start at a career after optioning her script *Losing My Religion* to Cobalt Blue Films via the WSN.

Karima lives in Detroit where she is a law professor and former human rights attorney for Amnesty International. "It's been hard to find time to write, and even harder to find someone willing to read what I've written."

There are tens of thousands of aspiring screenwriters holding down odd jobs, some are working professionals with careers, and when they can they write. And when the joy of finishing that screenplay ends, often it is replaced with a sinking realization, "What do I do now?" Finding the time to write query letters, make copies, and make countless trips to the post office can all become a little overwhelming for the aspiring screenwriter, leaving them with little or no hope.

What would you say if I told you the Internet could market your screenplay for you? As a matter of fact, even while you're sleeping someone could be reviewing your material, reading log lines, or reading a synopsis.

The WSN is former jewelry businessman and construction company owner Jerrol LeBaron's brainchild. How does Jerrol, with his web site, do it? An extensive entertainment industry background would surely be a must for this type of business, right? "No, I don't have any entertainment background. And you know what, I think that helped me get a better perspective on everything," concludes Jerrol. "There are so many do's and dont's and I didn't get filled up with all those negative pieces of information that someone with that kind of background might have. It allowed me to approach it from a fresh perspective."

"The *WritersScriptNetwork.com* has been very important to the success of our company," says Brooklyn Weaver, the founder of Energy Entertainment a literary management/ production company founded in March, 2000. They are in pre-production on several projects.

"Jerrol has a lot of integrity. He's always followed through with everything he says," independent producer Raymond Storti told me. Mr. Storti has optioned two scripts via the WSN.

A lot of research went into doing WSN's web site before it launched in early 2000. Jerrol LeBaron interviewed some 200 agents, managers, and producers. He found commonalties in their needs and wants, and applied them to his site.

"I found a common ground. But most importantly, I operate it (WSN) as a business," declares Jerrol. "I didn't just throw the site together. If you look at the successful dot.coms they approached it in the same way."

Here's how it works. First, you must register by signing and faxing back to them a release form. Jerrol reviews every application, for both industry professionals and screenwriters. "One of the things we do is check their references and credits, and we call them personally," says Jerrol. "That's not to say we don't make mistakes, but we don't just give anybody accesses to our database. We review each submission individually. I'm very protective of my writer's scripts."

Once you have registered you can "Place" your screenplays in the database for $30 per work. This includes, if you wish, title, author, pitch (logline), description, synopsis, treatment, and full script for each work. This lasts for 6 months, so you're looking at only $60 for a year.

And as for security? "I think it's pretty safe," says Karima. The WSN's database logs every visitor to your script, log line or synopsis. Everything that is done on the professional side is tracked and recorded. The result is a safe environment that doesn't sacrifice usability.

How do the producers and other professionals feel about being able to easily access someone's entire screenplay? "I look at it this way, if I go out and view your script we have a pretty good paper trail because of the site," says Storti. "Besides, the nature of the business is anyone can sue anybody. I believe in keeping integrity, I live by it...and a good journal of what material I have viewed and read."

Each script is placed with very specific parameters. From the budget range to the genre, sub-genre(s), and the lead roles, and all is entered in by you. You give your script a very specific listing that makes it easy for the right industry professional to find.

"I write off-beat stuff, very particular writing, and that requires the right person to find it," says Karima. The WSN database helped her find the right person for her screenplay.

High concept or not, this powerful database helps it's members find the material they want fast. "Whenever I look for something I save work and time, and usually find what I'm looking for," says Raymond Storti.
The smaller production companies and agencies are finding it makes a lot of financial and creative sense to use reputable and reliable online script services such as the WSN. Despite the fact that it is the small to medium companies that use these services, it is not uncommon for some writers to make six-figures.

"Out largest sale is in the low six-figure range, and we're happy with that," says Jerrol. "But were always working on getting more. Despite the success we've had, I want to get to the point where we're getting 4 or 5 scripts sold a month, and 10 or 20 writers Rep'd each month. We had four sold or optioned last month." More power to Jerrol and the *WritersScriptNetwork.com*. Let's hope it's just the beginning.

* This article was first published over a year ago.

Insider Report

provided by Baseline-Filmtracker

PRODUCTION COMPANY: Imagine Entertainment

2002 was a very big year for one of Hollywood's most prominent production teams: Ron Howard and Brian Grazer. After taking home the Academy Award for Best Picture, the Universal-based production company released a slew of film projects, including *8 Mile* starring rap superstar Eminem, the spoof *Undercover Brother* with Eddie Griffith and Denise Richards, revisited *Apollo 13* with an IMAX edition and recalled his wave-riding roots by producing the summer surf-girl flick *Blue Crush*.

After meeting Ron Howard while executive producing TV pilots for Paramount Pictures, Grazer found much greater success upon segueing to features, starting out by producing actor-turned-director's first two comedies, *Night Shift* (1982) and *Splash* (1984). In the mid-eighties, the pair decided to solidify their relationship, and opened the doors to Imagine. Since its inception, the company has specialized in high profile comedy films built around the particular talents of certain stars, such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Eddie Murphy, Steve Martin, and Jim Carrey. Since 1989, Grazer has produced all of Howard's directorial efforts, including the family-oriented comedy *Parenthood* (1989), the sweeping period epic *Far and Away* (1992, with Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman) and the Oscar-nominated *Apollo 13* (1995).

In 2003 the team is handling the mammoth production of *The Cat in the Hat*, the Dr. Suess live-action remake starring Mike Myers, and a big-screen revisiting of *The Alamo*. In the midst of all this, their groundbreaking, critically-hailed television series *24* was nominated for an Emmy in 2002 for Best Drama Series.

FOCUS PROJECTS:

- *Stretch Arms*
About an uptight spy who stumbles across a stretching formula, which he takes and must now adjust to in everyday life and when fighting crime.
Writer - Cooper & Collage, Greg Erb, Robert Shallcross, Michael Colleary
Talent - Jackie Chan
Producers - Brian Grazer, Doug Draizin, James Whitaker
Studio - Walt Disney Co.

- *The Cinderella Man*
Based on the true story of fighter Jim Braddock, who in 1930s depression-era New York enters the boxing ring out of desperation to feed his family. He becomes a hero of the common folk as he battles his way up the ranks, vaulting from broken-down ex-boxer to living legend with a string of amazing upsets to his credit.

Writer - Cliff Hollinsworth (original), Charlie Mitchell (rewrite), Akiva Goldsman (rewrite)
Director - Ron Howard
Talent - Russell Crowe
Producers - Brian Grazer, Michael Phillips, Penny Marshall, Leslie Holleran
Studio - Universal/Miramax co-production

- *Scary Poppins*
A rash con artist is in trouble with the law, as well as with other con men. To evade capture from both sides, he poses as a nanny and ends up overseeing two spoiled children.
Writer - Andrew Marshall (Spec), Saladin Patterson (rewrite), Diamond & Weissman (rewrite)
Producer - Brian Grazer Michael
Studio - Universal Pictures

AGENCY REPORT: Genesis

In April of 2002, Major Clients Agency became Genesis with a new brand, new look, and new staff. While partners Jeffrey Benson, Stephen Rose, Michael Margules and Ian Greenstein continue their strategy of building a mid-level literary house around well known TV producers, the company has made definite decision to strengthen their motion picture literary division. Bringing in veteran agents such as Lee Cohen (WMA), Jeff Okin (Metropolitan), and young lit hustlers like Dave Brown (Bruce Brown Agency), the Beverly Hills agency blends well-respected veteran writers and directors with breaking new writers. Genesis is not afraid to take a risk on industry-recommended new talent and is proving to be an ideal spot for green scribes with a stockpile of scripts. Since shifting to its new brand, the agency has also been actively searching for writers with a clear, concise voice, whom they can put up for studio writing assignments. Additionally, their incredible list of television talent makes this a must for any writer with aspirations to work in the small screen.

CLIENTS:
(Approximately 250)

FEATURES:
John Pogue (*Skulls, US Marshalls*)
Charles Leavitt (*K-Pax, The Mighty*)
Lutz & Smith (*Legally Blonde, Ten Things I Hate About You*)

TELEVISION:
Scott Brazil (*The Shield, Gideon's Crossing*)
Gammil & Pross (*Seinfeld, The Simpsons*)
Jeremy Stevens (*Everybody Loves Raymond, Coach*)
Ken Keeler (*Futurama*)
All data from Baseline-FilmTracker. For more information on Genesis and other agencies or studios, please visit www.film-tracker.com.

BUYER REPORT: Paramount Pictures

Executives and Goals: Paramount continues to see solid results from its regimented and safe production tactics. CEO Sherry Lansing continues her steadfast mandate to purchase franchise brands, pull remakes from the library, and set the standards for women-in-jeopardy thrillers—a formula that's made her one of the most continuously successful studio heads. Long-standing production deals with producers like Scott Rudin, Alphaville, and Tom Cruise/Paula Wagner also help solidify the studio's reputation as one of the classiest shops in town. Additionally, the company's willingness to spread the risk on co-financing deals with other studios, as well as heavy hitting production entities like Mutual Film Company and Working Title help balance a very stable budget.

Spec Scripts: Paramount is not a risk-taker, nor does it plan to be in the near future. Safe bets define their financing schemes, making it one of the tougher studios for spec writers to sell to. Without a reliable attachment (preferably one with a Paramount relationship already in place), writers and reps should focus on thrillers and widely appealing comedies with branding potential. Additionally, with Lansing extending her deal as of 2000, Paramount will certainly continue to try and find the next solid thriller or family-driven movie. Submitters should look to focused co-financing deals such as Nickelodeon, MTV Films, Mutual Film Company, and Working Title to help add value to any specs they may be shopping.

HOT PROJECTS:

Action/Adventure - 47 in development
Sample Project: *Global P.D.*- Futuristic police story involving a former cop brought back into action to solve an international crime.
Writer - J.D. Zeik, Richard Outten
Producers - Jeffrey Boam, Gale Anne Hurd, Carlton Cuse

Comedy - 65 in development
Sample Project: *American Girl in London* - A Southern woman is obsessed with English culture. When a brief fling with an English man goes wrong, she decides to stay in the country.
Writer - Matt Brown (Spec)
Producers - Laura Bickford, Jay Cohen, Kate Hudson
Studio Exec - D. Gardner

Thriller - 64 in development
Sample Project: *The Guide* - Story of Jane Whitefield, a female Native American detective from the Seneca tribe who specializes in helping trouble people disappear.
Writer - Thomas Perry (Novel), Jonathan Lemkin (Original Draft), Cynthia Mort (Rewrite)
Producing - Mutual Film Company
Cast - Halle Berry Attached
Notes: Based on Thomas Perry's series of Jane Whitefield novels which includes "Dance for the Dead," "Shadow Woman," "The Face Changers," and "Vanishing Act."

Baseline/Filmtracker boasts millions of records in its historical database, as well as the most up-to-date film and television development information offered anywhere. With major studio clients, as well as hundreds of production companies and print service subscribers, Baseline/FilmTracker is the top on-line destination for Hollywood.

The Independent Producer

"I truly believe great material can come from anywhere," says former Vice President of Development for Marty Katz Productions and author of *Hollywood 101*, Frederick Levy. More and more producers and production companies are wising up to the fact that good material can, and does, come from anywhere. "Good material does find a way," adds Thom Taylor author of *The Big Deal*. "It doesn't matter where you're from or who you are, if you have a hot script it has, as they say, legs, it will walk on its own." The key is getting it read. Once you can do that, a great script will usually take care of the rest.

Before contacting any producer, you should keep in mind that they are extremely busy people. They are working incredibly long hours and they are for the most part extremely driven. They live, eat, and sleep movies and projects. In order to succeed they have too. "For people working in this business it's really a lifestyle," adds Levy. "It's not a 9 to 5 job, it's bigger than you or your career. You have to adapt to that." So when a producer is late getting back to you, or says they're too busy, take their word for it and contact them at a later time. Don't take it personally, and always be professional.

As an aspiring screenwriter, an unproduced and unproven one, you still can express confidence in yourself. And know this, the majority of the independent producers you'll run into online need you almost as much as you need them, almost. Every one of them is looking for that next "Big project," and that means a script. And that means you the screenwriter. You may have just written the next *American Beauty*, and they know it.

Though the great age of spec sale bonanzas are gone, "Hollywood (still) continues to buy more and more spec scripts," says Howard Meibach author of the *Spec Screenplay Sales Directory*. "The producers are looking towards the Internet for material—especially the newer producers and smaller production companies. They usually get material that has been shopped to death. The Internet can provide them with fresh material." The Internet is a great source, and the key source, for new material.

"We want material to be submitted to us first. We want the first look. That's the name of the game," adds Indie Producer Michael Grace. "We're not interested in anything that has been shopped everywhere."

SELLING WITHOUT AN AGENT

An agent isn't the only person who can take your script and sell it. "When trying to break in everyone wants an agent," says Thom Taylor. "With *While You Were Sleeping* (written by Fredric Lebow and Daniel Sullivan) a producer was the catalyst. You don't have to have an agent to sell."

A producer will option your script, attach himself to the project, and then take it to the big fish in the pond. With any luck a studio or major production company will buy it, and if you were smart enough to have an entertainment attorney review the option agreement, you've just made a lot of money.

ZERO OPTIONS

At some time inthe future you may be offered what is called a "zero-option" by an independent producers. The "zero" stands for the amount of money you get. You're basically allowing a producer to shop the script around for free, and if they sell it, then you get paid. As with any option agreement, there is a time frame involved. I must confess, I agreed to a zero- option once. I will never do it again. Here's how I look at it now: a producer without any money really isn't a producer at all.

Interview with Elizabeth Owen
Producer/President of Girlie Girl Productions

How long have you been in business?
Almost two years.

What do you have in development?
We have a number of projects—features and television—in development, including *Dogwalker*, based on the short story by Orson Scott Card and a T.V. project with Mr. Card as well. *Pentecost*, based on the play by Tony Award-winning playwright David Edgar, and *American Skin*, based on the critically acclaimed novel by Don De Grazia.

What type of material do you typically produce?
Features and television. We're not picky, we like a good story. We're open to most genres, thought we tend not to enjoy westerns or horror.

What do you look for in a good script?
A good story and compelling characters. I don't necessarily have to like them but, if I don't, I want to understand what makes them tick. Also, spelling and grammar count, they really do. Show me that you were careful proofreading your work, that you know what proper script format is.

What don't you want to see in a script?
Three brads with the backs cut off that cut my hand when I open the envelope. I'm not kidding—this happens a lot. Two brads, not cut at the back, please. I really don't want to read any more stories about filmmakers wanting to make their one big film so they rob a bank/knock over a gas station/extort money from the mob to make their budget.

What's the best way for a screenwriter to contact you?
Email. We don't accept unsolicited submissions, but our website gives very specific instructions on how to query us (www.girliegirlproductions.com). We request that people not call the office to follow up on queries—when you send your query via email you should receive an autoresponder telling you that we've received the query—and that really does mean that we have received it.

And please, don't send scripts or fax full treatments—legally, for your own protection, we can't read them—we will discard them unread and contact you to let you know we've done so. Follow proper channels and, if we're interested, we'll send you a release form to fill out and send with your materials.

Do you accept e-mail queries?
Yes. That is the best way to query. We usually respond to email queries within two to three weeks whether we want to see more or are passing on it. We will contact everyone to let them know the status of the query.

What don't you want to see in a query (email or letter)?
Fifty-seven loglines. Seriously, people send query letters with loglines for 15 projects and what that tells me is that the writer has no focus and hasn't sold 15 screenplays. Also, do your homework—know who you're querying. Our website, for example, has the name of everyone on our roster. At the very least, "Dear Madam" or "To Whom It May Concern" but please, not "Dear Sirs." Also, make sure you spell the name of the company correctly. It's little things like that which REALLY make a difference. Be polite and to the point—and don't forget to include your full name, the title of your script, the genre, etc. We get many queries where people actually forget to include those things.

Finally, be honest and humble.

To query Elizabeth Owen:
www.girliegirlproductions.net

Women in Film:

Former Creative Executive Donie Nelson

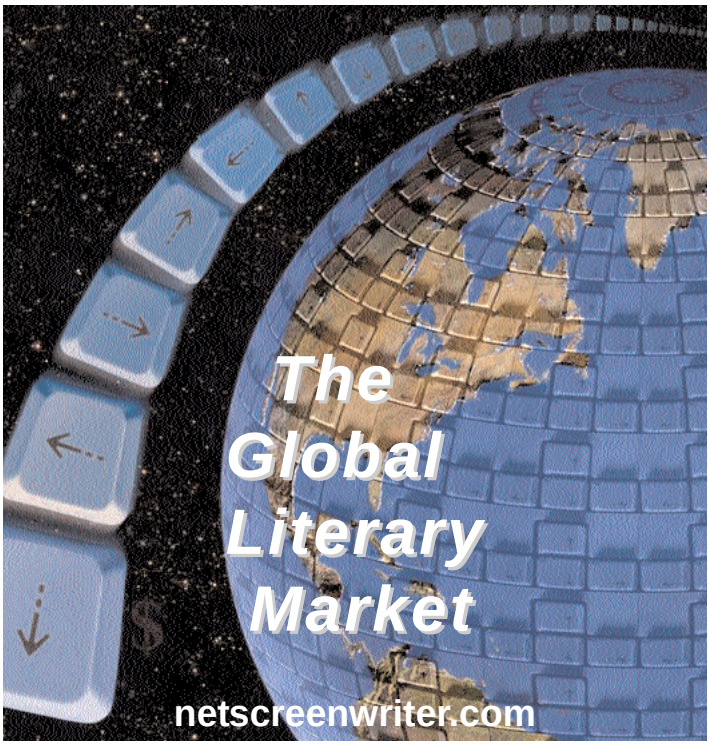
by Kenna McHugh

Donie Nelson never imagined that she would ever work in the movie business. To her it seemed too remote of a possibility. She aspired to be a journalism teacher or a social worker, but while in college she got a job at MGM and was suddenly in the film business.

She spent 20 years working in the entertainment industry, where she held executive positions with feature film, television, and cable companies. Her career highlights include six years as story editor with the MGM Film Company, plus five years as a creative executive with several independent film and television production companies based at Paramount Pictures, Twentieth-Century Fox, and MGM-Television.

When she was at a crossroads in her career her good friend, screenwriting adviser and author Linda *Seger (When Woman Called the Shots, Making a Good Script Great, Creating Unforgettable Characters*), suggested what Donie knew about the film business might be helpful to screenwriters.

Without a doubt, Linda was right. Donie considers Linda the godmother of her career as a consultant. She not only encouraged Donie, but she sent Donie her first clients and continues to make referrals.



Donie discovered that helping writers achieve their dreams is the best job she has ever had. She loves her work. “In an increasingly competitive industry writers need a mentor or access to an inside expert to interpret how the information they’ve obtained from seminars, workshops, books, or newsletters apply specifically to their own unique talents and goals.”

What is the primary mistake beginning screenwriters make?

Not asking for advice. No one knows everything, but if you get advice from people who are ‘on your team’ you are ahead of the game and better prepared. Too often creative people do not view the pursuit of their goal as a career change, and they fail to do the necessary background research to discover how the business works and where they fit in. Instead they rely too much on the possibility that their talent will be recognized and that somehow others will make it happen for them. Establishing yourself in the entertainment industry is as difficult as having a career in politics, medicine, or law. So find out what you are getting in to, so that you are ready when opportunities present themselves.

Do you feel that anyone can write a great script and sell it bar-none?

No. It takes talent, craft, and knowledge of the industry to get a script to the screen. Not all great scripts get produced. A lot of mediocre ones do. You can’t teach talent. It is either there or not. I can’t carry a tune. I could probably take singing lessons and learn the craft of singing, but probably no one will ever pay me to sing.

If you were a fledging screenwriter and had two completed screenplays, what would you do?

Never go into the market unless you are absolutely sure that your product, or screenplay, is ready to compete. It takes just as much energy to open Hollywood’s doors for a poorly written script as for a terrific script.

How can a writer make the best of a Hollywood conference? What should a writer do to get the most out of her time and money?

You should really know yourself before attending. You should routinely assess yourself to know what is the information missing from your portfolio, in the areas of craftsmanship and knowledge of the industry. Then really analyze what each conference is offering to determine if you are really going to learn something new that you need to know, or are you going to just review information you already know. Be sure you are going to get something out of at least 50 percent of the conference before making the commitment of time and money. And talk to other writers to find out what they think of the conference. Sometimes the conferences with the biggest names offer the least in the form of real information.

You're not a big fan of writers critiquing each other's work in writer's groups?

Don't get me wrong, I love writer's groups. However, because of the feedback I've had from my screenwriter clients I've learned that some writer's groups may create more problems for individual writers than solutions. This is especially true if the primary goal of the group is to read and critique each other's scripts. For instance, my idea of creative hell would be to have someone less experienced and less talented telling me what is wrong with my script. Even experienced development executives can give poor or misleading notes—imagine if you are getting notes from someone who knows less than you do. And what if you are relatively new and inexperienced. You might follow their advice! What happens to your script? It becomes a script by committee, instead of a script with your unique vision. Another problem is the more experienced and talented writers often become the de facto script doctor of the group. Everyone is dependent on direction from one person. Who can that person learn from? Eventually the best writer drops out so he can be challenged elsewhere.

Not all writers' groups are critiquing committees.

True. I think that most writers' groups do well when they help their members network, provide speakers with an area of expertise, and offer information and resources about how the industry works, which might include a lending library of scripts, books and so on. But if you are a writer who chooses to get feedback on your script from members of a writers group, I recommend that you only submit a script that is in very good shape. Not a work in progress and not an early draft when the most damage can be done with well-meaning comments.

Kenna: How important do you believe networking is to a screenwriter's career?

Donie: I think networking is invaluable. Networking should not be viewed as an esoteric skill or insincere task separate from your writing. Good networking requires a person who genuinely likes people, is curious about their lives and interests. You know, the skills good writers already have. You should be able to initiate conversation, ask questions, and make friends with those you share a common interest. The entertainment industry is so collaborative that a writer without the confidence and respect of others will have difficulty establishing and sustaining a viable career.

What groups would you recommend a screenwriter to join in order to *network*?

In general I believe a screenwriter should track down and research every writers group they hear about. Then determine what it is they need and where is the best place they can get it. Remember, being good at networking doesn't mean being a vacuum cleaner. You know the type: they join a group, suck up all the information, zone in on those they think important enough to meet, and then leave without ever giving anything back! You should always give something back, especially when you aren't expecting anything in return. None of us get anywhere alone. We need each other.

Scriptwriters Network
11684 Ventura Blvd., Suite 508
Studio City, CA 91604

Their web site states - Originally begun as a group of emerging writers in 1986, the Scriptwriters Network truly came into its own in 1994 when we moved the location of our meetings to Universal Studios.

The Network is a REALITY BASED organization whose purpose is to provide access to REAL information about the way the entertainment business works and how you as a writer can make intelligent, career advancing decisions in getting your work out to the people who count.

Here are some solid and well-known networking groups for screenwriters to get you started off in the right direction.

American Screenwriters Association
www.asascreenwriters.com
269 S. Beverly Drive, Suite. 2600
Beverly Hills, CA 90212-3807
866-265-9091

Twenty affiliates across the United States. Check out their web site to find an organization nearest you.

Women in Film
www.wif.org
8857 West Olympic Blvd., Suite 201
Beverly Hills, CA 90211
310-657-5144

Thirteen affiliates across the United States. Women in Film's purpose is to empower, promote, nurture, and mentor women in the industry through a network of valuable contacts, events, and programs including the Women In Film Mentor Program, the award-winning Public Service Announcement Production Program, and the Internship Program in association with the Fulfillment Fund. They also have scholarships, grants, monthly networking breakfasts, seminars, workshops, and a screening series with filmmakers.

Kenna McHugh has been freelancing in the film industry for over 15 years. Her writing credits include the book, BREAKING INTO FILM, three screenplays, seven produced plays and numerous articles on the adventures and mishaps of the constantly changing film industry.

The Listings: Producers/Agents

*Note: We've selected some out of the way companies that should be of interest and will hopefully be of use. For a much larger listing see: www.netscreenwriter.com. **

PRODUCERS/COMPANIES

Blue Rider Pictures
2800 28th St., Ste. 105
Santa Monica, CA 90405
(310) 314-8246
E-mail: geoffray@compuserve.com
Web site: http://www.blueriderpictures.com

Formed in 1991, Blue Rider Pictures has established itself as a consistent producer of quality motion pictures, producing films for such companies as Miramax Films, Artisan Entertainment, Hallmark Entertainment, Republic Pictures, Trimark Pictures, The Samuel Goldwyn Company and The Fox Family Channel. You might need an agent to query.

Codikow Films
8899 Beverly Blvd. Suite 719
Los Angeles, CA 90048
(310)246-9388
E-mail: pitch@codikowfilms.com
Web site: http://www.codikowfilms.com

This Hollywood production company is open to pitches, ideas and material from all writers. Producer Stacy Codikow has been the guest speaker at many film festivals and served as judge at the Cinequest Film Festival. Check out their site for current needs and submission guidelines.

Game On Films
Contact: Mike Crawford/Chris Stinson
6372 Zelzah Ave
Los Angeles, CA 91316
(818) 971-7121
Email: subform@GameOnFilms.com
Website: www.GameOnFilms.com

A new company that requests that you submit a treatment via their website (URL above).

Girlie Girl Productions
Contact: Elizabeth Owen
1520 North Vista Street; Suite 203
Los Angeles, CA 90046-7900
(323)851-1206.
Email: info@girliegirlproductions.com
Web site: http://www.girliegirlproductions.com

You must submit a cover letter and short synopsis (or treatment), either by mail, fax, or email, and if they are interested in taking the next step with your script, they will forward a release form to you.

Grade A Entertainment
Contact: Andy Cohen
368 N. La Cienega Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90048
(310)440-0409
Email: GradeAProd@aol.com

Writer's are welcome to send email queries to email above. Contact person is Andy Cohen who has worked in development for such companies as Permut Presentations (*Face/Off*).

Jaret Entertainment
Contact: Seth Jaret, CEO and Producer
2017 Pacifice Ave., Suite 2
Venice, CA 90291
(310)883.8807
Email: sjaret@jaretentertainment.com
Web site: www.jaretentertainment.com

If you are either interested in submitting material or seek representation, they will take your query letter. Please send all query letters by mail, fax, or email. Credits include: *Legally Blond*, *Rounders*, among others.

Roadside Attractions, LLC
427 N. Canyon Dr. ; Suite 216
Beverly Hills, CA 90210
(310)860-1692
Email: chadm@roadsideattractions.com
Key URL: www.roadsideattractions.com/roadside_flash.swf

Email title, genre, and a logline. They will respond if interested.

Silverline Pictures, Inc.
Contact: Robert Yap , VP of Development
22837 Ventura Boulevard, Suite 205
Woodland Hills, CA 91364
(818) 225-9032
Email: ryap@silverlinepictures.com
Website: www.silverlinepictures.com

Silverline Pictures, Inc. was formed by Leman Cetiner and Axel Munch to acquire, finance, produce, and distribute commercially driven films on a worldwide basis.

AGENTS/AGENCIES

Axial Entertainment
Contact: David Garfield, Director of Development
20 West 21st Street, 8th Floor
New York, NY 10010
Email: submissions@axialentertainment.com

Send them an email containing a short summary of your material and they will respond if interested.

Crescendo Entertainment Group
407 N. Sycamore Avenue; Suite 3
Los Angeles, CA 90036
Email: query@crescendo-la.com
Website: www.crescendoentertainmentgroup.com

They are a full-service entertainment services company, specializing in the management of motion picture and television screenwriters and directors, and film and entertainment company financing. The company was founded by Marc Hernandez.

Energy Entertainment
Contact: Brooklyn Weaver
10833 Wilshire Blvd., Ste. 219
Los Angeles, CA 90024
Website: http://www.energyentertainment.net

Overall deal with Sony based Original Film (*SWAT*, *Sweet Home Alabama*, *XXX*, *The Fast and the Furious*).

Grey Line Entertainment, Inc.
115 W. California Blvd., # 310
Pasadena, CA. 91105-3005
Key URL: www.greyline.net/submissions.html

A literary management and production company. Email them a query letter, see website for details.

Global Entertainment Productions and Marketing
Contact: Development
3450 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 108-78
Los Angeles, CA 90010-2208
Email: Submissions@global-entertainment.net

They are a packaging and development production company who are always looking for new writers. According to their website, "The first step is for you to submit to our submission department a logline of no more than 30 words that sums up the gist of what your project is about. If it sounds like a viable project, we'll provide you with one of our industry standard release forms and allow you to submit the script." FYI-they are a management company and non-WGA signatory. If they sell your screenplay they will get 15% commission.

Vintage Entertainment
Contact: Peter Scott
843 Berkeley Street
Santa Monica, CA 90403
Fax: (310) 315-1132
Email: info@govintage.com
Website: http://www.GoVintage.com

They are a Santa Monica-based management/production company that claims to maintain an open-door policy for writers. See website for more information.

** **Screenwriter's Monthly** does not endorse any of these companies nor can we gurantee their professionalism or legitimacy.*