

THE CONTEST ISSUE: Your guide to entering and winning!

creativescreenwriting



OUT OF THE BOX WRITING IN

The logo for Toy Story 3, featuring the words "TOY STORY" in yellow with blue outlines, and the number "3" in a large, stylized yellow font with a blue outline, all set against a red rectangular background.

BIG for the Small Screen

MAY/JUNE 2010
Volume 17 Number 3



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Lindelof & Cuse and Kitsis & Horowitz explain how they never *LOST* control in the writers' room.



Steven Spielberg, Tom Hanks, Bruce C. McKenna and Graham Yost head back to war in *The Pacific*.



Ironing out a sequel with *Iron Man's* Justin Theroux

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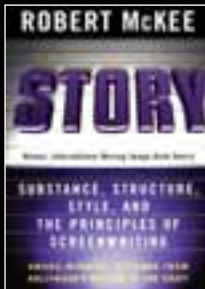
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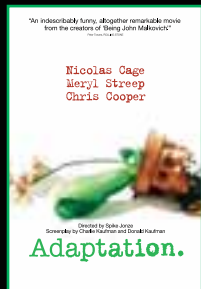
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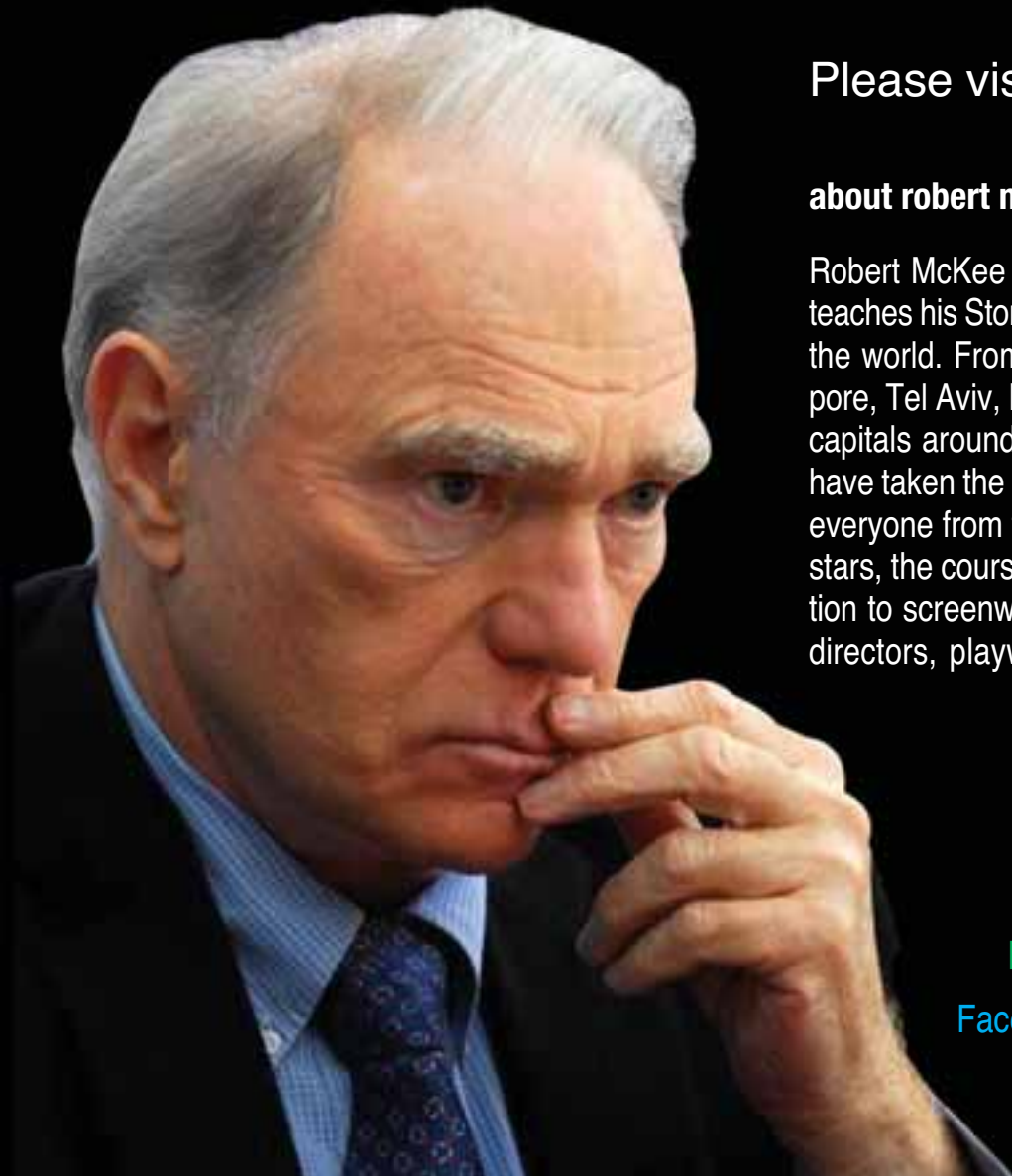
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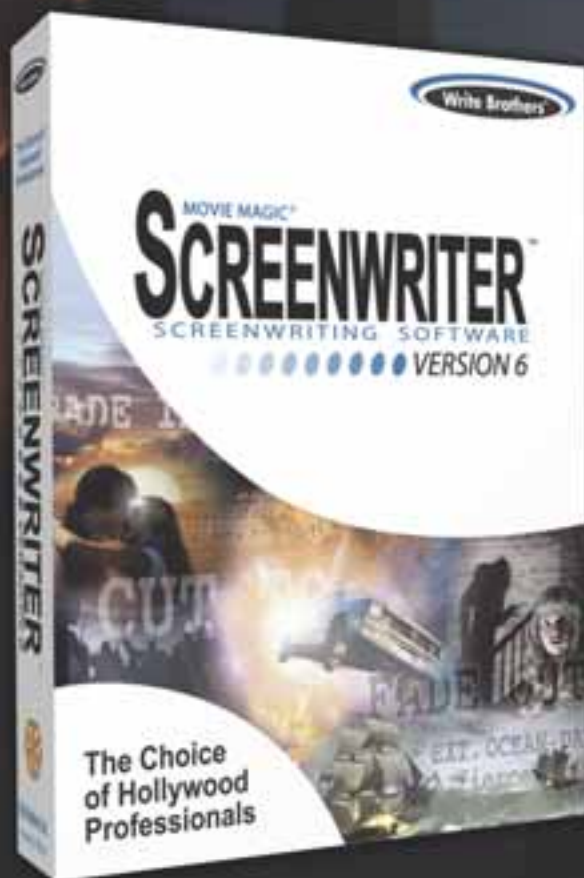
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Dear Subscriber,

Four 3-D movies in a row (*Avatar*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *How to Train Your Dragon* and *Clash of the Titans*) have topped the box-office charts in recent months. Two of them went, in one way or another, off the top of the charts. And, of course, we will see *Toy Story 3* and *Despicable Me* in 3-D as well, not to mention stories about owls and wolves and ogres (*Shrek Forever After*), plus *a Hole*, *a Gate*, *a Hubble*, more *Cars*, another *Tron* (you date yourself if you recall the first one's theatrical release), and if rumors can be trusted, some 3-D in the next *Harry Potter*.

So is it time to start writing for 3-D? And how exactly would one go about doing that? I'm going to stick my neck out until I see a better answer and say:

The answer to the first question is, "No. Not your job."

The answer to the second is, "You can't. And it's not your job."

That is not to say you cannot write with 3-D in mind. Definitely, there are subjects that lend themselves better to 3-D than others (more on this below), and it doesn't hurt to pay some mind to what kinds of stories are selling, but with a few flops the market could change. Write your best story.

The reasoning behind my first answer is that "to 3-D or not to 3-D" is a producer's decision, one that is likely to be based on budget and market considerations of the time. The reasoning behind the second answer is that decisions on 3-D scenes are director decisions that have to do with camera placement and shot composition. Trying to write scenes with 3-D instructions in a spec script is likely to get you laughed at, not sold.

I base that in part on some browsing I did in a book called "3D Movie Making:



Stereoscopic Digital Cinema From Script to Screen," available at The Writers Store here in Los Angeles. The chapter on preproduction, especially pages 94-100, has valuable information for those writing a script that might be a good candidate for 3-D.

That preproduction chapter is worth reading because it gives you an idea of how 3-D shots are done, where the action takes place in a 3-D scene and why these decisions belong to the director, not to you as writer.

3-D action almost always moves toward the audience — or, as one can tell from numerous scenes in *Avatar*, when it moves away, the camera tracks in faster than the action moves away, thus bringing even retreating action toward the viewer. This seems to be a universal constant of 3D: that one way or another, 3-D action is always sent toward the audience.

So here's how that separates candidates for 3-D scripts from the non-candidates: Motion coming at the viewer can effectively evoke only a few emotional responses and would wreck other kinds of scenes that viewers are not emotionally programmed to see coming at them.

Case in point: In the climactic scene in the second *Godfather* film when Al Pacino's character shuts his wife Kay out of his life and their children's life, he is seated in the foreground, in a chair, large in our eyes while she stands in a doorway in the background, looking small. Between them is a great, darkened depth of field. The scene is as visually three-dimensional as anything in *Avatar*, but the sense of depth is created by the static positioning of the characters and the lighting. The scene depends on the lack of motion for its vitality. Its static quality gives us time to breathe in its rich emotional resonance. When Kay finally leaves, she moves away from us, de-

feated, and becomes smaller visually as she is forced to retreat from the family.

3-D motion wouldn't work in a scene such as this. My point is not to say the obvious — that 3-D isn't right for the likes of *The Godfather* — but that 3-D works only for movies in which motion should be regularly propelled at, and even right by the ears of, the audience.

Avatar is a monumental achievement in the history of film. It's the Mona Lisa of 3-D movies, and its ecological themes are a strong audience draw. But as storytelling, the Academy understood that it was just a decently good actioner. That might have made it perfect for 3-D, but not for little gold statuettes.

So you can, of course, write a movie with 3-D in mind. It should be a good candidate for shooting a lot of action coming straight at the audience, with toothy critters and plants that move, and please keep the Liam-Neeson-doing-bad-Greek-theater-in-a-toga scene as brief as possible.

Anyone who has words of wisdom on this is welcome to send such guidance or opinions on this topic; write to advice@creativescreenwriting.com.

Movies you might miss but should not...

Speaking of dragons, I loved *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, but be prepared for some stark violence; and also the politically contentious *Green Zone*, and *The Ghost Writer*. The kid behind the counter at my favorite indy theater also recommends *A Prophet* and the Korean thriller *Mother*. And if you missed *Creative Screenwriting's* screening of the Best Foreign Film Academy Award winner *The Secret in Their Eyes*, don't miss senior editor Jeff Goldsmith's podcast of the Q&A with co-writer-director Juan José Campanella on iTunes.

Bill Donovan, Editor and Publisher
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The Script Contest Compendium

IN 1997, *Creative Screenwriting* was celebrating four years of covering the writing scene. The Internet was just starting to take off. Of course, most folks only had dial-up Web connections that crept along at a frustratingly slow pace when compared to the blazing broadband of today. Yet as slow as the connections were, there was one aspiring screenwriter who saw an opportunity to help his fellow writers.

"At the time, there were only about 40 screenwriting contests that I was aware of," recalls Frederick Mensch, founder of MovieBytes.com, "and there wasn't any real resource for getting information about them in one central location." Being a bit of an entrepreneur as well as a computer programmer, Mensch assembled a database of the contests he knew of and put them online. Thus, MovieBytes.com, the preeminent contest website, was born.

Since that time, MovieBytes has become the Mecca for the unknown screenwriter, with its extensive database of more than 350 competitions complete with contest deadlines and information, links and even report cards. "As things have evolved, it's become more important for us to serve as sort of a clearing house of information about the contests," Mensch states. "So we allow our readers to post report cards, evaluating the experience they've had with those contests."

This means newbie screenwriters no longer need to worry about being fleeced by an obscure screenwriting contest that fails to deliver the goods. Just a few clicks can get them the information that may not only save them from entering less worthwhile competitions, but also steer them toward some previously unknown ones that could match their genre or writing needs better, something Mensch is glad to be a part of. "Some people have

had a lot of success with the contests they've found, and they wouldn't have found them without MovieBytes."

Like many sites, MovieBytes also features a message board for users to post their opinions about a wide range of screenwriting topics, with most posts centering on the contests. Occasionally, the comments turn negative, but Mensch believes that a healthy discussion includes all points of view, even ones that might be a little out there. "For the most part I try not to censor people," Mensch says. "Who am I to say whether what



they're saying is true or not? Some people are clearly just off their nut, spewing their paranoid fantasies out there, but the nuts eventually go away."

Like the rest of the Web, MovieBytes has evolved and expanded with subscription-only services and sites. One such site, WinningScripts.com, allows registered users of MovieBytes to submit information about their script in the hope that producers, agents and managers will scout the free public database of contest winners in search of new clients and the next big spec sale. "It's a way for writers to extend the shelf life of scripts that

have won contests but haven't yet sold," Mensch explains. "They get a little flush of publicity when they first win a contest, but when the script doesn't sell immediately it sort of fades away."

But you don't have to be a winner to submit your logline. Finalists, semifinalists, quarterfinalists and even honorable mentions are invited to submit a logline and synopsis or script excerpt — all free of charge. However, if you don't mind shelling out a few bucks to become a WinningScriptsPRO member, you can track the number of hits on your script info and get an online mailbox for any inquiries about your screenplays.

Another subscriber-based service is Who's Buying What?, a searchable database of script sales and people who buy them. The site is accessible for a small annual fee and is updated daily with the latest sales and contact information for agents, managers and producers. There are also \$5 and \$10 coupons to help subscribers with the entry fees of more than 40 contests.

And for writers who would rather have their own website to publicize their works, WriterBytes.com allows them to build a site and maintain it for another small annual fee. Much of the site remains free to the public and writers who want to keep posted on the latest contest happenings can sign up for a free e-newsletter, which boasts a circulation of more than 23,000 subscribers, a number that Mensch never expected. "I could never have imagined that when I first started this. It blows my mind how many people are out there looking for this information." And thanks to Mensch, the search is over. **CS**

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Mark Kratter kept placing in screenplay contests, with his success directly leading to his new job as an in-demand Hollywood screenwriter.

WITH SO MANY screenwriting contests out there, and new ones cropping up all the time, you may wonder if submitting your script is worth your time, effort and money. Mark Elliot Kratter would unequivocally answer yes. On the heels of being a semi-finalist in not only the Nicholl Fellowship in Screenwriting but also a finalist in the 2009 AAA Screenplay Contest and a 2nd Place Winner of the PAGE International Screenwriting Awards Contest, Kratter's screenplay *Endangered* is now slated to be co-financed and produced by Radar Pictures, the company that produced last year's *The Box* and the remakes of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Amityville Horror*.

Kratter, a self-taught screenwriter with a bachelors and masters in English from Stanford University, transitioned into Venture Capital financing and securities trading before discovering the art of screenwriting in 2004 and decided to give it a shot. The first script he wrote (based on an obscure Joseph Conrad novel) was almost 130 pages long and was written in a script format he created after reading shooting scripts and trying to imitate them in a homemade Word template. Even he admits it was a disaster.

Still, he continued to study the craft by reading books and writing more screenplays. Inspired by a friend who'd had some success writing a horror script, Kratter decided to pursue the genre.

Eventually, Kratter finished a script he called *Viral* (known now as *Darknet*), which he felt was ready to show. But with no Hollywood contacts, he determined screenplay competitions were the way to go. This proved to be a wise move, as *Viral* either won or placed highly in over a dozen contests and landed him a manager who was as new to the industry as Kratter was. Unfortunately, the two weren't on the same page and ultimately parted company.

Encouraged by his contest wins and undaunted by the setback, Kratter continued to write and submit new scripts to competitions, which helped secure him Bettina Viviano of

Viviano-Feldman as his new manager. A prolific writer, Kratter has written as many as four to six scripts a year. This dedication, he says, keeps him from focusing too much on the outcome of any one specific script.



Mark Kratter

His screenplays, *Embedded* and *Where the Dead Go*, also found contest success in CineStory, Cinequest Screenwriting Competition and Acclaim Screenplay Competition, among others. *Where the Dead Go* took the Grand Prize in 2007's Fade In Awards.

Although he landed the opportunity to perform a rewrite for a now-defunct production company and a script-for-hire project for Clark Peterson (who produced *MONSTER* with Charlize Theron), his spec screenplay, *Endangered* opened up additional opportunities around town.

Kratter says, "Birches," a poem by Robert Frost, fueled his love of trees, which, in turn, prompted the premise of *Endangered*. The script tells the story of an exploration into the unique canopy ecosystem of the world's largest trees. The explorers become trapped 40 stories above the ground and discover that, up that high, they are the endangered species.

"I came up with the concept for *Endangered* and wrote it very quickly — in about a month," Kratter says. "It helped that I knew the genre backwards and forwards through years of research." His research skills and his commitment to honing his craft paid off.

After years of fits and starts in his career as a screenwriter, Kratter isn't sure what made *Endangered* strike a chord with producers, but he ventures a guess that the script is "the same [as other scripts of the genre] but different in a very accessible, digestible way."

In addition to the deal with Radar Pictures to produce *Endangered*, many of Kratter's other scripts are garnering interest as well. He has also started to secure new write-for-hire gigs, including an adaptation of a graphic novel for Stephen L'Heureux of Solipsist Films, a producer of the *Sin City* franchise. Kratter is taking meetings for several other writing jobs, among them, two novel adaptations and a biopic.

Kratter prides himself on being a student of the industry he's becoming a part of and encourages novice screenwriters to do the same. He spends hours reading about everything happening in the business every day and consistently growing his network of industry contacts at every level.

And for those considering screenwriting contests as a way to break into the world of screenwriting, Kratter offers this: "From my perspective, contests are a great way for an outsider, as I was, to build a network of people within the industry by using those accomplishments to get managers, agents or production companies to take a gamble on reading [a new writer's] material. Legitimate competitions offer talented new writers or writers outside of the Hollywood system the next best thing to a referral."

Additionally, be sure to factor in patience and perseverance, because, as Kratter points out, "It was a long haul with tons of ups and downs, small successes here and there and nonstop work." **CS**

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THE JOURNEY TO JOURNIES

Grant Boucher makes the transition from visual effects to romantic comedy writer-director with his first film, *Journies*.

THE TRANSITION from visual effects to the directing chair is one many filmmakers have made throughout Hollywood history. The transition from visual effects to writer-director of romantic comedies is one fewer have made, but it's the one traversed by Grant Boucher, a longtime visual effects worker who can count *Titanic* and *Star Trek: Voyager* among his many credits.

Death Ray Films has fast-tracked the development of *Journies*, a rom-com about an aspiring online journalist who gets the scoop of a lifetime when a one-on-one interview turns into an unexpected date with Hollywood's hottest young ingénue.

Before Boucher got into writing or working as a digital artist, he was a self-proclaimed geek who was a "true math/science/computer prodigy." Boucher seemed destined to become an astronaut; he pursued a Mission Specialist career path until the U.S. put a hold on the space program after the Challenger disaster in 1986. Boucher also discovered he preferred scientific explorations, which led him to pursue a degree in theoretical physics.

While studying physics in college, Boucher was introduced to the video game *Dungeons & Dragons*. He learned he was a far better Storyteller/Game Master than Player and he used his creativity to generate stories for his friends. Boucher submitted an "adventure" to the magazine *Dragon* and the editor liked it enough to feature it in the magazine.

This experience whetted Boucher's appetite for storytelling. Not wanting to give up on his scientific aspirations, though, Boucher decided to double major in theoretical physics and English. He also worked as a *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Star Wars* RPG designer and author. His work there eventually paved the way for a career in visual effects.

Over the course of his career, Boucher collaborated with some of the biggest names in Hollywood: Steven Spielberg, Morgan Freeman and James Cameron,

among others. "Every one of them, at one time or another, have encouraged me to actively pursue the directing chair," Boucher says. "Eventually, I listened."

After his effects company collapsed, he decided to try the directing path, but he soon realized he would have to craft his own story if he wanted to get the gig he was looking for.



Grant Boucher

"There were few serious directing opportunities being offered to VFX (visual effects) veterans," he explains. "And even those tended to be light on story, heavy on VFX — not very satisfying when compared to the caliber of work of my mentors."

Boucher's close working relationship with both Spielberg and Cameron, in particular, affect the way he writes today. In fact, he was one of the first people to read the initial script for Cameron's *Avatar* — over 14 years ago. Inspired by Cameron, Boucher works with "scriptments;" 30-page treatments that follow a pattern he saw Cameron use.

Boucher wrote a number of screenplays across several genres, including a family comedy titled *My Daughter the Destroyer*, about a hapless stay-at-home father who shepherds his daughter through her terrible twos. Though the script hasn't sold, it re-

ceived enough attention to encourage Boucher to write more comedies.

"Ironically, today, studios are looking for writer-directors, and my VFX awards that were once seen as a liability have now apparently made me one of a few 'triple threats,'" Boucher explains. "I do understand story and filmmaking from both the classic and new technology sides of the equation and that means I can handle strong dramatic storytelling in the age of the greenscreen."

Boucher looks at screenwriting as an individual task that involves problem solving. "Seeing the inner genius of a great screenplay — learning why and how it works so effectively as mythic storytelling — is part of what makes screenwriting so exciting and challenging," he explains. Boucher does not re-invent the wheel, however, arguing that scripts need a strong structure, classic storytelling and archetypal characters. Not surprisingly, it was his take on a friend's story that landed him the gig to pen the *Journies* script.

The personal experiences of the film's producer (and Boucher's aforementioned friend), Robert Sanchez, inspired the *Journies* plot. Boucher describes the proceedings as a hybrid between two unique works: "It has the classic underpinnings of *Romeo and Juliet*, but with the posse of main characters along the lines of *Entourage*," he explains. Boucher also feels he was uniquely qualified to write the script because he was inspired by "all my geeky friends and colleagues and all the women who've dumped me," he laughs. "Because, you can't write comedies about romance if you've been happily married to the perfect woman since high school."

Despite the long journey, Boucher has no time to dwell on the past. Instead, he is using talent to reignite his career as a triple-threat akin to one of his mentors. "James Cameron had such a profound effect on me as to what it meant to be a serious filmmaker," Boucher says. "I wanted that path, even if it took decades to get there — or forever." **CS**

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Magazine editor scores with not one, but two, spec sales.

AS AN EDITOR at *Us Weekly*, David Guggenheim was used to writing articles about celebrities. Now articles are being written about him. By anyone's standards, 2010 is shaping up to be a phenomenal year for the screenwriter. Not only is he a new father but he also sold a spec script (*Safe House*) and a pitch (*Puzzle Palace*), both in heated bidding wars, within an eight-week period.

Despite press that implies Guggenheim is a novice screenwriter, the truth is that he is a graduate of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts Dramatic Writing Program. In addition, Guggenheim's first spec went out when he was only 19. It made the rounds and looked like it was going to sell, but Guggenheim met disappointment in the end. Another near-miss sale landed him an agent who eventually introduced him to his current manager.

Though he was based in New York, Guggenheim knew that moving to California might improve his chances of securing work. But even with two older brothers, both industry-based writers, encouraging him to make the move, Guggenheim remained reticent and instead took a job at *Us Weekly*. "I didn't have the courage [to move to LA] that other people have," he admits. "I needed a little more security, so I decided I'd write from here."

Guggenheim continued to pen scripts that garnered attention but, for one reason or another, did not get produced. In retrospect, he says, he knows why those scripts didn't sell and applied what he learned from those "failures" when creating the script for *Safe House*.

Written on a self-imposed deadline (a baby on the way) in the fall of 2009, *Safe House* tells the story of the only surviving agent of an attack on a South American CIA safe house. The agent must find a way to

transport a dangerous prisoner to a second safe house while the two are pursued by forces that want them both dead.

A self-professed lover of espionage films (he thinks James Bond is the ultimate fran-



David Guggenheim

chise), Guggenheim had been developing the safe house idea for a while.

"We've heard about safe houses. We've seen a scene that takes place in a safe house so [I thought], 'Why don't I just make this a starting-off point?' I loved the idea of taking this sanctuary and [making it] the least safe place to be," Guggenheim says. And of the fairly unique Brazilian setting, he says, "Spy movies usually are set in Europe so that's already been done. South America is like the Wild West. That's where there's a lot of CIA involvement, so that seemed like the perfect place to set the story."

The script really came together for the writer when he married the safe house concept with the idea of "these two guys at the opposite end of the spectrum — the vet and the freshman, the idealist and the

cynic — and had them play off each other."

Preferring to write a first draft as quickly as possible, Guggenheim outlines the first act and has to know what the third act is before starting. In the middle he likes to explore.

"Sometimes it gets me into trouble and sometimes it doesn't. That's the fun of it, though. You're discovering these story elements that you didn't think existed."

Given his full-time day job, Guggenheim wrote mostly at night after his wife went to bed. He finished the first pass of *Safe House* in a month, worked on revisions to produce the draft that sold in three months.

Reeling from the six-figure sale of his first script, Guggenheim immediately began a round of pitch meetings. Never having pitched a film before, Guggenheim drew on his editorial experience at the magazine, where he has to pitch four or five story ideas a week.

The preparation served him well and led to a second six-figure sale of his next project, *Puzzle Palace*. A teen thriller, *Puzzle Palace* is the story of a young man trapped in a police station who resorts to stealing evidence in order to escape from a band of crooked cops.

And as if life couldn't get any better, a spec that Guggenheim wrote a few years ago, *Medallion*, is also garnering interest and has a producer attached. "It's surreal," Guggenheim admits.

So with his screenwriting career kicked into high gear and a new baby daughter in tow, what's next for Guggenheim? Perhaps the elusive move to LA? Not necessarily: "You have to make yourself available to go out there to meet with everybody. But I'm proof you can write from anywhere. Besides, I love New York." **CS**

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Writer-actor-director-producer **Scott Caan** takes a moment on the eve of the release of his third produced screenplay to reflect on his process for the very first time.

WHEN SCOTT CAAN was 17, he dropped out of school to start acting and two years later joined Playhouse West, a theater troop in Los Angeles. Frustrated with the parts and plays he was getting, Caan decided to start work on a play of his own: *Almost Love*. And once Caan started writing, he found he couldn't stop. "I kind of became obsessed with it," he remembers. "I felt like ideas came so quickly that if I stopped then I would never finish. I would literally sit and work for 15 hours at a time. I would sleep, wake up, eat and write until about five in the morning. I was banging out two or three screenplays a year and three or four plays a year."

Caan's work as an actor benefited his evolution as a writer. He would read every script he could get his hands on to learn the differences between good and bad writing. On set, he would observe the filmmakers and take inspiration from what he saw. He remembers his first day on the set of *Ocean's Eleven*, when he first saw Steven Soderbergh put the camera on his shoulder. "I was like, you're telling me he shoots [the film], too?" he recalls. "Being around people like that shows you what to do and what not to do, but it also gives you confidence to try it yourself. I feel like writing is something where you just have to have confidence in what you're doing and follow it."

While some writers rely on research to flesh out the details of their characters and story, Caan prefers the old adage, "write what you know." His first film, 2003's *Dallas 362*, was about young criminals in Texas, an element Caan was familiar with in his youth. The protagonists of his second and third films, *The Dog Problem* and *Mercy*, are writers. He explains that he wanted his leads to be artists, but that making them actors or painters seemed too obvious. "I guess it's from watching so many Woody Allen movies," Caan says. "I write about violent guys and sophisticated writers. I guess that's the two sides of me."

In recent years, Caan has had to adjust his habit to a more functional routine. Gone are his days of marathon writing sessions. Now Caan writes for about two hours a day to hit his target of five pages. "I still crank out scripts pretty fast," he says. "It usually takes me about three months to finish something."



James and Scott Caan

I just don't drive myself crazy sitting there for 10-to-12 hours. Now I have confidence it'll be there the next day." Once Caan's written something he's happy with, he puts it down for the day. If he still likes it the next morning, he calls over some actor friends and they act it out. If it sounds good out loud and gets the point across, it stays. But if an element isn't pushing the story forward or Caan can't justify its presence, it's gone.

A few years ago, Caan wrote a boxing script for German filmmaker Werner Herzog. Herzog liked the script, but felt it wasn't right for him. Caan replied that he could rewrite it, to which Herzog said, "There is no such thing as rewriting." This made a huge impression on Caan. "I honestly don't think it was an excuse," Caan says, "he just meant that what I wrote is what I wrote and if I have to alter the story enough to get someone interested, then it wasn't their story."

"I really don't like that thing in Hollywood where someone likes an idea in your script and tries to get you to change the story to what they think it should be," he continues. Caan recounts a time when he sold a script and spent seven months doing rewrites afterwards, driving himself crazy to turn his

story into something the studio would like. "Then we had a meeting where they said they liked the beginning and the end, but they weren't crazy about the stuff in the middle," he recalls. "It's like, did you really just say that casually? 'All the stuff in the middle.' You mean like *my script*? I mean, this is my story and my dialogue. If you just like an idea, steal it and have someone else write it. Don't buy my script just to change it."

Caan pauses for a moment as something occurs to him. "I've never really talked about writing before," he ponders. "I've been doing it for 12 years and I can't really stop doing it. Every time I write a script, I think that's gonna be the last script I ever write. But then I find myself sitting down and writing another. I've never really intellectualized the process or really even talked about it. Maybe now that I'm thinking about it, this will be the end — and I will blame you." **CS**

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TV vet **Justin Adler** (*Futurama*, *Better Off Ted*) mines laughs out of a tough spec market with *The Escort*.

WRITING A FEATURE script was something TV scribe-producer Justin Adler (*Futurama*, *Better Off Ted*) always wanted to do and the sale of his first feature script, *The Escort*, proves he can bring laughs to screens of any size.

Imagine spending a summer in the Caribbean with your buddies, working and playing in one of the most beautiful sandy playgrounds on the planet. That was where Justin Adler found himself the summer after his first year of college, blissfully unaware that the writing bug was about to bite him.

One afternoon, his old pals stumbled upon a most bizarre sight. “They found me on the couch scribbling a story I was writing and realized that I hadn’t even left the house the entire day and this was island paradise,” Adler recalls. “I was in a place where everyone should have been outside, having the time of their lives and I was inside writing a story.”

That fall, Adler signed up for a creative writing class, where he got an assignment to write in the “voice” of a fellow classmate. When the stories were read aloud for the class, Adler had a revelation. “When I read mine, people started laughing so hard they were crying,” he says. “It was such a great feeling! Definitely an epiphany for me.”

Addicted to the euphoria of the laughter, Adler moved to Los Angeles wanting to write movies. What he got instead was a job as an assistant on HBO’s *The Larry Sanders Show*, which, for Adler, became a graduate writing program of sorts. Wanting to find a way into this new world, Adler wrote a *Larry Sanders* spec and handed it to some of the show’s writers, who loved it and in turn passed it to their agents. Several of them contacted Adler, who decided to sign with a talented, young agent named Aaron Kaplan (who would later head the William Morris Agency’s TV department).

Soon after, Kaplan got Adler a spot on the writing staff of Matt Groening’s *Futurama*. At last Adler was getting paid to make people laugh and even got to work under the cre-

ator of *The Simpsons*. But the siren song of feature film writing continued to play in the background.

For years, Adler kept attempting to complete a feature script during the show’s hiatuses — “I would only get through outlining something or a first draft” — but he became the victim of his own success as he continued to write and produce various shows, even landing an overall deal with ABC-Disney. But the 2008 WGA strike changed the landscape of TV production and Kaplan left William Morris to form his own management company, Kapital Entertainment.



Justin Adler

Adler soon found a new agency, UTA, where feature agent Julien Thuan enthusiastically encouraged Adler to write a movie. And while Adler insists that his former agency had always been supportive of his desire to write a feature script, he felt that at UTA he was finally ready take the leap, so much so that he refused an opportunity to staff on a new TV show. Instead, Adler focused his creative energies on writing his feature. After pitching a few things to Thuan, Adler says the two settled on an idea that would become *The Escort* — the story of an irresponsible male flight attendant who is forced to escort an angry 14-year-old boy on a road trip to Boston after their plane is grounded for engine trouble.

The idea was triggered by a recent trip Adler had taken to San Diego to visit his in-laws with his wife and daughter. As he drove, an Amtrak train passed him by and he thought, “Would it be possible to send our daughter down to visit her grandparents without us? How would you even do that? Can you put a kid on a train by herself?”

Then Adler remembered traveling as an unattended 10-year-old on a plane to meet his own parents and thought a story about a flight attendant stuck escorting a kid cross-country (à la John Hughes’ *Planes, Trains & Automobiles*) might make for an entertaining film. “I thought there was something in an

unlikely friendship between this guy, who’s a flight attendant, and this kid that seemed really interesting to me,” Adler relates.

From there, one could say the idea really took off. After peppering a real-life flight attendant with questions, Adler sat down and spent the next several months whipping the idea into feature film shape, finishing the script in December of this past year. Kaplan and Thuan both gave Adler some notes, as did his wife (who is also a screenwriter) and a close friend. After assimilating the feedback, Adler rewrote the script. Once the rewrite was ready, Thuan felt it was better to hold onto it until after the Sundance Film Festival ended so everyone could be back in town and available to respond.

In the interim, Adler and his reps strategized about the key people they wanted to get the script to. Initially, they considered targeting an actor to make the spec more marketable, but it was decided that attaching a star wasn’t really necessary. “We realized,” Adler says, “that one of the strengths of the script was that it could work for a lot of different comedy guys right now.” So they decided to circulate the script widely. And while Adler was somewhat unfamiliar with the whole spec sale process — “I was still learning what ‘territories’ were,” Adler admits (an industry term for studios/buyers) — he really appreciated having a rep who really convinced people that this was a script they should read.

Positive responses came pouring in almost immediately, with DreamWorks Studios stepping up to make an offer with Tom McNulty (*Date Night*) attached to produce. Adler could not have been more pleased and knows that his background in television paid off in a feature kind of way. “Having been in TV so long, I think I gave people a script that maybe was a little farther along than a lot of specs that come out, in terms of how polished it was,” he says. “I think people responded to that as much as they responded to the idea.” To Adler, the secret to writing is... writing. “To be good at anything, you have to do it and do it a lot. The sheer volume of writing you do in television is exercising your writing muscles and that can only help you.” **CS**



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Brian Koppelman and David Levien have been like brothers since the day they met in their teens. Growing up in New York, watching the same movies, listening to the same music and reading the same books, they developed what they call a “common aesthetic” that still fuels their partnership.

DAVID LEVIEN: I had it in my mind that I wanted to be a writer since I was pretty young. I’m not really sure why. I didn’t know anything about it. I didn’t know any writers growing up. But I just sort of had this urge.

I’m not one of those people who sits around and says, “Oh, I love to write. Writing’s so great. I love it.” It’s more painful. Doing the actual writing somehow lessens the pain slightly but it’s not one of those joyful romps most of the time.

After college, I went out to L.A., working in the business and writing the occasional screenplay but I realized I was spending all my time reading other people’s stuff. So at last I returned to New York and devoted myself to writing fiction. I had just finished a

book when Brian came to me as I was bartending one night.

BRIAN KOPPELMAN: It’s funny, the idea of being a writer was incredibly appealing to me, but I was more of the typical blocked or frustrated writer until I was 29. I had been in the music business and had done a whole bunch of other things, but after my son was born I realized I could not live the kind of life I wanted to live and become the kind of father and person I wanted to be unless I was working in a creatively fulfilling career.

LEVIEN: So we plunged into the writing world with commitment. We started in earnest, meeting in the mornings at 8 a.m.,

after I’d been bartending and before Brian went to work, trying to figure out what we were going to write about, coming up with some characters and outlining stuff.

Shortly after we made that decision, Brian had been taken to an underground poker club and lost all his money and called me excitedly at three in the morning to say, “I think I’ve found the world we can set our movie in!” So we started going to the clubs every night and meeting in the morning to outline and write the script. That was *Rounders*.

Research has always been part of our process. We always try to bring that authority and immersion to most any world we’re writing about. We’re drawn into that world



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and characters with a language of their own and a code of their own.

In *Solitary Man*, you have a character who, when he was young, walked with a kind of swagger and a confidence and an authority. Growing up on Long Island and then spending time in the city, we'd been around a lot of these "great men" — really successful businessmen who had an outside sense of influence based on their success, people who were listened to and looked up to.

We watched these guys over time. Some aged gracefully, but many others self-destructed in a business sense. Some of them went to jail; some of them went bankrupt. Others made mistakes with their appetites and ruined their family relationships. I wrote a book that featured one of these types of guys. Then Brian witnessed an event that inspired *Solitary Man*.

KOPPELMAN: I saw one of these men walking with his daughter who was in



David Levien and Brian Koppelman

her thirties. This was a guy in his sixties who had been a titan of industry and had made some bad career decisions, putting a lot of stuff in jeopardy. He was one of these guys who always wore black because he thought it was both cool and slimming. He had become recently divorced from his wife and he turned to his daughter and said, "Don't call me Dad in public because it will make it harder for me to pick up women."

I thought it was both mortifying and hilarious at the same time. Fueled by that sort of anger, I began writing. A real sign of the constructive nature of our partnership is that I showed these pages to Dave and he encouraged me to finish it on my own. So I went off, finished it, showed it to Dave again, and we decided to make the film.

Still, the writing never gets easier. It's hard, but if you're willing to just show up, do it and keep writing, then all this other stuff can happen — like writing and directing amazing actors. But none of it can happen if you don't write. **CS**

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Inside Pixar's



BY **DANNY MUNSO**

IN A STRANGE TWIST OF FATE, Michael Arndt found himself in a position enviable to any writer. The New York-based screenwriter was in Los Angeles for the production of his first screenplay, the indie dramedy *Little Miss Sunshine*. Unsure of his next career move Arndt received a call from his agent with the surprising news that Pixar prin-

cipals wanted to meet him. "It was like being summoned to Mount Olympus," he says.

It turns out that Pixar's story department head, Mary Coleman, asked *Sunshine* producer Ron Yerxa if he knew any great up-and-coming writers. Yerxa gave Coleman Arndt's script and she was blown away. The amazing thing about this story is that despite the fact

that *Little Miss Sunshine* would eventually go on to become a big indie hit — and win Arndt an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay — at the time Arndt was interviewing with Pixar, *Sunshine* didn't even have a distributor.

As it turns out, Arndt is a huge animation fan and even made a few animated shorts at New York University, where he studied film,

Toy Chest



but never thought he could make a living from animation. "It never seemed like a career possibility," he says. "I used to go to animation festivals and see every new Pixar film, but feature animation always seemed like Timbuktu. I knew it existed, but I would never go there."

Arndt was hired at Pixar to work with Lee Unkrich, co-director of *Toy Story 2* and *Finding*

Nemo, on an original idea of Unkrich's. Arndt admits that collaborating on Unkrich's story at first concerned him. "Usually as a writer, you're alternately stepping on the gas – creating stuff – and stepping on the brakes – editing and rewriting," Arndt explains. "But with Lee, I didn't have the luxury of withholding scenes until I felt they were polished or perfect. I just

had to crank out a scene and turn it in so he could react to it."

Arndt admits he was worried that, when he got pages back from Unkrich, only the negative would be highlighted instead of the positive. "I had packed up and left New York and moved temporarily to San Francisco, all based on this good faith notion that this collabora-

tion was going to work out," Arndt remembers. "So I remember turning in my first bunch of pages and thinking, 'Man, I hope this works,' because you never know what kind of creative chemistry you're going to have until you actually start working together."

When Unkrich returned the pages, Arndt was relieved. There were notes, but they were all improvements on what was already there. "That was a hugely liberating moment," Arndt

he received more surprising news: Pixar had been bought by The Walt Disney Company and Pixar's Chief Creative Officer, John Lasseter, who directed the first two *Toy Story* films, would take on the same title at Walt Disney Animation Studios in addition to retaining his role at Pixar.

During the messy haggling between then-Disney head Michael Eisner and then-Pixar CEO Steve Jobs, it appeared the two sides could not reach an agreement, leaving Pixar to either sign with another studio or remain independent. One trump card Disney held, however, was the rights to Pixar's old films... and characters. When talks began to break down, Eisner put *Toy Story 3* into preproduction without involving any of the first two films' collaborators. It was a shot across the bow, to say the least.

When Eisner's tenure at Disney ended in September 2005, he was replaced by Bob Iger, who reignited the talks with Pixar that led to the deal that merged the two companies. The then version of *Toy Story 3* was shut down immediately and Pixar decided to make its own version in order to close the chapter of its signature series.

Given his new duties, Lasseter couldn't take the reins himself, nor could Pixar luminaries Andrew Stanton and Pete Docter, who were busy with *WALL-E* and *Up*, respectively. Unkrich was asked by Pixar to put his work with Arndt aside and take on the role of director himself. Comfortable with their working relationship, he decided to bring Arndt along.

"Again, this was before *Little Miss Sunshine* was even released, so I really felt like a kid from the sticks who is suddenly asked to be the lead-off batter for the Yankees," Arndt jokes.

When Pixar decided to move forward with *Toy Story 3*, there were only rough ideas of what the content of the film could be. So Lasseter, Stanton, Docter and Unkrich — along with *Up* co-director Bob Peterson, story artist Jeff Pidgeon, and producer Darla K. Anderson — went on a weekend "story retreat" at the same Northern California cabin where the four of them and the late Joe Ranft broke the orig-

inal *Toy Story* plot more than 10 years earlier. When they returned from the retreat, Stanton took a short break from *WALL-E* to draft a 20-page treatment that he then turned over to Arndt and Unkrich. But like most Pixar films, this early treatment doesn't share a whole lot with the final product. "It had a rock-solid beginning and a rock-solid ending, which, as a writer, is all you really need to get going," Arndt says. "But a lot changed between that first treatment and the final film."

Over time, the changes that Arndt and the rest of the filmmaking team made included a new inciting incident for the story, a new midpoint, new act breaks and a different third act — with the exception of the final scene. "That final scene was always the anchor of the whole movie," Arndt explains. "We always knew it was solid gold. But we knew there was a good story in there somewhere. But going from the first



says. "I realized not only was I not going to have to be fighting this guy and arguing my point of view, but I could stop worrying about stepping on the brakes and being critical of my own work. I could start shot-gunning ideas as fast as possible and trust that Lee would sort out the wheat from the chaff. It ended up being a great relationship."

SWITCHING GEARS

While working on Unkrich's film, *Sunshine* premiered at Sundance in January 2006, and while Arndt was there celebrating its success,



treatment to the final film was not a matter of coloring between the lines. It was an agonizing, years-long struggle for everyone.”

FIRE DRILLS

Toy Story 3’s plot centers around the threat that Andy — who is Woody, Buzz and the other toys’ owner — could decide to dispose of his beloved toys now that he is all grown up. For several days, Arndt struggled with an early sequence in the film that sets up this threat for the audience. He kept toying with scenes in which the concept of disposing of old toys is discussed by the film’s human characters but Arndt ultimately felt it was too expositional — until his train of thought was interrupted by a loud alarm that signaled a fire drill at Pixar.

As the studio employees filed onto the front lawn of the Emeryville location, Arndt

found himself standing next to Stanton. “So, kind of as a way to make conversation,” Arndt recalls, “I explained my problem and he immediately suggested that I set up the threat from the toys’ perspective.” Stanton thought if one disloyal toy was freaking out and said, “Screw it! Andy’s grown up and I’m getting out of here before I’m thrown away,” that the threat would have greater impact. That simple idea led to Sarge delivering those lines as he jumped out the window with his Army men. “That’s a visual way of setting up the idea and having it take the form of a dramatic argument between two characters — Sarge and Woody — rather than a limp line of exposition from one of the human characters,” Arndt says. “And that was a problem I had been struggling with on my own for about a week that got solved in 10 seconds because you’re all in this building and you just get those happy acci-

dents once in a while — that and the fact that Andrew is a really irritatingly smart guy.”

Oddly, the early part of the film was where some of the hardest problems to solve resided. Arndt suffered mightily over a sequence the production team called “grown up,” which was a scene designed to catch the audience up on the 10 years that elapsed between *Toy Story 2* and 3. “There’s just a ton of stuff you have to deal with right away,” Arndt says. “Character exposition, relationships, expectations for the future and various disagreements. It was just a nightmare trying to figure out what all that stuff is in the first place and then how to communicate it as quickly as possible.”

When problem solving a scene, Arndt uses a process similar to outlining. “If a scene is very complicated,” he explains, “I’ll make a list of everything that needs to happen in that scene and then try to establish the proper



chronology. That way, everything happens in the right order." To hear Arndt describe it, even at the end of the project, the scribe feels his problems within this highly expository scene were never really completely solved. "I actually went back and counted more than 60 drafts of it, and it still feels like the least-great scene in the movie to me," he laments. "That was my Waterloo. It does what it needs to do, but it doesn't sing the way other scenes in the movie do."

TOYING WITH CHARACTER ARCS

Eleven films in, Pixar is very careful to not repeat itself and that adage certainly held true for the third installment of its landmark franchise. But if one is being held to the fact that these characters are only toys, their problems would seem to be limited. Arndt recognized this obstacle immediately, particularly when it came to Woody, the central character of all three films. Arndt explains Woody's personal development by comparing his emotional progress in the films with that of a child. "In *Toy Story*, Woody is learning to share the spotlight with Buzz," he explains. "He's like a child who gets a new sibling and has to realize he doesn't always



have to be the favorite. That tracks emotionally with someone who is 5 or 6 years old.

"In *Toy Story 2*," Arndt continues, "Woody has to deal with and accept his mortality. That tracks with a child who is 8 to 10 years old." With the plot devised for *Toy Story 3*, Woody needed to progress to a more mature sentiment — that of a teenager — in order for the film to have the correct impact. "Woody learns about the impermanence of things and the necessity for letting go and moving on," Arndt says. "So there's an arc to his development across the trilogy. Even though there are common elements in all three films, I do think we're telling a different story in each of them, as well as one big over-arching story that spans the trilogy."

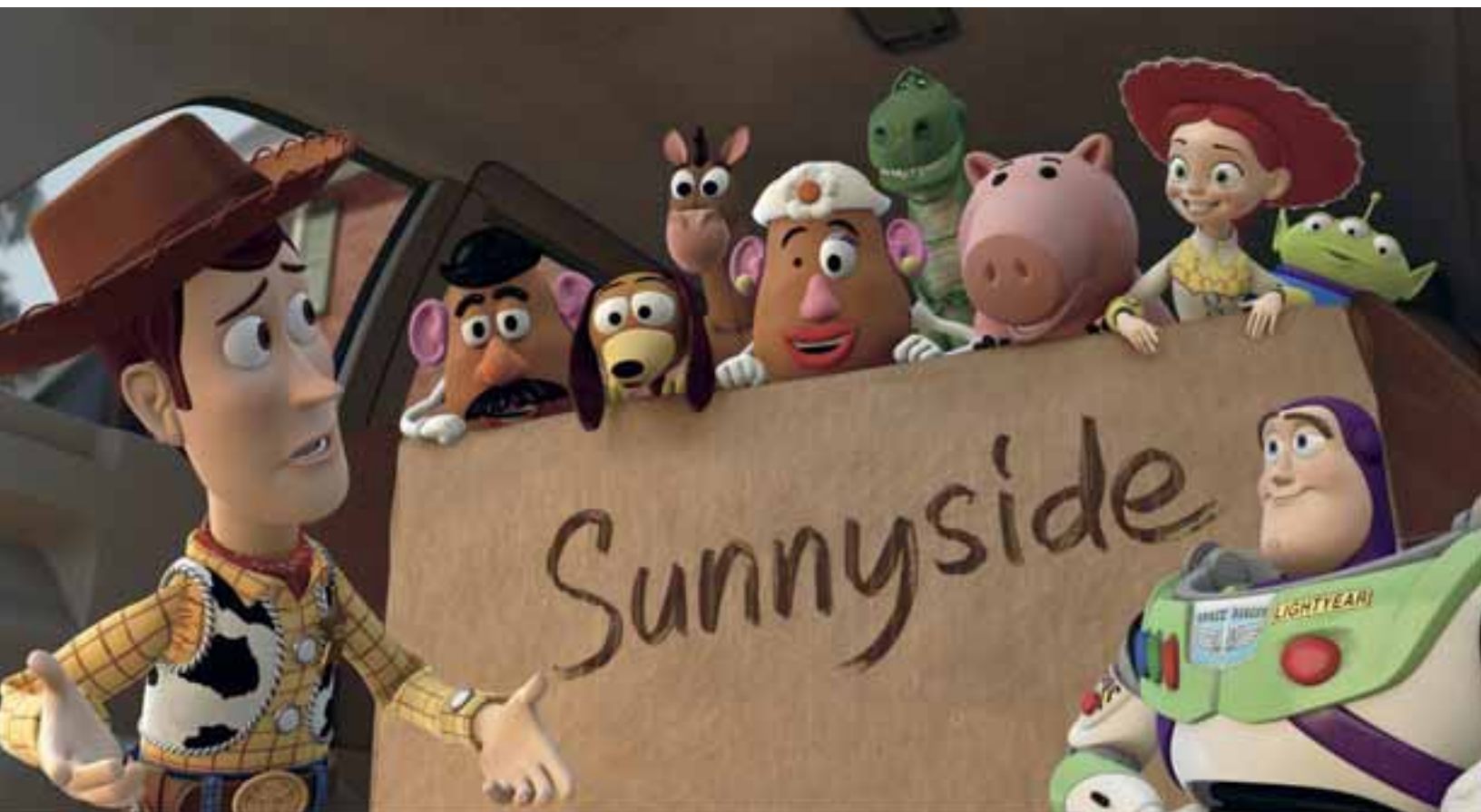
Another difficulty the script of *Toy Story 3* presented was servicing the ever-growing cast of characters and balancing moments between both the trilogy mainstays and the new toys we are introduced to in this film.

"This is the danger of having a group protagonist," Arndt laments. "A lot of times, we had to make sure that everyone had something to do in a scene. You never want a character to just be luggage that's being dragged from scene to scene."

Arndt points out that the familiar characters are so well defined by this point that coming up with their natural reactions to each new situation was fun. But at the end of the day, some characters were just going to get more screen time than others. "When you have so many characters, you're invariably making a trade between variety and depth," he continues. "While I couldn't give everyone their own arc or subplot — although we did cram a lot of B-lines into 90 minutes — you want to make sure that each character, at the very least, is true to himself."

THE PIXAR PROCESS

Arndt's fondest memories of his *Toy Story 3* stint involve his immersion into the so-called "Pixar process," a collaborative effort between great filmmakers who make sure each of the studio's releases is up to par with its predecessors. Chief among these individuals is the Pixar "Brain Trust" — a group that includes Lasseter, Stanton, Docter, *The Incredibles'* Brad





Bird, *Up*'s Bob Peterson, animation director Brenda Chapman (whose Pixar debut *The Bear and the Bow* will be released in 2011) and Pixar sound designer-turned-director Gary Rydstrom, among others.

Every convening of the Brain Trust saw Unkrich and Arndt presenting their film at various stages of completion; sometimes as an early draft of the script or later on as rough versions of animation with added dialogue called "reels." Then notes were given, usually with amazing results. Arndt doesn't mince words when describing his Brain Trust experiences, "As a screenwriter, that's just f***ng heaven on earth!

"You have to remember," he continues, "I spent 10 years sitting alone in Brooklyn working on my own scripts and getting dribs and drabs of feedback every couple of weeks. And suddenly, it's like you're crawling through the desert and one day you drill down and hit a geyser. Sitting in on those Brain Trust meetings have been some of the most exhilarating moments of my creative life."

"I remember the first time I sat in on a Brain Trust meeting," Arndt continues. "As soon as people started talking, it was like the Harlem Globetrotters in your living room." The collective minds present at such a meeting can certainly only improve on an idea. The common protocol is for one member to throw out an idea while another follows up with a completion or addition to the original thought. Jokes are topped sometimes three times over. "The organic intelligence in that room is automatically higher than even the smartest person in the room," Arndt says. "There are times when

you feel like you're in the presence of some super-intelligent invisible story deity that has powers beyond that of any mere mortal."

INSIDE THE STORY DEPT.

For an Oscar-winning screenwriter who could have his pick of any project in town, Arndt's outlook on screenwriting changed after seeing the unique collaboration offered by Pixar. "When you look at the final product, there's just no way I could have written that screenplay on my own," he says humbly. "It's just too narratively complex and too dense with incident and humor. I worked really, really hard on *Little Miss Sunshine* — I went to the end of my abilities in writing that script. But, purely formal terms, *Toy Story 3* puts *Little Miss Sunshine* in the shade. And that comes from the fact that it's a collaborative process."

Arndt says that Pixar's process harkens back to the old studio model, when companies had writers on staff. He also points out that even the great auteurs he admired in film school — Billy Wilder, Federico Fellini, Akira Kurosawa — had writers whom they regularly collaborated with on their scripts. "Pixar was very, very generous in giving me sole screenplay credit," Arndt continues. "But what's up on screen is the product of a huge team effort. I was, very happily, just another member of the team."

Also included in this collaboration is the story team led by Jason Katz, whom Arndt gives credit to for improving the screenplay tremendously. "They were constantly adding ideas and details into shaping the story," Arndt says. "Everyone was given complete creative

freedom to do whatever we felt was best for the story. Once you make that shift — once you check your auteur/genius/visionary self-image at the door — the problem of ego goes out the window.

"People say that writing is re-writing," he continues, "but that leaves out a crucial part of the equation: the feedback you get prior to your re-write. Pixar stories work because of the robustness of the story feedback system." Arndt points to statements made by several key Pixar staffers who admit that, at some point in the process, every single film Pixar made was once the worst thing one might ever see. "It's only by making the movie as a 'reel' seven or eight times, and failing repeatedly, and by applying the smartest and most ruthless criticism you can to the story over and over again, that the stories are able to take shape and come out feeling coherent and complete," he says.

Arndt's observations on his time at Pixar only confirm what many film pundits and fans have long suspected: Pixar's films are such rousing successes because of the attention each individual at that studio dedicates to the screenplays. "Andrew Stanton's rule of thumb is that it takes 10 man-years of labor to make a good screenplay," Arndt explains. "Either two writers working five years or 10 guys working one year. For *Toy Story 3*, it was even more than that — probably the equivalent of 10 people each working two or three years.

"To me, this is what separates Pixar from almost everyone else," Arndt concludes. "They realize how hard it is to come up with a great screenplay." **CS**

LOST

The Final Article

BY **PETER CLINES** ■ ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY **JEFF GOLDSMITH**





ON SEPTEMBER 22, 2004,

Oceanic Airways Flight 815, en route from Sydney to Los Angeles, broke up in the air and crashed on an uncharted island

somewhere in the South Pacific. Miraculously, a large number of the passengers on-board survived relatively uninjured. Some, in fact, came out of the crash better than they'd been before.

As they quickly came to realize, this was no ordinary island. Polar bears wandered amidst the palm trees, as did something huge, dark and unknown. A strange radio signal, almost two decades old, hinted of a contagious madness. Ominous whispers in the jungle warned that this island may not be as deserted as it seemed. Over those first few weeks, the passengers of Flight 815 —

and millions of viewers — became obsessed with the same baffling question:

“Where are we?”

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

It seems odd, in retrospect, that such a popular and critically acclaimed piece of storytelling as *LOST* grew out of an act of petty vengeance. An ABC executive who discovered he was being fired decided to give his employers the finger by greenlighting what was, at that time, the most expensive television pilot ever made — with a budget of more than \$11 million. In the rush to get the pilot written, cast, produced and edited, the groundwork for well over a dozen mysteries was set up with only scant ideas of how they would be developed. Creator Damon Lindelof points at examples such as the handwritten note James “Sawyer” Ford

(Josh Holloway) would always read or the polar bear the survivors would encounter in the jungle. These things were only briefly discussed since the writers didn't want to just have random, arbitrary elements, but there wasn't time for much else. “Let's say there were people on this island and they were doing experiments on animal behaviorism and that's what brought the polar bear here,” Lindelof says. “And that's as far as the conversation goes.” Once the pilot got solid reviews, however, he began getting the same question from everyone. “‘How are you going to do this every week?’ And my answer to that question,” he adds with a laugh, “was, ‘I have no fucking idea.’”

Executive producer Carlton Cuse points out, though, that these low expectations ended up being a creative blessing in disguise. After spending so much money on the



pilot, the network felt obligated to order a dozen episodes, but made no effort to control or influence the writers. “No one thought that the show was going to be successful so they left us alone,” Cuse says with a smile. “We were left to our own devices.”

Cuse and Lindelof were joined by writers Edward Kitsis and Adam Horowitz, who eventually became full executive producers of the show as well, and the writers began work on fleshing out the mysteries — and the answers — to their mysterious island. “We began having much more detailed conversations about where this was all going,” Cuse says. However, the problem, which soon became apparent, was that the writers had no idea how long their show would be on the air, given the fickle world of television. “So the tricky thing became that we had this mythology, but we really had no idea how quickly we should let it unfold,” Cuse explains. “We had to start that story and we found ourselves always in this tricky predicament of



Carlton Cuse



Damon Lindelof

[figuring out] how fast to let the narrative unfold, because we didn’t want to burn all of our fuel. On the other hand, if we didn’t burn that fuel, people would get upset and say, ‘Oh, you’re stalling.’”

The theory has been tossed around that the writers of *LOST* never had any of the answers and were making things up as they went along, but Kitsis enjoys using an analogy that compares the show to a road trip. It begins in Los Angeles and ends in New York, but could follow any number of paths and

include any number of stops. “We may not have realized we were going to see the world’s largest waffle cone,” he chuckles, “but there’s a sign for it so let’s go.”

After six years, the wait is over. Soon, the secrets and mysteries of *LOST* will be revealed.

More or less.

THE MEN BEHIND THE CURTAIN

The last season of *LOST* began just like most of the others, with the writing staff sitting down for

three weeks to discuss plot and character possibilities. “We do half-days and we call it mini-camp, like in football when you go and you start doing drills,” Kitsis explains. “That’s where we plot out the season.”

An episode of *LOST* begins in the writers’ room with a day of “blue-skying,” which is discussions of where the show is and where the writers planned for it to be. This is followed by a day of tossing out scenes the writers want to see, whether they are character beats or action beats, and as ideas take form,



they're added to the whiteboards that fill the writers' room. In the days that follow, the episode is constructed as a series of one-line beat descriptions, all structured around the show's six-act structure (the teaser and five acts) and the need for a dramatic end for each act. It's common for the writing staff to spend at least five hours a day in the writers' room to ensure everyone is aware of everyone else's work and where the story is headed. When they leave the room, it's to turn the huge, whiteboarded outlines into a 57-page shooting script.

Kitsis admits there is a degree of pressure now that the show is in its final season and the staff can no longer push ideas or revelations to the next one. "We only had 18 hours this year," he chuckles. "We got to look at the waffle cone for a minute and take a picture and then get back in the car." At the end of the day, he feels it's always about telling a great story. "It changes conversations in the [staff] kitchen, maybe, but once we get into the room, we just fall back into the way we always play. At a certain point you stop thinking about pressure and all that. Once you get into that room, it somehow has a calming effect, and it becomes more of, 'How do we make the coolest story?' It's not until the hour before it airs that you're like, 'Oh, God, what if they hate it?'"

Horowitz also feels that, even in the final hours, there's lots of flexibility for the writers. "When Eddy and I are writing a scene for anything, we will enter the scene and say, 'It's going to be about this, accomplish that and take us there,'" he explains. "But there are infinite possibilities for how you can execute and how you can take it somewhere. So you can work in your waffle cone if you must." Horowitz also notes that, this late in the series, it's no longer possible to shift gears and spin the story around 180 degrees, but points out that the staff wouldn't want to do something that drastic anyway.

One bit of creative flexibility that pleased Kitsis and Horowitz was an idea they cut from the third season's "Expose," which was an ambitious episode that hoped to tie up several dangling threads, but the first cut of the story ran almost 10 minutes over. One scene that fell to the cutting-room floor involved the characters Nikki and Paulo (Kiele Sanchez and Rodrigo Santoro, respectively), who found an asthma inhaler in the jungle — Shannon's missing inhaler that caused so much trouble in the first season. "Some ideas do come back," Horowitz says, referring to Hurley (Jorge Garcia) finding the device in



this season's "Lighthouse." He adds, "That was something we always wanted to do and we found a place to do it."

One thing the writers are clear about is that everything will not be revealed in clear detail in this final season. "Sometimes we're presenting things that are not really questions to us, but they inevitably become questions for the audience," Lindelof says. "If they're not questions for us we don't really feel beholden to answer them. From the moment that you heard the roar in the jungle, we had every intention of explaining what the origins of the [smoke] monster are and what its function is. You'll know a thousand times more about it by the end of

the series than you do now. But to say there won't be other questions for some people left in that wake, that all depends on the individual." He uses the example of *Harry Potter* and points out that while author J.K. Rowling never addresses the question of why some people in her world are magical and others aren't, it hasn't stopped people from asking the question.

In a recent appearance at the PaleyFest in Los Angeles, Cuse took this a step further and pointed out that the questions the writers were concerned with answering were the ones the characters were concerned with. Yet, it's impossible to explain everything, as the showrunner pointed out when he quipped

that they certainly wouldn't be pausing in the finale to explain the identity of the man Sayid (Naveen Andrews) shot on a golf course in season four's "The Economist."

Kitsis and Horowitz are quick to point out these answers do exist — but that the staff isn't going to spend time on them. They explain the man was named Peter Avellino, he was a partner of the economist working with Charles Widmore (Alan Dale) and that Ben (Michael Emerson) had Sayid eliminate him to annoy Widmore. "I think that's a good example of something where there's information you can cull from watching the show that pretty much tells you everything you need to know about Peter Avellino," Horowitz says. "What's his relationship to the economist and what Ben was doing — it's exactly what we were talking about, in the sense that there's stuff out there. If you look back and put stuff together, you can create what you need to create to get what you need from the show. There isn't a need to ex-

plore that aspect any further."

Kitsis makes it even simpler: "Look," he says with a shrug, "we can spend the limited time we have to talk to you about the guy we shot on the golf course or we can show you more Desmond (Henry Ian Cusick)."

ONE OF US

To its credit, *LOST* is based on the characters far more than it is on the mysteries of the island. "We spend about 80% of our time talking about the characters, the character relationships and the character interactions and about 20% of the time on mythology," Cuse estimates. "Mythology is what everybody talks about and what everybody asks us about, but we feel that we're making a character show, first and foremost. That's really, I think, why the show has crossed out of being a small genre show and into more of a broad appeal show."

Kitsis explains that the three weeks of mini-camp at the beginning of each season allows the writers to explore characters to a great depth. "If we're going to introduce a character, even if we don't ever show all of it — as Damon and Carlton say, it's under the iceberg — we need to know all of it," Kitsis says. "Yes, there's a mystery element to the show, but we aren't writing toward any answers, because at that point we might as well have Damon and Carlton come out and read them." So while many of the answers are known in advance, what the writing staff prefers to do is "earn" the answers through character development and story.

As an example, Kitsis talks about the character of Richard Alpert (Nestor Carbonell), who was first developed in the third season's mini-camp. "When we first introduced Richard, I don't think we even hinted at the fact that he hasn't aged," Kitsis says. "What's cool is that by the time you got it, you were already with Richard. So when we started to peel off layers, you were into it."

Horowitz adds that mini-camp also allowed the writers

to explore the question of how an ageless man ended up on the island. "Well, we have the Black Rock," he says. "You're free to play with the universe of the show in a very cool way if you have that freedom to spend some time before each season to really delve into who these characters are and who they're going to be. There's so much more about all the characters than we actually need to put out there. But by having all that, it allows you to keep revealing things about them as you go along and hopefully continue to make them interesting." Hints of Richard's history have been peppered throughout the show since the character's appearance. In the season six episode "Dr. Linus," written by Kitsis and Horowitz, Richard and Jack (Matthew Fox) share the following moment transcribed below.

INT: BLACK ROCK

Jack enters to find Richard examining a set of MANACLES fastened to the wall of the ship's hold.

JACK

Been here before?

RICHARD

Yes. And in all the time I've spent on this island, today is the first time I've ever come back.

It was decided in the writers' room that, two episodes later, "Ab Aeterno," would become a full concept episode focusing on Richard's flashback story — a rare departure from the show's usual format of interspersing the present day with flashbacks, flash-forwards and even flash-sideways stories. Previous concept episodes include "The Other 48 Days," "Meet Kevin Johnson" and "Flashes Before Your Eyes." "Richard Alpert was not going to be told in five beats," Kitsis says, recalling the discussion. "And what we started to realize was Richard Alpert is not going to be told in six beats." Ideas continued to snowball around Richard's episode and long-awaited origin story until a variation on the stand-alone concept episode was outlined. "And then you just get going," Kitsis says.

As the final hours of the show are unveiled, audience members discover that one of the island's biggest mysteries is a character. Season six begins with the revelation that the



resurrected John Locke (Terry O'Quinn) is, in fact, the smoke monster who has been heard and glimpsed many times since the pilot but until this point had never been personified as a character. The monster has become a major character in the final season with the confirmation that it's not only intelligent, but it's also the man in black (Titus Welliver) seen in season five's finale, "The Incident," and in this season's "Ab Aeterno." "The approach to a lot of these mysteries from the start," Horowitz says, "has been [that] people are more interesting than objects or facts. I think making something a person allows you to then make it a character, which then allows you to make it something the audience can get invested in." He and Kitsis confirm this deception by the false Locke has been the plan since the murdered man first reappeared alive on the island in season five's "The Life and Death of Jeremy Bentham."

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Another carefully scripted element of the show is the "ancient technology" that appeared more as the show progressed: the stone lighthouse, with its elaborate gears and mirrors; the hidden passages of the Temple; and, of course, the infamous glowing donkey wheel that moves the island through space and time. "We spend a large amount of time involving the technical aspects as well as the story aspects," Horowitz says. "And Carlton, God bless him, is one hell of a sketch artist." It's not uncommon for extensive diagrams to be drawn on the whiteboards with hours spent discussing the actual mechanics behind story elements.

This poses the question, though, from a storytelling point of view: Why does the island or its mysterious master, Jacob (Mark Pellegrino), need a gear-driven, mathematically precise lighthouse when the end result is magic? "I think because it's too easy," Kitsis muses. He points out the show works best when things are left in the gray areas of "is it or isn't it?" and mysteries that could have scientific or supernatural answers are posed.



"There are people who love the show that hate the magic, and there are people who love [the magic]," he says. "For us, we don't want to come down either way. There's definitely some magic in the show but there's definitely some science. That's a huge theme in the show — man of science versus man of faith. Things like a donkey wheel that needs to be turned illustrate that."

Perhaps no bigger magic versus science element has been introduced on *LOST* than the time travel, which dominated season five. While fans tirelessly debate the finer elements of time travel — both online and over a beer — it should be noted that the show's producers debate it as well. The show first toyed with time travel in the fourth season episode "The Constant," where a fundamental rule for the show was formed. "We don't do paradoxical storytelling," Lindelof says. "We're more interested in the storytelling where you travel to a future and there's *nothing you can do* to stop it from happening. In fact, the more you try to avert it from happening, the more you might potentially be the cause of that disaster." Cuse adds that it's difficult to have stakes if the future is always alterable, because there are no real consequences. Horowitz points out that it's illogical to make something happen in

the past that history tells you didn't happen. Kitsis, however, is a firm believer in, "*Back to the Future* time travel," and claims an unalterable history means a dull time travel story. "You hear those arguments on the show because those are arguments in the room," he says with a chuckle.

Lindelof likes to say the show suckered in viewers by not presenting the sci-fi elements right from the start, allowing people to get drawn in instead by the characters and the drama of the plane crash. "There's obviously this loud, menacing monster out in the jungle," he says, "but you never see it. So for those people who don't want to be watching a science fiction show, like a Rorschach test, they project. Whatever it is that threw the pilot up into that tree, there's got to be a rational explanation. Even when they saw 'Walkabout,' they say, 'I don't know how Locke ended up in the wheelchair, so maybe it was psychosomatic and the plane crash jarred his memory free.'" He mentions shows such as *Heroes* or the short-lived *LOST*-coat-tails show, *Invasion*, which both opened with sci-fi events rather than letting people slowly come to their own conclusions while they became invested in the characters. "If you watch the pilot for *Heroes* and Nathan Petrelli flies up into the sky and catches Peter

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LOST: The Final Article

falling down, there's no subjectivity to that. He flew. We saw him. You're presenting something that is sci-fi. There's no other explanation for it." In this sense, he explains that *LOST* is a long con, starting out with small, debatable events and slowly building to a show where a final season of time travel, alternate universes and ancient gods and monsters feel natural and necessary.

THE END

After six years, there is a sorrow that comes with bringing such a rich story to an end. "For us right now, it's very sad to think we'll never write Hurley again," Kitsis says a few days after the finale finishes filming. "We'll never write Jack again. We'll never write Sawyer again. It's sad to us. It's hard to do all of it, but you try to stay true to the vision you have." He pauses for a moment and adds, "It's funny because during season one, people would come up to me and Adam and be like, 'What's the smoke monster? What's in the hatch?'" Kitsis stops to laugh. "Now the only thing we constantly get is, 'I hope you don't screw it up. I hope the ending doesn't suck.'"

Cuse thinks the key to *LOST*'s ending lies in the unknown and explains that mystery is a regular part of everyday life and a component of good storytelling. He points out that George Lucas tried to define the nature of the Force with *midiclorians* and in doing so stripped that aspect of his story of all its intrigue and power. "Mystery is good," Cuse says. "I think that we, hopefully, will strike a

balance in the conclusion of the show in providing answers but also leaving that sense of magic and mystery. We hope that the things that remain unknown are unknown in that good way that makes you kind of engaged by this notion of the mystery that inhabits all of our lives." He acknowledges that, at the end, there will be satisfied audience members and others who will still have questions, but states some of the bigger questions will be answered and that the show will have an ending. "We're not intending to cut to black or say this all took place in a snow globe," he chuckles. "We know what the last image of the show is and we feel that the conclusion will be a satisfying one."

Horowitz feels that once people have a chance to look back at the show as a whole and digest the events and results, they'll appreciate all the subtleties of the storytelling. "There's hopefully a richness to the whole thing that will keep coming to the surface as people look back on it."

Lindelof thinks there's a definite line between, as he puts it, "*The Sopranos* way to end things," and the planned ending for *LOST*. "Our suspicion is that the majority of people really care about how the characters are going to end up," he says. "Who's going to be with whom? Who survives? Who dies? Where's Jack on the axis of faith when the show ends? Those are the real answers that we care about, and we feel that if those are satisfying, then the legacy of the show will live on." **CS**



LOST's 10 Greatest Episodes

BY MATT GODSEY & DANNY MUNSO

SPOILER ALERT!!

With only a handful of episodes remaining in the series, we take a look back at *LOST*'s greatest moments.

1. Through the Looking Glass (Season 3)

Written by Damon Lindelof & Carlton Cuse
LOST's greatest triumph succeeded on many levels, with its action-packed end to the war between the castaways and the Others, and the death of a fan-favorite character (sorry, Charlie). But when Jack cries to Kate, "We have to go back," we are left with the realization that the flashback we thought we were experiencing is actually a look into the future when some of the castaways have left the island, and that the writers had a much grander plan for this show than any of us could have expected.

2. The Constant (Season 4)

Written by Damon Lindelof & Carlton Cuse
A time-travel love story for the ages, "The Constant" was not the biggest mythological download the show would offer, but it was the most heart-wrenching, as it showed us that Desmond's love for his soulmate Penny does not adhere to the limits of time and space.

3. Walkabout (Season 1)

Written by David Fury

The first of the many heartbreaking flashbacks dedicated to John Locke is still the best. The final act reveal that this knife-wielding island hunter was in a wheelchair before the crash was the writer's signal to us that this place, and show, was special.

4. The Man Behind the Curtain

(Season 3)

Written by Elizabeth Sarnoff
& Drew Goddard

The writers finally treat us to the island backstory of Benjamin Linus, with brilliant and horrific results. Even being fully introduced to the Dharma Initiative for the first time couldn't compare with finally seeing how *LOST*'s favorite villain was created.

5. Pilot (Season 1)

Written by J.J. Abrams & Damon Lindelof

The two-hour intro was jam packed with enough mysteries to hook us instantly. What is the monster lurking in the jungle? Why is there a French distress signal on the island? It was Charlie, however, who voiced the most important question of all: "Guys, where are we?"

6. The Incident (Season 5)

Written by Damon Lindelof & Carlton Cuse
LOST's most sci-fi leaning and mind-blowing season came to a close with the explosion of a hydrogen bomb, the death of everyone's favorite Other (Juliet) and, once again, John Locke in a casket. However, it's the opening scene — a philosophical showdown between Jacob and the Man in Black — that would have fans analyzing each line searching for answers to the show's biggest questions.

7. LaFleur (Season 5)

Written by Elizabeth Sarnoff
& Kyle Pennington

Fans never would have guessed that tortured con man Sawyer would ever play it straight. But in a different time (1974) and with a different name (Jim LaFleur), the writers gave us a glimpse of a leader whose mind wasn't clouded with science and faith, but with the resolve to protect the people and woman he had grown to love.

8. Greatest Hits (Season 3)

Written by Edward Kitsis & Adam Horowitz
For most of season 3, the writers, through Desmond, prepared us for the death of Charlie, one of the show's most beloved characters. Their gift to us was this episode, a coda as poignant and moving as Charlie's list.

9. Ab Aeterno (Season 6)

Written by Melinda Hsu Taylor
& Gregory Nations

This was the episode that die-hard fans had been waiting for. We were led to believe that Richard was privy to most of the mysteries of the island, and that a Richard-centric episode would fill in some of the mythological puzzle. Instead, the writers presented us with a portrait of a man, not a supernatural being, whose flaws led him to choose between his death or being the voice of the island.

10. Man of Science, Man of Faith (Season 2)

Written by Damon Lindelof

At its core, *LOST* has always been a show about duality, and no two forces clash greater than Jack and Locke. This episode presented the paradox of Jack, a man who healed a woman that science said could not be healed, yet who doesn't seem to have faith in anything. Though the episode ends with Desmond pointing a gun at Locke's head, it was the warring ideologies of the show's most dominant characters that took center stage. **CS**



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A Return to

BY **DANNY MUNSO**



IN 2001, Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg executive-produced the acclaimed miniseries *Band of Brothers* for HBO, an epic tale about a company of American soldiers who fought in the European theater during World War II. As that project concluded, Hanks and Spielberg were already talking about showing the other side of America's participation in the war via the battles in the Pacific against the Japanese. In addition to the letters the power duo re-

ceived after *Band* premiered from Pacific veterans asking them to bring their story to life, Spielberg's interest in the venture was personal because both his father and uncle fought in the Pacific. One of the writers of *Band*, Bruce C. McKenna, was also already thinking along similar lines.

He approached Spielberg after the 2002 Emmy Awards and asked if he was thinking about tackling the Pacific war next. "I said, 'Please, if you ever do, I'd love to write you a

couple of episodes,'" McKenna remembers. "Eighteen months later, I got a phone call from Tom Hanks who wanted to know if I was interested in working on *The Pacific*. I tried not to seem too eager." McKenna sat down with Spielberg, Hanks and Hanks' producing partner at Playtone, Gary Goetzman, to discuss the project in March 2003.

"It was Steven who, at one point, asked, 'Is there any way we could do the Pacific?'" Hanks recalls. "And we had to ask ourselves,

BATTLE

A black and white photograph of a soldier in a trench during a battle. The soldier is wearing a helmet and a uniform, and is holding a rifle. In the background, there is a large plume of smoke or fire, suggesting a recent explosion or battle. The scene is dark and gritty, capturing the intensity of war.

‘What’s the story?’ because we didn’t want to make things up or redo things that had been done before. If we could find the source material, we might be able to let it speak for itself.” Spielberg relayed their plan to McKenna: Cover the entire Pacific war with stories about real soldiers and, most importantly, make it more intimate and psychologically deeper than *Band*. McKenna believed that finding true stories to base the series on was a crucial element to the pro-

ject’s success. “It elevates the material,” he says. “Making it real connects the viewer more deeply. It becomes more than entertainment; people feel like they’re watching something that’s really happening.”

McKenna immediately set out to work with Hugh Ambrose, the son of *Band of Brothers*’ late author Stephen Ambrose. Ambrose’s job was to collate information about veterans of the Pacific war and recommend story ideas to McKenna. Ambrose, who re-

leased a companion book about the war, suggested that McKenna read two memoirs: “With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa” by Eugene Sledge and “Helmet for My Pillow” by Robert Leckie. McKenna says that both books floored him.

“The stories are searing and honest about their own failings, their own fears and their own degradation that they went through during the war,” McKenna says. Sledge’s book in particular stood out to everyone involved as a powerful piece of material, mainly because Sledge’s talents as a writer were not great, which allows the text to remain honest and intimate. “I read it and I said ‘This is it,’” McKenna recalls. “This is what the series is about: the moral cost of war, the loss of innocence and the loss of humanity.” They soon discovered Sledge’s text was revered amongst veterans. As a further test to make sure they were on the right track, Hanks approached Major Dick Winters, a member of the company that was the focus of *Band of Brothers*, and informed him that they were looking into Sledge’s book. His response was simple: “Sledge is a legend.”

In addition to Sledge (played by Joe Mazzello) and Leckie (James Badge Dale), the producers wanted to tell the well-known story of John Basilone (Jon Seda), who earned a Medal of Honor and was cited for contributing in large measure to the annihilation of a Japanese regiment on Guadalcanal. Soon after, Basilone was paraded around (mostly against his will) on a war bond tour by the federal government before finally

being allowed to return to action. With his three protagonists in place, McKenna set out to interview anyone who would talk to him: family, friends and fellow soldiers who knew these men intimately. Even though all three men are deceased, McKenna managed to get all the information he was looking for. A big part of the trust he earned from his interviewees was due in part to the success of *Band of Brothers*. “They trusted us because they knew we would be respectful to the central core of

A Return to Battle

what their experiences were," he says. "It's a huge risk on their part, but it was worth taking for them because they knew we would do justice to these stories."

THE SOULS OF MEN

McKenna promised that *The Pacific* would differ greatly from *Band* because of

how different the wars were. The war in Europe is sometimes glamorized because it was fought in cities that Americans identify with. Yet the war waged in the Pacific was dark, fought in places that no one knew about and, at times, was more dangerous because of the unique psychological approach of the enemy. "The Japanese attacked our

lines with an overwhelming disregard for survival," Spielberg explains. The soldiers had a great belief in *bushido*, which means "death before dishonor." "Because our lines were so spread out, it was very hard to fight that kind of battle," Spielberg continues. "The Japanese were very willing to sacrifice themselves for *bushido*."

The savagery enacted by both sides also affected the soldiers' minds and well-being. It was this internal ethical struggle that was as interesting to the producers as the actual battles. "The Pacific lent itself to a more psychological examination of the moral cost of war," McKenna says. "That was always our intent." Hanks also took interest not just in what happened, but how these events affected the soldiers after the battles were over. "What we ask is, 'How were they able to go through all of this and come back in 1946 for the first time and get on with their lives?'" Hanks says. "I couldn't help but wonder how they returned to normal lives after their ordeal. How did these guys set up a Christmas tree for their kids? How did they pick up their lives and put on a tie and go back to a job? It's extraordinary that Eugene Sledge came home as he did and lived as he did."

The attention to both the battle with the Japanese and within the American soldier's psyche is what makes the series so unique. "It's about the souls of men," Spielberg says. "It's the story of the corruption of the human spirit and the private war that all of those soldiers had to fight to save themselves from what they were witnessing and what they were engaged in." This moral duality seen both on and off the battlefield was the overriding reason Hanks and Spielberg decided to head back into World War II, and they trusted McKenna to deliver that to the audience. "From the very moment I was hired, Steven looked at me and said, 'Don't blink; don't hold anything back,'" McKenna recalls. "I tried not to do that."

Though he was gleaning great material from his interviews, McKenna still struggled with how it would come together to form a seamlessly cohesive series. At first he hoped to interconnect his stories similar to the way the scenes connected in *Traffic*, where different characters weave into each other throughout their own stories. But his eureka moment for how to blend them together came during his extensive interview process. While interviewing Private First Class Sid Phillips, Sledge's best friend from youth, he discovered Phillips actually served in Robert



Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg



Bruce McKenna (center)

Leckie's company. "They weren't best friends," McKenna says, "but they knew each other well enough to make that connection. Right then, I knew we had a miniseries." Further digging led McKenna to the revelation that during the Guadalcanal battle, Basilone walked right by Leckie's machine gun company. "You learn these things through deep, deep research," McKenna continues. "These connections are real and it's exactly how they happened."

ISLAND HOPPING

HBO first wanted McKenna to pen a series bible — a detailed version of each episode of the entire miniseries. He recalled the work that went into the 189-page bible that was created for *Band of Brothers*. "I thought the bible for *The Pacific* would be 800-pages long," he laughs. He called Hanks, Spielberg and Goetzman and suggested a different approach: He would outline each episode for HBO to see if it worked. McKenna spent close to a year hammering out the plots of each part, ranging from the characters involved in each chapter to which battles would be represented. The producers



Graham Yost

loved his approach and hand-delivered it to HBO, which officially greenlit the series on the spot. "This was a great joy because I never had to write that goddamn bible!" McKenna exalts.

McKenna's first task after the greenlight was to visit several of the battlegrounds de-

picted in the miniseries. After visiting Guadalcanal and the very spot where Basilone earned his Medal of Honor, it was off to Peleliu, the little-known island that would become the centerpiece of *The Pacific* and the grounds where the battle for Eugene Sledge's soul would be waged. "It's the most evil and sad place I have ever been to in my life," McKenna says. "Within 10 minutes [of being] there, we entered a cave and there was the skeleton of a dead Japanese soldier. It has never been cleaned up and you couldn't help but weep with the agony of the aura of death that pervades the island." Not surprisingly, this experience helped inform the script that McKenna would soon pen. "You feel it in your bones," he continues. "Not only does it help you write the episodes, but it helped me inform the actors and directors of what this place was really like. It was one of the more profound and surreal experiences of my life."

Back in the States, McKenna hired the team of writers who would take this journey with him. Although he was warned not to hire former showrunners, such advice remained unheeded. Coming aboard were *The Wire*'s George Pelecanos, *Six Feet Under* and



Alias vet Laurence Andries and *The Quiet American* screenwriter Robert Schenkkan. (*John Adams* writer Michelle Ashford joined later.) “I mainly hired them because I thought they were better writers than I was,” McKenna says. Working off the outlines McKenna penned, along with hundreds of pages of his interview transcripts, the writers set out to work on their own individual episodes. Soon enough, *The Pacific* was ready to head into production, yet one logistical problem remained.

TOM HANKS’ LUCKY CHARM

Though HBO was pleased with the extensive work McKenna had done, the fact re-

about it.” Thus, Yost came onto the project as the showrunner and there was no animosity between him and McKenna because the two were already good friends.

In fact, when McKenna came on board in 2003, one of the first calls he made was to Yost to see if he could join the project. Yost was busy at that time, but McKenna convinced him to read the books by Sledge and Leckie anyway. “They completely blew me away,” Yost recalls. “That’s all I could talk about for weeks. I was hooked but I couldn’t work on the project. I kept calling Bruce and saying, ‘Send me your outlines. I’d love to see what you’re doing.’”

Yost and McKenna forged a partnership on *Band* that had them each writing multiple episodes. When tasked with writing consecutive episodes, they strategized on how to best work together. “He said, ‘Look, I’ll set this up for you if you pay this off for me,’” Yost laughs. “It was a little *quid pro quo*.” By the end of it, the duo wound up co-writing a *Band* episode together. For *The Pacific*, Yost’s responsibility was to get the scripts into production shape. His production experience, combined with McKenna’s command of the material, once again made them a perfect team.



mained that he had no production experience and therefore wasn't the ideal choice to be the showrunner once filming got underway. Enter Graham Yost, the veteran writer-producer-director who worked on both *Band of Brothers* and another Hanks-HBO collaboration, *From the Earth to the Moon*. “It was one of those things where there was no question,” Yost says of his conversation with Hanks about joining the project. “I really respect Tom and I like the work he’s done and the work we’ve done together — so it was a no-brainer.” Yost jokes that Hanks considers him his good-luck charm and likes having him around. In addition to their other projects, Yost was the one who turned Hanks onto *John Adams* and even received a producing credit for, as Yost explains, “Basically sending Tom an email





Yet, a wrench was thrown into the plans when Yost requested to direct part four of the project (which he also co-wrote). He had previously directed an installment of *From the Earth to the Moon* and wanted to take on one of *The Pacific*'s stories as well. To his delight, Spielberg agreed, but due to the intense prep that came along with directing, his duties as a showrunner had to take a backseat. Suddenly, the clock was turned back and McKenna received a "battlefield promotion," as he calls it, to become the showrunner. "It was the greatest professional experience of my life and I thank Graham for that," he says.

Aside from collaborating with his fellow writers, McKenna also worked with Hanks to take over some of the rewriting duties while Yost was off prepping his episode. This put McKenna in the awkward position of giving his boss script notes. "He would turn a script in to me and I would have to figure out how to give him notes and suggestions," McKenna laughs. "It was somewhat frightening!"

"The reality is that Tom did an amazing amount of work on this thing and so did I," Yost explains, "but McKenna not only

got the boulder rolling, he was the one who chose what that boulder was going to be. He found the stories and figured out the course of the whole thing. The rest of us were there to just help polish the boulder once it was rolling."

INSIDE THE WRITERS' ROOM

Of all the changes *The Pacific* underwent, it's largest came when a decision was made to cut the original 13 episodes down to 10. McKenna and the other writers originally devised a plan that included episodes dedicated to the bombing of Pearl Harbor (as the series opener) and also the experiences of a pilot who was shot down during the Battle of Midway. Though the ambition was admirable, neither episode would have featured Sledge, Leckie or Basilone. In the end, it was decided that they made the narrative feel too sprawling. Ultimately, it was Hanks who spoke up and rededicated the series' focus back to the three marines. This change gave the writers a more structured environment to work within, which was greatly appreciated by all. "Structure can be a great gift," McKenna says. "It forces you to focus on exactly what's important and what you need to do with the time

given to you. Tom gave us a great gift to boil the series down to what was important."

Because of the way the miniseries plays out, Sledge's time on Peleliu became the centerpiece of the entire show. "It enabled us to really spend a lot of time with him," McKenna says. "A lot of war movies don't have the luxury of doing that. *Full Metal Jacket* and *Platoon* are great movies, but because we had the time, we could properly depict Sledge's slow decent into the depths of hell."

No scene embodies that idea more than when Sledge sees PFC Shelton, his friend and fellow soldier callously tossing pebbles into the open skull of a recently deceased Japanese soldier, each pebble echoing in the man's blood-filled cranium. The image, taken directly from the book, is shocking and stirring, and McKenna made a point to include it. "Chris Anderson, the editor at *World War II* magazine at the time, made me promise to put that in there," he says. "That was his favorite moment from Sledge's book and, really, it's one of the most crucial." In that scene, Sledge also threatens to cut out the Japanese man's teeth in order to get the gold from them (a call back to an earlier episode

where he stopped someone else from doing the same thing), before relenting to Shelton's pleas that he doesn't want to cross that road. The scene literally transports the viewer across the battlefield and into the dilemma in Sledge's mind. "The viewer is going to be exhausted and concerned about the soul of Eugene Sledge by the end of that sequence," McKenna says. "And that was the intent. That sequence is one of the most important in the entire 10 episodes."

The elimination of those additional episodes also freed up Yost's episode to expand its emotional depth. Under the original outline, part three would have focused on Leckie's leave to Melbourne and then his return to battle in Cape Gloucester. With those other storylines out of the way, it became solely about Leckie's Melbourne experiences, with part four now adding a crucial element to Leckie's, and *The Pacific's*, story.

Using Schenkkan's existing Gloucester material, Yost expanded part four to include Leckie's trip to a naval hospital on Banika. He was there being treated for a case of enuresis (a condition involving uncontrollable urination), but a surprisingly large wing of the hospital was also dedicated to a psychiatric ward. The episode's brilliance lies in its portrayal of Leckie, one of the series' heroes, struggling mentally and giving in to the effects of the war. In *Helmet for My Pillow*, Leckie doesn't mention his Banika visit in great detail, but McKenna relayed to Yost that when he interviewed Leckie's family, he got the sense that Leckie might have had a breakdown that led to his stay there.

This lent itself to a theme found in Sledge's book that the writers wanted to portray on screen. "Sledge wrote that a marine's greatest fear was not dying; it was losing his mind and becoming a burden to his fellow soldiers," Yost says. "We really wanted to explore that with Leckie." Yost crafted a conclusion to that episode which involved Leckie seeing a soldier he previously knew in the hospital. "We wanted to give the viewer the feeling of Leckie breaking down," Yost says. "But then he ends up seeing this fellow soldier who has really gone off the deep end. That wakes Leckie up because that's the fear." This character was created to not only represent the fear, but to also bring Leckie back to reality so that he was able to return to war. "We wanted to give Leckie a slap in the face for how bad it really could be," Yost says. "That's what the soldiers were really terrified of and we needed a way to personify that."

PRESENT-DAY IMPACTS

Although the war in the Pacific concluded more than 60 years ago, the writing and production of the miniseries took place during a time when America remains at war in the Middle East. McKenna states that the current war did not impact why they chose to tell these stories, but it did impact the writing. "What it did was give us a responsibility not to comment on the Iraq war, but to get this war as right as possible," he says. "We tried to illuminate the truth of war, not just the Pacific war." The connection is not easily

avoided, especially when one considers the similarity of the enemies: Both the Japanese in the Pacific and the suicide bombers of today are willing to senselessly end their lives in order to destroy the lives of others. McKenna used this element to show just how grim the consequences of such an ideology can come to life on the battlefield. "I wanted the audience to understand that even in a 'good war,' even in a necessary war, this is what's going to happen to the combatants," he says. "There's no way you can look at this and say, 'War is good.'" **CS**



NICHE MARKETS for Your Screenplay

THE LOW-BUDGET Horror/Horror-Comedy

BY JOHN FOLSOM

Editor's Note: There are several niche markets for scripts. These are small markets for big dreams. Your chances of selling your first script to a major studio are not that great. But your chances of selling it improve vastly if you know where to sell it and how. In this series, we examine what the niche markets are and how to sell to them — market by market. This issue: low-budget (pulp), sci-fi and horror.

In the early days of home entertainment, when VHS was the summit of technology, few producers took advantage of this emerging market. For many, having a film go straight to video meant a mark of shame. Making movies solely for VCRs was the province of the porn industry. Yet a few visionaries saw the potential for stories told exclusively for the home-viewing crowd.

Roger Corman, already the “King of B Movies” saw a new outlet for his films. Others, such as Charles Band at Full Moon Entertainment, found an audience for their low-budget horror films when traditional distributors balked. Flicks such as *Puppetmaster*, *The Re-Animator*, *Trancers III* and *Creepozoids* could join the likes of *Sorority Babes in the Slimeball Bowl-O-Rama*, *Munchies* and *Transylvania Twist* in what became a genre unto its own. These low-rent horror movies were so bad they were funny. And whether humor was intended, these pictures (sometimes referred to as



Toxic Avenger

“schlock pictures”) found audiences willing to laugh at their tongue-in-cheek humor.

Their fame was cemented with *The Toxic Avenger*, from writer-director Lloyd Kaufman and his team at Troma Entertainment. This superhero tale of a meagre mop boy at a country club who falls into a vat of toxic waste and emerges as a mutant man-thing who cleans up crime in the town of Tromaville became a cult classic.

Troma founder and producer Kaufman has been fighting the stigma of direct-to-DVD for years, saying that part of the reason his films go that route is because the major entertainment conglomerates thumb their noses at anything that's truly independent.

Today, thanks to the expansion of DVDs and other emerging venues for first-run material, more independent producers and production companies realize not only the value of direct-to-DVD productions, but have found new audiences for them internationally, and in subject matter often overlooked by major studio fare.

You now have distributors such as Maverick Entertainment tailoring their titles to specific niches. Within Maverick are faith-based films, Latino, urban and low-budget sci-fi and horror films.

And while the glory days of Roger Corman and Charles Band appear to be fading, the markets they first tapped have not faded. In fact, the opposite is true. Direct-to-DVD filmmakers at a pro-

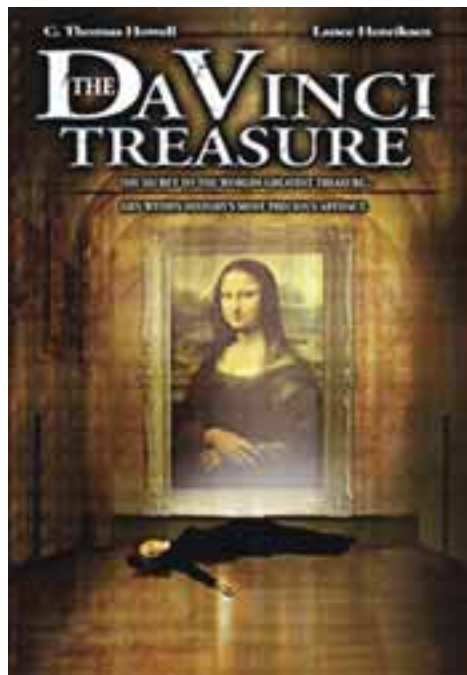
**More independent producers
and production companies
realize not only the value of
direct-to-DVD productions,
but have found new audiences
for them internationally.**

duction company called The Asylum continue to churn out the same types of exploitive cinema that the godfather of the genre, Roger Corman, brought to big screens in the 1970s and early '80s. And, like Corman, many of its movies have had their first run on cable's Syfy Channel.

Such titles as *Transmorphers*, *The Terminators*, *The Da Vinci Treasure* and *AVH: Alien vs. Hunter* continue the tradition. If these titles sound familiar, it's for good reason. David Michael Latt, producing partner at The Asylum, admits they title their films to cash in on popular big screen names. That's why 2008's remake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* saw The Asylum release of *The Day the Earth Stopped*, or why last year's *Transmorphers: The Fall of Man* was followed by *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*.

Playing off theatrical hits is one part of the B-movie niche's well-worn formula. However, don't assume that because these films are formulaic, they're easy to write. Because they follow a specific formula, they can actually be harder to write than an original theatrical release.

For example, Latt says, "The creature must appear in the first five pages," leaving little



room for story or character development. "For genre films, you're not writing for character, you're writing for the formula." You have to grab the reader [audience] from the start and not let go. If your script is about a giant prehistoric creature threatening to devour Los An-

geles, you have to show it from the beginning. Start with the actual attack and show your hero working to stop the creature until the very end. Or, as Latt suggests, "take acts one and two and toss them out. Start with act three — as close to the end as possible."

Starting as close to the end as possible also helps keep the page count down. A producer is more likely to read a script that is only 99 pages than one that is 120 or more.

Other rules include having a lone hero, usually a scientific type, whom no one believes until the problem erupts — and then only he or she can stop the threat. There is also a love interest and often a witty sidekick to offer one-liners or sly observations on the action. Mix in some authority figures and cook under pressure for about 90 minutes. The formula works best if you are writing about aliens, zombies, vampires or any number of assorted beasts.

In many ways, the formula for these types of movies mirrors the formula used in pulp fiction prose of the 1920s and 1930s, developed by such writers as Lester Dent (creator of *Doc Savage*). For act one, introduce the threat (monster, villain, plague or pending disaster). To paraphrase Dent's blueprint for a 3,000-word pulp short story:

Who's Who: Low-Budget (Pulp), Sci-Fi and Horror Films

Adam Fields Productions

Rachel Walker, creative executive
8899 Beverly Blvd., Suite 821
West Hollywood, CA 90048
(310) 859-9300

Credits: *S. Darko: A Donnie Darko Tale*, *Donnie Darko*, *Ravenous*
Genre: All

Notes: Mail query letter via snail mail to Rachel Walker.

The Asylum

David Latt, producer
72 E. Palm Ave.
Burbank, CA 91502
(323) 850-1214

Credits: *Transmorphers: Fall of Man*, *100 Million BC*, *Death Racers*, *The Terminators*, *King of the Lost World*, *Merlin and the War of the Dragons*, *Mega Shark vs. Giant Octopus*

Description: With facilities in Burbank, Calif., The Asylum fully finances and produces 10-15 titles per year and its North American home entertainment division has released more than 300 titles to date. Many Asylum titles air on the Syfy Channel. Titles tend to mirror films released theatrically. After *Transformers*, The Asylum pro-

duced *Transmorphers*. Like *King Kong*? Then try *King of the Lost World*.

Genre: All

Notes: Like television, The Asylum uses a stable of writers. If you're interested in becoming a part of the team, study the studio's work and find a referral.

Barnholtz Entertainment

Anthony King, Development
23480 Park Sorrento, Suite 217A
Calabasas, CA 91302
(818) 591-1900

Credits: *The Mangler Reborn*, *All Hell Broke Loose*, *A Christmas Proposal*

Genres: Horror, comedy, thriller

Notes: Email queries to Anthony King at aking@barnholtz.com.

Camelot Entertainment Group/ DarKnight Pictures

Peter Jarowey
Camelot Entertainment Group
10 Universal City Plaza, 20th floor
Universal City, CA 91608

First page, or as near to there as possible, introduce the hero and swat him with a fistful of trouble. Hint at a mystery, a menace or a problem to be solved — something the hero has to cope with later.

The hero pitches in to cope with his fistful of trouble. (He tries to fathom the mystery, defeat the menace or solve the problem.)

Introduce all the other characters as soon as possible. Bring them in on the action.

Hero's endeavors should land him in a physical conflict near the end of the first act.

Also near the end of first act, add a surprise twist to the plot's development.

From there on out, shovel more grief on the hero. Put up obstacles to his or her success. A lover, child or friend is in danger. Or the hero must overcome skeptics, or outwit or outrun government agents who would try to stop him, all the while struggling with inner demons borne from all those years of ridicule when no one would listen to him.

In Dent's words, "Shovel the grief onto the hero. Hero makes some headway and corners the villain in a physical conflict. There can even be another plot twist that sends the story in another direction that intensifies the problem. For example, the nuclear bomb meant to stop the creature only made it mad — and bigger and badder.

Act three in the Lester Dent pulp model consists of:

Shovel the difficulties more thickly upon the hero.



Get the hero almost buried in his troubles. (Figuratively, the villain should have him prisoner and framed for a murder rap; the girl is presumably dead, everything is lost and the *different* murder method is about to dispose of the suffering protagonist.)

The hero extricates himself using his skills, training or brawn.

The remaining mysteries — save one big one until to this point to help grip interest — are cleared up in course of final conflict as the hero takes the situation in his own hands.

Final twist, reveal a big surprise. This can be the villain turning out to be the unexpected person, having the sought-after "treasure" be worthless, the creature be a product of man's own genetic tampering, etc.

Add the snapper — the punch line — to end it. Some variation on "hasta la vista, baby" should do.

You can increase your chances of success with your pulp movie if you put the words "mega" or "dino" somewhere in the title. *Megaquake*, *Megafault*, *Dinocroc* and *Dinoshark* are good examples. Combine them to create a "mega-dinosaur" and you're on your way.

(818) 308-8858

Credits: *The Fallen*, *Weiner Dog Nationals*, *Samurai Avenger: The Blind Wolf*

Genres: All

Note: Send submissions with a filled-out submissions form to submissions@camelotfilms.com.

Capital Arts Entertainment

Lisa Gooding, Development
17941 Ventura Blvd., Suite 205
Encino, CA 91316
(818) 343-8950

Credits: *Casper: A Spirited Beginning*, *Men in White*, *Timecop 2*

Description: Started by Mike Elliott and Rob Kerchner, two former producers for Roger Corman, Capital Arts specializes in direct-to-DVD features and sequels to first-run theatrical releases.

Genres: All

Notes: Query Lisa Gooding at info@capitalarts.com.

New Horizons Pictures

Roger Corman, president and CEO
11600 San Vicente Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90049
(310) 820-6733

Credits: *Dinoshark*, *Dinocroc*, *Supergator*, *Spacejacked*

Description: Known as the "B Movie King," producer Roger Corman has discovered a who's who of writers, actors and directors over his lengthy career.

Genre: Drama, fantasy, sci-fi and horror

Notes: Send a query letter via snail mail to Roger Corman.

Red 5 Entertainment

Clint Hutchison, writer-producer-director
5524 Colbath Ave.
Sherman Oaks, CA 91401
(310) 980-8626

Credits: *The Way Home*, *Terror Tract*, *Conjurer*

Genre: All

Notes: Email queries to Clint Hutchison at clintonhutchison@gmail.com.

Troma Entertainment

Lloyd Kaufman
36-40 11th St.
Long Island City, NY 11106
(310) 410-9405

Credits: *Poultrygeist: Night of the Chicken Dead*, *Toxic Avenger* (series)

Genre: Comedy, horror

Notes: Troma's website offers information on how to submit a script or completed film. Visit: www.troma.com/jobs/.

Doomsday scenarios based on supposed prophecy also help. Movies inspired by the Mayan 2012 calendar myth proliferated both big and small screen features in the last year. As have movies with “apocalypse” in the title, based partly on the success of the *Left Behind* series and other such novels and films. Even Dan Brown-esque “coded” prophecies have made it to store shelves with *The Da Vinci Treasure*.

Zombie comedies have also proven popular on both screens as well with 2009's *Zombieland* and Troma's *Poultrygeist: Night of the Chicken Dead*. However, don't bother Troma Entertainment with another zombie movie. They've done that already — multiple times. Instead, Kaufman suggests writing something you're passionate about. It doesn't even have to be



Lloyd Kaufman

horror/comedy. It can be an ensemble drama in the tradition of Neil LaBute and David Mamet. Kaufman confesses that he'd love for someone to write a *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf*-type film for him or even a children's movie. The point is to write what you believe in and never compromise. And write a script because you want to produce art. If you're writing just to become rich, stop what you're doing and become a stockbroker or CEO. Why? Because along with (often)-formulaic writing and low-budgets, these low-grade direct-to-DVD genre films offer low pay and few accolades. The Asylum is not a Writers Guild signatory and does not pay to scale. So what is the value of writing for this niche market? One word: experience.

It is rare for a screenwriter to sell a spec to a studio or get a plum writing assignment the first time out of the gate. By writing a script for a small market, a screenwriter can not only de-

velop a portfolio of credits, but also gain valuable experience. By mastering the formula, you learn what conventions to break to bring a fresh perspective to the material. Looking back at literature as an example, take Stephenie Meyers' *Twilight* saga, which takes the story of “Romeo and Juliet” and places it in the world of vampires and werewolves.

Another example, this one from the big screen: in 2009, writer-director Neill Blomkamp put a fresh twist on the alien invasion story by having *District 9* be about man's propensity to segregate from people we perceive as being different. In the case, *District 9* represented South Africa's apartheid past.

This niche market also offers a point of entry for an illustrious career. Evidence for that was on display during this year's Oscar telecast, when the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences honored Roger Corman for his influence on a generation of filmmakers, who are referred to affectionately as coming out of the Roger Corman School of Film. Notable alumni include such writers and directors as James Cameron, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Ron Howard, Joe Dante, Jonathan Demme, Penelope Spheeris, Peter Bogdanovich, John Sayles and Curtis Hanson.

Screenwriter James Gunn, who scripted *Scooby-Doo*, *The Dawn of The Dead* remake and *Scooby Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed* started by writing *Tromeo & Juliet* for Kaufman.

At The Asylum, Latt's number one piece of advice for writers is to “learn proper screenplay format.” Despite the availability of dozens of books and magazines on the subject — and software programs such as Final Draft and Movie Magic Screenwriter that do the formatting for you — Latt says improperly formatted scripts cross his desk every day. Without command of proper screenplay format, you start with one major strike against you. Latt says, “I don't have time to teach someone screenwriting.” If you hope to be a screenwriter, know your craft. Know what a screenplay looks like. Because if you do not know how to properly format text, it does not matter who you know in the business. Latt once refused to read a script from a writer his own sister suggested simply because the format was incorrect.

Kaufman suggests that screenwriters read “the classics like Hemingway and Hawthorne and Fitzgerald.” He also suggests that writers get out into the world. “Travel. Have experiences. Have something you can write about and then write it.” It may just be your formula for success. **CS**

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HOW: For entry form and contest details, and actual examples of what your radio-movie will sound like, click on www.divebombradio.com. There are four examples of previous full-length movie scripts that have been turned into successful radio-movies with little or no alteration to the author's original descriptive action or dialog.

HOW MUCH: \$49. PayPal or check. Hardcopy or electronic submission.

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SEND YOUR SCRIPT NOW

PLEASE DON'T DO THIS:

Seven Ways to Get Your Screenplay on the Reject Pile

BY ROBERT ARJET

Contest readers have to read a lot of bad screenplays. So do readers for agents, producers and directors. In fact, probably 90% of the screenplays out there suffer at least one basic problem that keeps them out of serious consideration. Although learning to avoid all possible problems is a life-long pursuit, the truth is simple: Avoid these mistakes and you could get your script past that all-important first cut.

MISTAKE #1 Ignoring the basics

Nothing frustrates a reader like picking up a script and seeing that it doesn't even stick to industry standards. These are just basic screenwriting craft — e.g., showing instead of telling, following standard formatting, writing with clarity and brevity, and at least attempting a three-act structure. If you fail on any of these points, you're telling the reader that you either don't know enough or don't care enough to stick to the rules. Few readers forgive that mistake.

MISTAKE #2 Not Writing a Synopsis

If you don't write a synopsis during your drafting process, at least write it before you send the script off. Why? Because scenes that seem great in the script suddenly stick out when condensed into a synopsis. "Rick and Kara decide to go back to Sam's apartment... why?" If a scene, narrative arc or character doesn't fit logically into a 300-500 word synopsis, than it's "off the spine," a narrative dead end that will put your script in the 90% of rejects.

MISTAKE #3 Focusing On Your Cool Premise, Not On Your Story

Cool ideas for screenplays are actually not that hard to come by. Cool endings that go with those ideas are harder. Powerful, satisfying second acts that advance the story, raise the stakes and develop compelling characters in exciting

and conflict-driven relationships? If you can nail that, you've hit solid gold.

No matter how great your premise is, it's only the launching pad for what people really want to see: a great story.

MISTAKE #4 Dialogue Without Subtext

In real life, people don't generally say exactly what they think and feel. In a good script, they absolutely must not. Instead, they need to say things that reveal what they think and feel.

That's the difference between, "I'm angry and disappointed that you missed my birthday party," and "thanks for ruining my birthday, you selfish jerk." The first *tells* us what Sandra feels, but nothing else; the second *shows* us what Sandra feels and does so in a way that also shows us her character, her relationship with Clifford and more. If your dialogue sounds like a boring family therapy session ("I miss you when you spend so much time at the office"), re-write it until it doesn't ("You're having an affair with your job!"). Your readers will thank you.

MISTAKE #5 Flat Characters

No matter how wonderful your characters may be on page 1, they have to be different characters by the final page if your reader is going to care about them. Heroes and villains are defined by the decisions they make. Weak scripts don't force characters to make decisions. Weak scripts don't "burn down the hero's house" — that is, force them out of their known world through some kind of irreversible turning point. Weak scripts don't feature characters who endure repeated setbacks and mishaps.

MISTAKE #6 Failing to Strengthen Conflict

Many scripts establish a solid conflict in the beginning, but fail to

strengthen it. Ask yourself: Are the stakes constantly rising? Are the characters forced to commit more deeply to their goals? Do the obstacles keep getting harder to overcome? Does the third act play out a final, desperate struggle for all the marbles? Answer "yes" and you improve your odds of making it into the top 10%.

MISTAKE #7 Avoiding Cause-and-Effect Storytelling

The single most important phrase in storytelling is, "And because of that..." If you avoided mistake #2, you know why. Stories thrive on cause-and-effect and cause-and-effect sounds like, "And because of that..."

Scenes that move the story forward cause something else to happen down the line. Scenes that have been properly set up happen because of something that happened earlier. Each domino falls, each scene plays out with the irresistible logic of, "...and because of that, and because of that, and because of that..." If that's how your screenplay sounds, your reader won't want to put it down.

Go back through your script and ask yourself if you have avoided these seven mistakes. When you find one, re-write until it's gone. Then repeat the process. When you're done — really done — your script will stand an excellent chance of getting past that first gatekeeper.

And good luck! **CS**

Dr. Robert Arjet reads scripts for the second round of the Austin Film Festival screenplay competition. He also writes coverage for the Austin Film Festival as well as for individuals through his own business, Script-Teacher.arjet.net. In addition, he writes screenplays and teaches screenwriting and other courses at Syracuse University, Austin Community College and Emory University.

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SPRING YOUR SCRIPT INTO THE SPOTLIGHT

BY DAVID BARBA

Spring season means the end of winter and cleaning to some. For aspiring writers it can be the start of a productive year, a chance to dust off the script that needs a little polishing or boldly write that masterpiece you've been dying to pen. If you have a screenplay ready — or almost ready — to go, there are a number of screenwriting contests accepting submissions this time of year.

Winning a contest can open doors for screenwriters that are often too hard to even crack. "Send your best material," suggests Mark Andrushko, President of Scriptapalooza. "We had 4,500 entries last year." With so many budding screenwriters competing for prizes and recognition, it's important to know what these contests offer and how to approach them.

EXPOSURE—Winning a screenwriting competition can get screenwriters agent representation and networking opportunities, and encourage production companies to promote winning scripts to studios. Andrew Colville, who won the Scriptapalooza TV contest, won a Writers Guild Award for his script of an episode on the AMC smash hit *Mad Men*. Winning a contest, whether it's one that involves big cash prizes, can also lead to fellowships or connections that can be parlayed into opportunities for pitching or selling scripts. For instance, both ABC and Warner Bros. offer fellowships in which winners actually work for the studios.

AWARDS/PRIZES—Cash prizes can vary anywhere between \$250 and \$15,000. Many contests offer other prizes as well, such as expensive software, memberships, free script consultation, free subscriptions and even travel expenses to film festivals.

SEE WHERE YOU STAND—Submit a script and see what happens. When possible,

screenwriters should get feedback. Some competitions offer free script coverage and others will offer that service for an extra fee. Honest opinions from professionals who have read hundreds or thousands of scripts can be helpful if you keep an open mind.

Jennifer Berg, administrative director of the PAGE International Screenwriting Awards, suggests not thinking of the readers as "faceless enemies." "They want to see you succeed," Berg says. "They want to discover the next great talent." Besides receiving professional feedback, Berg recommends reading professional scripts to see what successful screenplays look like (scripts are easily available online for free at either www.script-o-rama.com or www.simplyscripts.com). Pay attention to the technical skills. Although technical flaws might not disqualify you, it could hinder your script's overall appearance.

Remember, screenwriting is a craft and experts will be reading the scripts. Keep in mind what the odds are for every contest. The higher amount of submissions in a given contest means that your chances of winning are lower. On the other hand, the awards are much higher in a contest like PAGE or the Nicholl Fellowships where the volume of submissions is high. "Our readers pay attention to concept, plot, dialogue and commercial potential," Berg points out. "But, first and foremost, is strong writing." A strong story for both small and big competitions is the common theme. "A phenomenal story grabs the reader by page 15, and don't worry about writing three pages of description," Andrushko says. "Dialogue is more important." Best of luck to those who enter! The following contests are ordered by earliest deadline. Note that not every contest has multiple deadlines. Please **ALWAYS** check contest websites for updates and last-minute changes.

MOVIE SCRIPT CONTEST: THE GOLDEN BRAD AWARDS

This contest aims to discover and promote new writing talent, offering prizes and trophies in three different categories: Drama, Comedy and Thriller/Horror/Sci-Fi. The contest is open to all writers.

AWARDS: Cash prizes, trophies and exposure for first, second and third place.

THE ODDS: Not available at press time.

DEADLINE: January 20, 2010 (early), March 20, 2010 (regular), May 20, 2010 (late) and July 20, 2010 (final)

ENTRY FEE: \$39 (early), \$49 (regular), \$55 (late) and \$65 (final)

NOTIFICATION: September 30

NOTES AND FEEDBACK: Inexpensive feedback offered

APPLICATIONS:

www.moviescriptcontest.com

CREATIVE WORLD AWARDS

The Creative World Awards (CWA) is an international screenwriting contest that is known for having writers' interests at heart when it comes to development and industry promotion.

AWARDS: Grand prize winner receives \$5,000 in cash and prizes. Four additional winners receive \$500 cash and four 1st runners-up will get \$250.

THE ODDS: Not available at press time.

DEADLINE: February 28, 2010 (early), April 15, 2010 (regular), May 31, 2010 (late) and June 30, 2010 (final)

ENTRY FEE: \$45 (early), \$50 (regular), \$55 (late), \$60 (late) and \$65 (final)

NOTIFICATION: October 15

NOTES AND FEEDBACK: For a fee

APPLICATIONS:

www.creativeworldawards.com

SCRIPT P.I.M.P. SCREENWRITING COMPETITION

Coming up on its eighth year, the Script P.I.M.P. (Pipeline Into Motion Picture)

SPRING YOUR SCRIPT

continues to aggressively promote its winners. The contest is open to all features and TV writers.

AWARDS: Four grand prize winners will receive \$3,500 cash each, plus exposure and presentation at an awards ceremony in July in Santa Monica.

THE ODDS: Script P.I.M.P. received 2,500 feature submissions and 325 TV submissions last year.

DEADLINE: March 1, 2010 (early) and May 1, 2010 (regular)

ENTRY FEE: \$45 (early) and \$50 (regular)

NOTIFICATION: July 1

NOTES AND FEEDBACK: For an additional \$40 fee

APPLICATIONS: www.scriptpimp.com

FINAL DRAFT, INC. BIG BREAK INTERNATIONAL SCREENWRITING CONTEST

Big Break, a Final Draft, Inc. contest, rewards screenwriters with cash, prizes and A-list executive meetings. Winners and finalists have had their screenplays optioned and produced and have secured high-profile representation as well as lucrative writing deals.

AWARDS: Over \$30,000 in cash and prizes, plus Hollywood industry meetings

DEADLINE: March, 1 2010 (early), June 1, 2010 (regular) and June 15, 2010 (extended)

ENTRY FEE: \$40 (early) and \$50 (regular) and \$65 (extended)

NOTIFICATION: August 20

NOTES AND FEEDBACK: No

APPLICATIONS:

www.bigbreakcontest.com

SLAMDANCE FILM FESTIVAL SCREENPLAY COMPETITION

The Slamdance Screenplay Competition is dedicated to discovering and supporting emerging writing talent. The contest is now in its 15th year.

AWARDS: Slamdance Grand Prize of \$5,000. Prize packages awarded to the top 10 finalists include festival passes to the

Slamdance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, and membership in the Writers Guild of America's Independent Writers Caucus.

THE ODDS: Not available at press time.

DEADLINE: April 9, 2010 (early), June 11, 2010 (final) and July 30, 2010 (extended)

ENTRY FEE: \$50 (early), \$60 (final) and \$75 (extended). Scripts that are longer than 121 pages cost \$15 extra.

NOTIFICATION: September 30

NOTES AND FEEDBACK: For an additional fee

APPLICATIONS: www.slamdance.com

SCRIPTAPALOOZA TV WRITING COMPETITION

Now in its 11th year, the contest is open to all aspiring television writers. Scripts are accepted in four categories: one hour existing spec scripts, half-hour existing sitcom specs, original pilots and reality programs.

AWARDS: \$500 for first place; \$200 for second place; and \$100 for third place. Consideration by established production companies.

THE ODDS: Scriptapalooza is anticipating 600-800 submissions.

DEADLINE: April 15, 2010 and October 2010

ENTRY FEE: \$40

NOTIFICATION: August 30 and February 15 of each year

NOTES AND FEEDBACK: None

APPLICATIONS:

www.scriptapaloozaTV.com

DISNEY/ABC WRITING FELLOWSHIP

Created to seek out and employ culturally and ethnically diverse talent, the fellowship is open to all screenwriters. Winners are moved to Los Angeles where they will enroll in a year-long series of workshops and

mentorships with screenwriters and creative executives from the wide range of Disney/ABC shows and networks, including hands-on work in writers' rooms.

AWARDS: \$50,000 fellowships

THE ODDS: Not available at press time.

DEADLINE: End of June

ENTRY FEE: Free

NOTIFICATION: November

NOTES AND FEEDBACK: No

APPLICATIONS:

www.abctalentdevelopment.com

AUSTIN FILM FESTIVAL

Open to all writers who do not earn a living writing for film or television.

AWARDS: A \$5,000 prize for family and comedy categories; a \$2,500 prize for sci-fi; teleplays win \$1,000 for drama and sitcom categories. Winners are also reimbursed for roundtrip airfare and hotel expenses for the Austin Film Festival.

THE ODDS: AFF received 4,000 entries last year.

DEADLINE: Screenplays: May 15, 2010 (early) and June 1, 2010 (final); teleplays: June 1, 2010 (final)

ENTRY FEE: Screenplays: \$40 (early) and \$50 (final); teleplays: \$30 (final)

NOTIFICATION: Winners will be announced during the awards luncheon on October 23.

NOTES AND FEEDBACK: Offered to AFF finalists who reach the second round.

APPLICATIONS:

www.austinfilmfestival.com

WARNER BROS. TELEVISION WRITERS' WORKSHOPS/ DRAMA & COMEDY

For over 30 years, the Warner Bros. Television Writers' Workshop has been the premier writing program for new writers looking to start and further their careers in the world of television.

AWARDS: Every year, the workshop selects up to 10 participants from almost 1,000 applicants and exposes them to

INTO THE SPOTLIGHT

Warner Bros. Television's top writers and executives, with the goal of earning them a staff position on a Warner Bros.-produced television show.

THE ODDS: 1,000 submissions last year

DEADLINE: June 1

ENTRY FEE: \$30

NOTIFICATION: Early October

NOTES AND FEEDBACK: The top 5% will be invited to a feedback lecture held on the Warner Bros. lot in Los Angeles.

APPLICATIONS:

www.writersworksop.warnerbros.com

AMERICAN ZOETROPE

The eighth annual contest, sponsored by the production company founded by Francis Ford Coppola, is open to all screenwriters who have earned less than

\$5,000 from screenwriting. Electronic submissions only.

AWARDS: A \$5,000 top prize, plus the top 10 screenplays are submitted to major production companies and agencies for consideration.

THE ODDS: 2,600 entries last year

DEADLINE: August 2, 2010 (early) and September 7, 2010 (late)

ENTRY FEE: \$35 (early) and \$50 (late)

NOTIFICATION: February 1, 2011

NOTES AND FEEDBACK: No, but Zoetrope hosts free online workshops.

APPLICATIONS:

www.zoetrope.com/contests

CINESTORY

Unlike most screenwriting organizations, CineStory is a national nonprofit

for screenwriters. Now in its 14th year, CineStory Screenwriting Awards is one of the oldest screenwriting competitions.

AWARDS: A \$2,000 grand prize and a fellowship with prizes; \$700 in prizes for first place and \$500 in prizes for second place.

THE ODDS: Approximately 600 entries each year.

DEADLINE: November 15, 2010 (early), December 31, 2010 (regular) and January 31, 2011 (late)

ENTRY FEE: \$45 (early), \$55 (regular) and \$65 (late)

NOTIFICATION: May 1, 2011

NOTES AND FEEDBACK: No, only if invited to retreat.

APPLICATIONS: www.cinestory.org

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JIM CIRILE (jimc@creativescreenwriting.com) is a WGA writer, artist and musician from New York now living in Los Angeles. He has sold, optioned or written for hire dozens of screenplays. He is the founder of the low-cost script analysis service www.coverageink.com and the Writers on the Storm screenplay competition.

BY **JIM CIRILE**

THE SPECK MARKET

Nope, that's not a typo. Writers everywhere were hoping that 2010 would bring about a resurgence in the spec screenplay marketplace. So far, it's not so good.

"Far fewer scripts have hit the market through March 19 this year than in the same period for 2009 — 92 in 2010 compared to 135 in 2009, down by about 33%. Spec sales are off even further: 11 so far in 2010, compared to roughly 21 through the same period in 2009."

— Jason Scoggins, *Spec Market Scorecard*

[Editor's note: When we refer to the spec market, we mean the studios and the big production companies. There are many other script buyers, although generally at lower prices. Our ongoing series of articles about niche markets covers many of those other buyers.]

WRITERS, WE'RE IN A PICKLE. The old paradigm of launching a career by selling a spec appears to be on its way out, and it's being replaced by the new paradigm, which is... do the best you can even though no one's buying anything. Huh? What kind of crap is that? Sadly, it's just the way it is, brothers and sisters. The Spec Market Scorecard tells the tale. Everyone was hoping for a bounce in 2010 given 2009's already anemic numbers. Instead, the opposite happened. It's actually gotten worse.

So what does this mean for writers trying to break in? How long is this going to keep up, and is there any light at the end of this tunnel? Come with us now as the Agent's

Hot Sheet serves up the answers once again — whether you like them or not!

The first thing to note is, while these stats show about a 50% drop in spec sales when compared to last year, that's only half the picture. "The pricing of the script sales, even in competitive situations, has gone dramatically down as well," says UTA feature literary agent Julien Thuan. "Not only are there fewer sales, but they're selling for a lot less money." Thuan recalls two recent UTA sales with multiple bidders each time. This is, of course, the dream scenario — bidding wars allow agents to sell scripts for serious money. Except in 2010. "One opening offer was essentially scale," Thuan continues. "They're willing to let it play out." In the past, representatives might have laughed at such lowball offers and walked away. But not anymore. "[Buyers are

"Think about the brands that are left that are in the zeitgeist and craft great stories around them. Think like a studio."

—Emile Gladstone, ICM

not] really honoring quotes anymore, and they're all one-step deals. You have to take a different approach to how you structure your overall business in the aggregate as a writer. That's the hardest part because it's an emotional conversation — it's that realization that things are not what they were even as recently as two years ago."

"How much longer can it be as bad as it has been?" asks Protocol literary manager Jason Scoggins, author of the Spec Market Scorecard newsletter and founder of www.lifeonthebubble.com. "In 2008, the writers' strike hit. When it ended, there was a little flurry of activity. But then the actors started rattling their sabers, so 2008 kind of sucked; 2009 was the global recession. And this year... it's been pretty bad." Scoggins says the studios are making fewer movies and therefore developing fewer projects. Furthermore, they are mainly interested in projects that have a built-in marketing angle. "That's why we see all the stuff being either rebooted or adapted from books and comic books or video games — all of those things that we complain about all of the time. That sucks a lot of the air out of the room for original material."

The other problem is that, just like last year, a bunch of big buyers have announced they're more or less going to sit out 2010. Disney has shuttered Miramax, is cutting pro-



Writers need to be brand aware, as Roland Emmerich was with 2012.

ducer deals and hasn't been a big player in the spec market for ages. Universal is also in play — and who knows what will happen once the GE/Comcast buyout is done, meaning that uncertainty could keep Universal on the sidelines, too. "And Sony has basically let it be known that they have spent all of their development money for 2010 already," Scoggins says. "So they will not be buying new specs unless it's a worthy exception to the rule — stuff that's coming in packaged up and ready to go." Yes, you read that right: 2010 development money is all gone already.

But wait! Put down that *seppuku* knife and listen up. Manager Mike Goldberg from Abstract Entertainment says the picture is not quite as gloomy as the Scorecard makes it out to be. "A lot of specs went out recently," he says. "There has been some movement. A lot of things have been selling that are either based on intellectual property or have an attachment. There have been a few naked things that have sold, but it's still definitely in the minority." Goldberg acknowledges that "naked" specs — ones with no attachments or source material — are increasingly difficult to shop nowadays. "I just had a conversation with an agent yesterday about taking out a spec together in the next week. And the agent expressed a concern to me, like, 'Listen, this is naked. I don't know if we're going to be able to sell it.' I'm like, 'I know, man. I don't know what else to do.' Things are definitely better than fall, but they're not all we're hoping for quite yet."

We all need to be savvier as to what's really going on, says ICM feature lit agent Emile Gladstone. "Buyers are taking advantage of a buyer's market. But there are still writing assignments out there; there's still a writing business out there and they're still making movies out there. There are still lots of oppor-

tunities and possibilities. They're just fewer, and they're more specific than they used to be." The key is being realistic about what the buyers will pony up for. This isn't the 1970s; the corporate media behemoths who own the movie studios are no longer taking flyers. "If you have an event movie, you're still going to sell it for a lot of money," Gladstone says. "If you have a genre movie, you're going to sell it for scale. But a big comedy with a huge idea, you're going to sell it for a bunch of money."

This ever-shrinking bull's-eye naturally leads to some tough conversations between writers and their reps. "We do that daily," Goldberg says. "We go back and forth knocking down ideas until we both can agree on an idea that they're passionate about and [one] that we have a strong feeling that we can sell," he says. "We've had some clients who have taken months until we hit the [right] idea." Which is better than being this guy: "We've had other clients who just wanted to write what they wanted to write, and then they turn in the script, and we're like, 'It's great, but we can't do anything with it.'"

So how *do* we get the leverage back? Says Thuan, "Hopefully, once we get through this transitional period with [concern over] delivery systems and how we finance movies and what the pipeline is actually able to handle, we'll find stability — and that stability will allow us to find some comfort." But until then, it's going to be tough out there for feature writers and reps alike. "The truth is," Thuan continues, "people are very concerned about the DVD market, the Internet [as a distribution medium] and the changing value of syndicated television. Everything we've relied on for many, many years [is in flux.] On the one hand, it's terrifying. On the other hand, it's incredibly exciting that there could potentially

be so many different opportunities to deliver entertainment. Content will still have its place, but people will have to figure out ways to monetize the distribution platforms so that we can get back to being in strong positions to negotiate to be appropriately compensated." Goldberg says it may be 2015 or 2016 before the economy — and the entertainment industry — finally rebounds. "Keep in mind we've had this gloom that DVD sales are dwindling, followed by this new, exciting song of '3-D is here, 3-D is here!' *Variety* [reported that] the ticket prices are going up on 3-D, which is offsetting the loss of the DVD revenue. So Hollywood continues to find new ways to bring in those revenue streams. It's going to eventually have to trickle back down. The gloom song is only going to last for so long before agents and managers tell the studios, 'Well, then go F yourself, you can't have this script.'"

In the meantime, writers, be brand aware. "And brands are not necessarily a Hasbro toy," Gladstone says. "A brand is everywhere. Look at Roland Emmerich. How'd he brand *Independence Day* or 2012? Those posters said, 'Look up 2012.' They didn't have a picture and an actor. They didn't have a screen shot. Brands are everywhere. Pay attention to them. *Date Night* is a brand. Sure, what they did with it is specific to a narrative and a writer, but everyone knows what a date night is." He concludes, "Don't be disgruntled, writers, thinking that you have to go secure the rights to [a property] to survive in Hollywood. Think about the brands that are left in the zeitgeist and craft great stories around them. Think like a studio." **CS**

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KARL IGLESIAS (karl@creativescreenwriting.com) is a screenwriter and a lecturer in the UCLA Extension Writer's Program. He is the best-selling author of "The 101 Habits of Highly Successful Screenwriters." His latest book is "Writing for Emotional Impact." Find out more at his website: www.karliglesias.com.

BY **KARL IGLESIAS**

PIXAR'S EMOTIONAL CORE: *The Secret to Successful Storytelling*

FROM 1995'S *Toy Story*, the world's first computer-animated feature, to last year's *Up*, Pixar's 10 films have earned an astounding \$5.56 billion worldwide, picked up 24 Academy Awards, including five for Best Animated Feature, and many other awards, including a Lifetime Achievement Award for Pixar's *Brain Trust* at last year's Venice Film Festival. Given this phenomenal amount of box office and critical success, no one can deny that Pixar is doing something right.

Luckily for us, Pixar's directors have been forthcoming in numerous interviews in trying

to explain the studio's secret — talking about their process, their focus on story and characters, and their love of those rare family films that parents can *enjoy* with their children, rather than endure like so many other animated features. And yet, most animation studios have attempted to emulate Pixar's way without success, so there must be something deeper that contributes to Pixar's winning streak. Some argue it's Pixar's technical breakthroughs. After all, they were the CG pioneers, the first out of the gate with *Toy Story*. Since then, Pixar's filmmakers have challenged

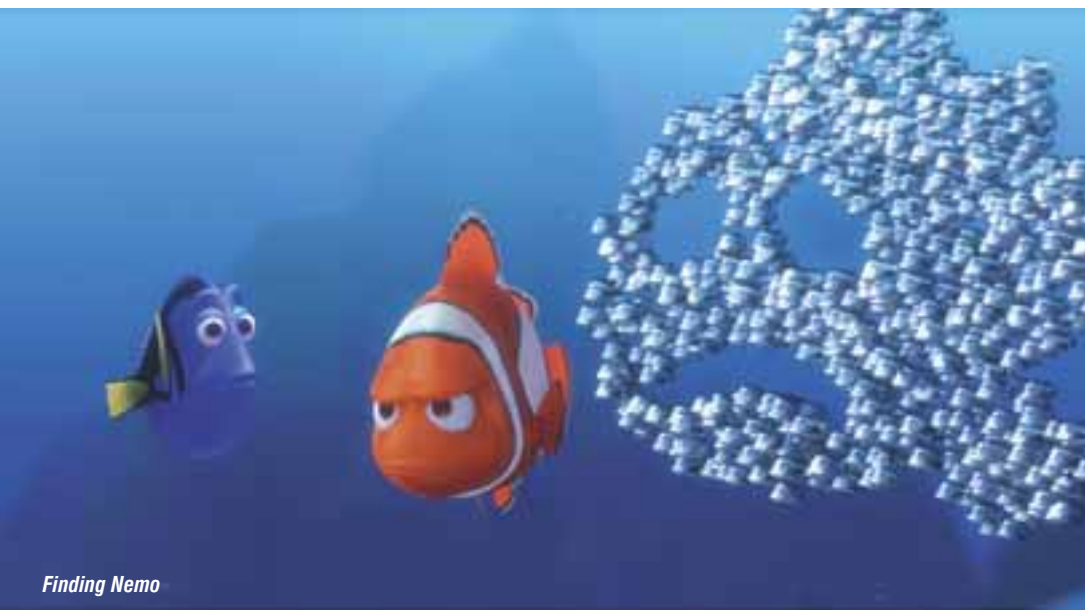
themselves to push the envelope of what is possible with each new film. And how many times have we heard of Pixar as a filmmaker-led studio where the story comes first, thanks to its people, its workforce of storytellers and animators?

But in this competitive field of animation, there is one thing Pixar does better than others and that is focus on the story's emotional core, which is achieved through a balance of character empathy and emotional stakes that come from a worthy and universal motivation. When filmmakers focus on a story's emotional core, their films often succeed; when they don't, their films fail, often surprisingly, considering that all the other right elements were present.

In the documentary *The Pixar Story* by Leslie Iwerks, included on the *WALL-E* DVD, Frank Thomas, one of the Nine Old Men — the original artists behind classic Disney animated features from *Bambi* to *The 101 Dalmatians* — said: "We call it 'the warmth,' the inner feelings of the character. It all comes back to their heart and how they think about it; how does the character feel and why does he feel that way?" That warmth, those moving moments in many Disney classics and more recent films from other studios, is a lesson to all storytellers, not just animation writers. And all Pixar films have it — from *Toy Story* to *Up*. There's a much-talked about moment in *Toy Story 2* — "Jesse's Song" sequence, as recalled by John Lasseter: "No one had a



Toy Story



Finding Nemo

dry eye in the theater. Even grown men were crying. And in these moments, no one's thinking, 'This is a cartoon.' No. These characters are alive, they're real." Recently, the chatter has been about Oscar-winner *Up*'s opening "Married Life" montage. Ultimately, it's all about caring. As Frank Capra once said, "The whole thing is, you've got to make them care about somebody."

We all know that stories are about characters. What we care about is not what is happening, but whom it is happening to. We go to movies to see characters solve problems and handle relationships. But what is often forgotten is that without an emotional connection to these characters, there can be no caring about the journey these characters take. This leads to an unsatisfying experience, which means the movie ultimately fails.

It doesn't have to be a Pixar film for us to care about the characters. This is obviously a requirement for any good screenplay. But Pixar's storytellers do it masterfully, which is the greatest factor in their films' success. And this is in spite of the extra challenge of making us connect emotionally with non-human characters such as toys, bugs, monsters, cars, fish, rats and robots.

So how do we create an emotional connection with the main characters? In my book, "Writing for Emotional Impact," I present the three areas writers should focus on to make

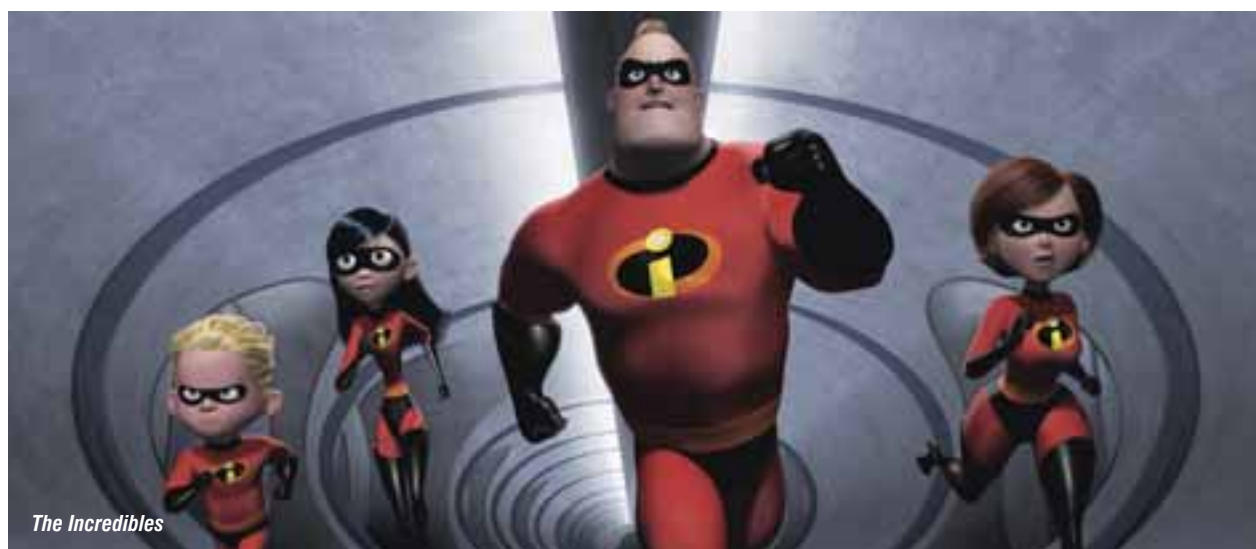
audiences care about any character. They are *pathos*, *humanity* and *admiration*. Specifically, we care about characters we feel sorry for, like when a character is unjustly abused, abandoned or betrayed. We also care about characters who have humanistic traits, like when they're being nice to another human being or animal, or when they care about a cause or anything other than themselves. Finally, we care about characters who have admirable qualities. For instance, we admire characters who are good at what they do, who are powerful, attractive, charming, funny or wise.

Because it's crucial we connect emotionally with main characters in order to care about their goals, needs and the ultimate journey that makes up the film's plot, writers should make us care about the characters from the very start, preferably within the first few minutes of their introduction. Reading a script or watching a film is like a dance of emotions,

and should include a little bit of interest, anticipation, curiosity, amusement, tension and surprise. When it comes to characters, the dance is along an empathy line (*I care, I like*) and an enmity one (*I don't care, I dislike*). This happens fast. The moment characters are introduced, we start building opinions about them. Everything they say and do counts. This is why we should create that emotional connection as soon as possible.

Pixar's filmmakers never shy away from this emotional setup. In *Toy Story*, for instance, Woody is upset about being replaced by a new toy and losing Andy's love — a simple, honest emotional core, and something everyone can relate to. In *Finding Nemo*, a father and son are separated. The same thing happens in *Ratatouille*, as Remy is separated from his

family. And in both *Wall-E* and *Up*, the main characters are alone and we feel sorry for them. This is Pixar's strength: Its films offer a genuine emotional component that runs deeper than traditional animated features. They make sure to have a complete emotional connection before anything else, and this is in spite of the extra challenge of making us connect emotionally with non-human characters. Even when the film is making us care for a cute clown fish or a family of superheroes, the emphasis right off the bat is to create a moment that makes us feel sorry for the character. In *Finding Nemo*, for instance, we begin with a dark, traumatic sequence involving an expectant father who loses all but one of his 400 babies to a hungry barracuda, which is followed by seeing his only surviving son get kidnapped by a scuba diver. And in *The Incredibles*, right after the interview montage that introduces the superheroes — and



The Incredibles

the action sequence that has Mr. Incredible fighting crime — we feel sorry for him when the citizens turn on him for the collateral damage caused from his crime-fighting, starting with a suicidal man who sues Mr. Incredible for saving him from his intentional fall (“You didn’t save my life, you ruined my death!”). This lawsuit creates an avalanche of other lawsuits, prompting the government to put all superheroes in a “superhero relocation program” where they are forced to live normal lives. So not only do we understand the pathos of being unjustly accused of something he didn’t do, we also feel sorry for Mr. Incredible having to live a boring life and stifling his talent because of it.

Pathos is the most effective technique to get to the heart of the emotional core, though using the other two devices (humanity and admiration) also does the trick. But writer be-

and admiration, but if writers want a deep connection, if they want heart, use pathos first and foremost.

The other components of the emotional core are the emotional stakes that are a part of the main character’s motivation; these stakes should be universal so they resonate with all audiences. When the stakes are minimal or missing altogether, the story becomes flat, no matter how well the writer tries to hide it through special effects or quirky dialogue. In a recent interview at the San Diego Comic-Con, Lasseter mentioned how he loves turning inanimate objects into living characters, and that his process involves thinking about what would be that object’s main purpose in life — its reason for “living.” As an example, he used his water bottle to imagine what that bottle’s main joy in life could be: to quench the thirst of a drinker. As long as the

tor in the film’s success or failure, so I’ll compare rats with rats by profiling *Ratatouille* against *Flushed Away*.

Ratatouille is about a rural French rat who aspires to be a chef in Paris. Aardman Studios’ *Flushed Away*, in collaboration with DreamWorks, is about a pampered, caged British rat who struggles to return to his mansion after being accidentally flushed down the toilet to the sewer city.

While it’s difficult to make an audience care for a rat, Pixar rose to the challenge in *Ratatouille*, first through irony — this is a rat who wants to be a chef in Paris — and then through the trio of empathy techniques in the emotional core. Starting with our first introduction of Remy the rat crashing through a window and being chased out of a kitchen by an old lady, we empathize, as we would with any character in jeopardy (pathos). Then, with

his voiceover introducing himself, we get more pathos and admiration — he’s a rat with a highly developed sense of smell and taste. The problem is that Remy lives in a world where he must forage for garbage, though he’d rather eat fine food. Plus, he’s not appreciated by his family, as his father uses Remy’s talent to make him work as the rat poison detector of the clan, smelling garbage to label it safe or poisonous.

We feel sorry for his inner conflict between

family obligation and personal ambition to become a chef. We connect with Remy even more when we realize he’s more intelligent than the other rats, as evidence by the fact that he chooses to walk on his hind legs to keep his front paws clean for eating. He can also read cookbooks and understand human speech, his idol is Gusteau the chef, and he admires humans for their taste in food despite his father’s warnings that humans are dangerous. Despite being a rat, Remy is a culinary wizard burning with the desire to cook (admiration). He loves his brother, Emil, and shares with him his secret passion for food. Not only is Remy excited about cooking, he teaches Emil to rise above garbage and appreciate good food (humanism).

When Remy gets struck by lightning while attempting to cook a mushroom above a chimney (admirable cleverness), all he cares



ware: An audience may connect with your main character without pathos, but ignoring it may ultimately have a negative effect on the audience’s overall satisfaction with the film, as evidenced by the critical reaction to Pixar’s seventh film *Cars*, which had the most mixed reviews of all of the studio’s films.

In *Cars*, while John Lasseter established the main character’s skills and traits — he’s good at what he does and is an adored superstar, because he’s cocky about it not once do we feel any pathos for Lightning McQueen. This omission strips away the heart that has proven effective in other Pixar features and may explain why the film wasn’t as successful critically (it still did well at the box office because it had heart that was focused on the theme, not the main character). The key of connecting emotionally with the main characters is a balance between pathos, humanism

bottle is being useful, it’s happy, though it worries about the moment it will become empty and then discarded in a recycling bin. This is the same with toys: Their sole purpose is to be played with and nothing is sadder for them than their owner outgrowing and abandoning them. When these stakes are emotional and relatable, the connection with the main character is strengthened. Keep in mind that the main character’s motivation must be worthy and selfless for the audience to really care. Many film failures have showcased characters we cared about through pathos but whose main motivation was too selfish, hence the low emotional stakes.

To illustrate these arguments, let’s compare a Pixar film with a competitor that has not fared as well critically or commercially. The two films I chose have similar concepts and characters to show that these were not a fac-

about is how great the charred mushroom tastes and how it would taste even better if he had some saffron, which leads him into the old lady's kitchen. This little rat knows his spices (admiration). And as Remy interacts with humans throughout the film, we get a sense of his modesty and shyness about his talent, another admirable quality. With such a deep emotional core, how can one not root for this little rat to succeed?

Contrast this deep emotional connection with an incomplete one in *Flushed Away*, in which Roddy, a pampered rat who lives with a rich family in Kensington, loves his life (who wouldn't?), seems cocky and has everything. When his owners are away on vacation, he spends a whole day playing with toys to Billy Idol's tune "Dancing With Myself," which reinforces the fact that he's kind of lonely. This may be a bit too subtle in terms of pathos, but let's give it to him. In the humanity and admiration areas, however, we don't get anything from the story. Even when Sid, the uninvited guest from the sewers shows up, Roddy is unwelcoming, trying selfishly to send him back to the sewers instead of sharing his toys. We're supposed to feel sorry for Roddy when he is flushed down the toilet into sewer city. His motivation to return home is certainly worthy and resonates universally, but because we don't have an emotional connection to Roddy, we just don't care about the rest of the film, despite all the interesting adventures and oftentimes funny humor.

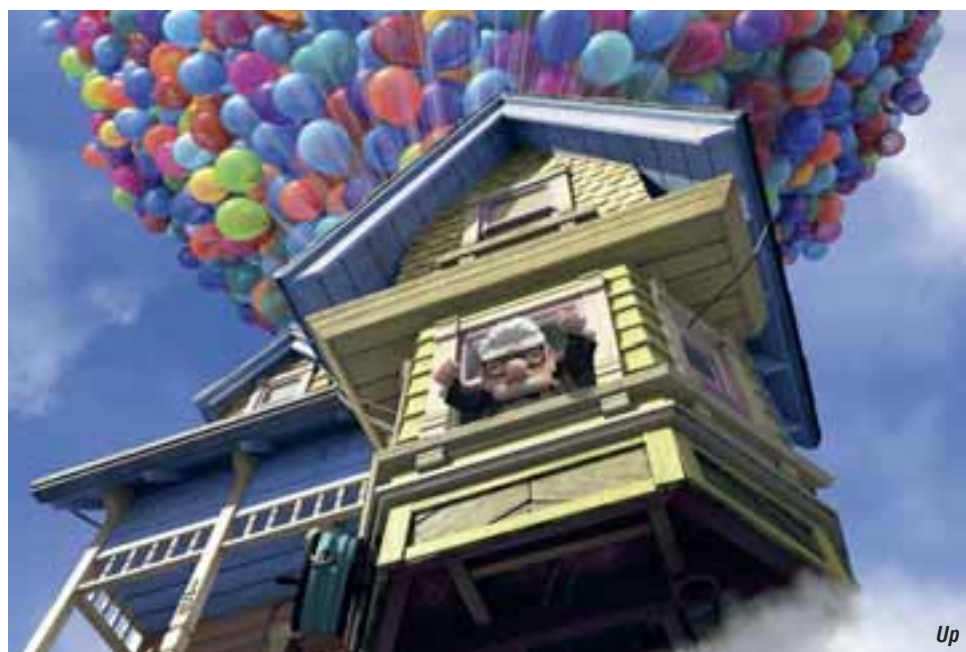
Back to *Ratatouille*, when Remy is separated from his clan, we relate to his struggle to survive in the big city. We also admire his desire to cook once he reaches Gusteau's restaurant and his willingness to help Linguini keep his job and save his restaurant. All are worthy motivations that create high stakes, especially as Remy tries to remain hidden from the humans, his survival being the highest stake there is. This is rich storytelling. Contrast this depth with the contrived and insincere storytelling in *Flushed Away*, whose journey back home is about pop culture references, visual gags and ethnic humor — though Roddy's main motivation to return home is definitely worthy and universally resonant. We can even relate to his budding romance with Rita. But the problem is that we just don't care about Roddy due to a very low empathy level. This flat emotional core certainly correlates with *Flushed Away*'s poor box office performance and mixed reviews. Compare *Ratatouille*'s worldwide box office of \$623 million and a Metascore of 96 with *Flushed Away*'s \$178 million and Metascore of 74.

And just to make sure this emotional core factor holds up, let's compare two non-Pixar films against each other, again featuring similar characters — this time penguins. How can we not care about penguins? Let's look at the Australian independent film, *Happy Feet*, which won the Oscar for Best Animated Feature in 2007, had a Metascore of 83 and was a box office success, earning \$384 million worldwide. Let's compare it with a similar film, *Surf's Up* from Sony, which was a box office disappointment, with \$149 million worldwide and a Metascore of 63.

In *Happy Feet*, we are introduced to the protagonist Mumble, who's not only born late but also is unable to sing, a crucial need for

are (humans) and why they are the cause of the fish scarcity, his motives are unselfish and worthy.

Conversely, *Surf's Up* profiles the odd but unique concept of penguins who surf. They're just as cute as the penguins in *Happy Feet*, so what did the filmmakers do wrong? You got it — an incomplete emotional core. Through a mockumentary style, we're introduced to Cody, a rockhopper penguin who's the best surfer around (admiration), but that's about it. There's no pathos, nor any humanity. Our entire introduction to him is mostly expositional through various interviews with his mother and bickering brother. As to his motivation, all he wants to do is leave home and



penguin mating (pathos). Mumble is one hell of a tap dancer when he's happy (admiration), but because "it ain't penguin," this immediately makes him an outcast in his community (pathos again). This is done in a few different ways: His parents think there's something wrong with him; he makes a fool of himself when he tries to sing in school, with his teacher telling him that if he can't sing, he's not a penguin.

Still, he's happy when he can be himself and tap dance. Does this show his humanity for a complete emotional core? You bet. As a teenager, Mumble bonds with his friend Gloria when he offers her a fish he caught and fights hungry birds over it just to give it to her. Adding to the emotional stakes is his motivation to survive predators after he accidentally separates from his community and tries to be accepted by another community of penguins. And when he tries to find out who the aliens

surf, which isn't noble enough for us to care about. And then when he makes it to Pen Gu Island for a surfing competition, it goes downhill as we discover that our main character is pretty much goal-less, beyond his desire to win the competition. But because his emotional need to win it is missing, the stakes feel low. Low empathy combined with low emotional stakes is a recipe for disaster, proven repeatedly by the data.

For all the effort that other animation studios expend in emulating Pixar's success, most miss the fact that it's not the *technology* but the studio's *writing* that makes the difference, especially its focus on the emotional core. This leads to quality storytelling with heart and humanity. While Pixar did not invent this emotional core formula, it has been consistent in applying it. Those who have used it have proven to be successful; those who have ignored it, not so much. **CS**



Twilight: Eclipse

Written by Melissa Rosenberg

Based on the novel by Stephenie Meyer

THE TWILIGHT SAGA — maybe you've heard of it — includes two films that have grossed over \$1 billion worldwide, which in turn are based on a series of books that have sold 85 million copies. The sage saga has won awards, inspired hundreds of fan sites and even made a tourist mecca out of Forks, Washington. It's a momentous global phenomenon, one that makes it easy to forget that at its core is a simple story of boy meets girl meets boy. That the two boys are, respectively, a vampire and a werewolf does serve to complicate matters, though.

Eclipse is the third installment in this ongoing series, in which Edward (Robert Pattinson), the vampire, and Bella (Kristen Stewart) are together again and very committed to staying that way. Their relationship, though, has caused an estrangement between Bella and her best friend, Jacob

(Taylor Lautner), the werewolf. When a threat surfaces against Bella, it forces the rival clans to enter into an uneasy pact to protect her.

Eclipse marks the third time Melissa Rosenberg has undertaken the daunting task of adapting these beloved books to the big screen. Of course, before Kristen Stewart can say a word or a fan can scream for Taylor Lautner at a premiere, Rosenberg must first face the scariest monster: the blank page.

"Any writer worth their salt has demons," Rosenberg says. "What separates a professional writer from a non-professional is whether you let the demons win. I mean, yes, talent and craft play a part of it, too. But can you overcome those voices that scream, 'You suck! You're a hack! You've never had an original thought!' That monologue from *Adaptation* — every writer has that. I mean, if Charlie Kauf-

man, one of the greatest screenwriters we've ever known has those thoughts, you know everyone does."

With her rich history of writing for television, most recently on *Dexter* and *The O.C.*, Rosenberg brings a "writers' room" mentality to her feature work. While working on a draft, she'll take scenes to the writers' group she's been relying on for 18 years. "Sometimes you read something out loud and think, 'That sounds horrible,'" Rosenberg says. "Sometimes you read it and think, 'Oh, that's good,' and you catch a little thrill. But that doesn't always happen. It's usually just working and sweating over a draft until you finally find it." Once she has a draft she's happy with, she shows it to her very large circle of writer friends for feedback. As she explains, "By the time I show the studio what I'm calling a first draft, it's more like a 12th draft."

Once the studio signs off on the script, Rosenberg collaborates with the producers, most notably the author of the *Twilight* books, Stephenie Meyer. Rosenberg says she feels a kinship with Meyer and often goes to her when she's working through ideas and processes for characters and emotional arcs. "The rest are

very creative producers," she says. "And this is why I love working with them. But Stephenie is the only other writer, plus she's an incredible resource in that she created the mythology and has thought about these things for many more years than I have."

Meyer also serves as a sort of proxy for Rosenberg during shooting, when Rosenberg is usually attending to her day job as showrunner on the Showtime drama *Dexter*. Regular communication with the set in Vancouver allows Rosenberg to continue rewriting through production from the cozy confines of her office in Los Angeles. Working on two projects concurrently can be tricky, even though they're both character-driven pieces with obvious tonal differences. Rosenberg admits that sometimes they can bleed together and it takes some effort to separate them. "Maybe once in a while I'll

put a *Twilight* line in *Dexter* or a *Dexter* line in *Twilight*," she says, "but I'll catch it — or someone else will."

Though Rosenberg remains the sole screenwriter on the *Twilight* series, each film has had a different director. One might expect this to be a unique challenge — adapting to an entirely different set of sensibilities with each script — but Rosenberg insists that the biggest challenges have come during the revision stage. Catherine Hardwicke directed the first film and Chris Weitz directed the second; both directors are also writers who felt comfortable making production changes to the scripts. *Eclipse* director David Slade, on the other hand, prefers to work on the script before shooting and then stick to it thereafter. Thus, Rosenberg found herself working closely with Slade on the production drafts to tailor them to his vision. Regardless of the revisions, when inventing dialogue, Rosenberg is careful not to stray too far from the original intention of each scene. "You start with what's in the book, but sometimes something can read smoothly on the page and then sound corny coming out of an actor's mouth," Rosenberg says. "So I get notes from Stephenie and the producers, and I rewrite it and rewrite it, then give it to the actors who might adjust it further. You just keep working it until it sounds like something someone might actually say."

Given that this is her favorite book of the series, Rosenberg looked forward to writing *Eclipse* while working on the first two films, thinking this one would be easiest. It proved to be anything but. While the third act is full of action, Bella's character arc is actually quite subtle. She starts off convinced she wants to become a vampire like Edward, but through the story comes to realize she'd made that choice without fully thinking it out. She also starts to see Jacob in a new light — so there was also the challenge of making him a legitimate rival for Bella as she and Edward had been previously established as part of an epic romance. According to Rosenberg, the key to all of this, is, "[To] keep it honest and authentic. It's a big story with a world and a mythology that you can and should use. You have a vampire with su-

perhuman strength — use that! But the characters and emotion have to be genuine because you're building on that and it will keep you rooted."

An example of such a scene comes at the climax of *Eclipse*. In both the book and the movie, Bella hears the Quileute story of the third wife — a woman who saves her village by spilling her own blood to distract a rampaging vampiress. Whereas the book takes the reader into Bella's head to show the heroics she's prepared for, Rosenberg needed a more visual answer to that scene. "I couldn't use a thought bubble," she says. "So I took Bella all the way to actually spilling her own blood. It keeps Bella's arc alive, her discovery of her own strength, but it also saves Edward and services that story as well. There's a lot of action and stunts going on but at the peak of the scene is this very human thing Bella does that brings the heart of her story into the scene."

Ultimately, the most sensitive notion of any adaptation lies in the changes that must be made to the source material in order to make it filmic. As mentioned previously, *Twilight* has inspired a legion of fans not to be trifled with. They have invested themselves in these stories and they are very protective of them. Some fans feel Rosenberg wasn't faithful to the books, while others thought she did the perfect adaptation. For her, this has been a lesson in the old maxim that you can't please all the people all the time. "As a screenwriter, your job is to tell the best story possible in filmic terms," Rosenberg explains. "This means losing things and changing things and there are those who will never forgive you. But there are also people who, no matter how successful your film is, will call you a hack. It's silly, but that sticks, and it hurts when you realize that. When you already have the demons and then you find yourself facing criticism on an international level — I understand why some writers hole up and try to remain anonymous. It takes some really thick skin to bounce back from that stuff. I don't know how actors do it. But I'm glad it hurts. I think when it stops hurting I need to pack up and go, because I'll have gotten to this weird place of ego where nothing touches me." **CS**

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Sex and the City 2

Written, directed and executive
produced by Michael Patrick King

Based on characters from Candace Bushnell's book

Based on the series created by Darren Star

WHEN WRITER-DIRECTOR-EXECUTIVE producer Michael Patrick King first set out to transform his hit series *Sex and the City* into a movie, he expected to be met with skepticism. "People would say, 'What makes you think this is a movie? Why can't you leave it alone?'" King recalls. When the movie became a blockbuster hit, with the biggest opening weekend ever for an R-rated comedy, King thought the critics were silenced. And they were — until he set out to pen a sequel, that is. "Even my mother said to me, 'Why would you want to do that? It ended perfectly!'"

From the outset, King's plan for the second film involved a completely different approach. "[In] the first movie, I wanted it to be an epic, painful emotional movie that spanned a year," King reveals. "This one, I wanted the same characters but different DNA. I wanted a big, fun movie." So while the original film presented separate storylines for the four leading ladies, the sequel gets them together and sends them far away — to the Middle East, in fact. "I wanted to

play with the idea of traditional female roles," King notes. "And the idea of Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall), the most overtly sexually liberated American woman going to a place that is in the midst of its own revolution appealed to me. Of course, there's going to be a culture clash."

In addition, King wanted the film to be pure fun. "In the 1930s, there were these escapist comedies," he notes. "And being in the middle of an economic depression, I thought people would want to see big, extravagant, anti-depressing movies." While the film may be the perfect "anti-depressant," it will also tackle some heady issues for the foursome. "Another theme I'm working with is the evolution of these characters," he states. "Who they were, who they are, who they might be. Because the show evolved into a film and we're evolving the film into a sequel — evolution is the name of the game. The only place I could get into trouble with these characters is if I didn't let them grow."

Because of the success of the series and

film, King was given total freedom by the studio to do as he pleased. "My only taskmaster is page count and the size of the movie," he says, "which is actually a monster when you consider I have four main characters." In fact, King's biggest problem was overwriting. Having begun his career on the verbose series *Murphy Brown*, King has never had a problem filling pages. "Diane English was my first enabler," he says of the comedy's creator. "If she got a script under 55 pages for a half hour, she would ask what was wrong." King was also spoiled from being able to spread stories over *Sex and the City*'s six seasons and 94 episodes. "A lot of nuances had to fall away from the film script," he says. "I've gotten pretty good now at realizing you only need to say something once. There were times where I would tell myself not to even look over at another character because I could have given them a huge monologue and I didn't have the page count."

When writing, which King refers to as "homework," he adheres to a strict schedule. He starts around 6:30 a.m. and takes a break to hit the gym and grab lunch. When he returns, he spends the afternoon polishing what he's already written. King says he doesn't suffer from writer's block, but rather what he calls "writer's primal scream." He adds, "I know that it's there and it will come. When people ask me if I like writing, I say, 'I like having written.' But that feeling of waiting for it to come creates anxiety." Ultimately, he says deadlines are his friend. "They force me to finish out of fear I'll be humiliated when there's nothing on the page."

While some writers will suggest writing anything to keep the momentum going, even if you're going to throw it away later — it's something King refuses to do. "I can't do fake pages," he admits. "Any writer can write good dialogue, but if it's not the right dialogue, you risk becoming attached to stuff that isn't right." He credits his friend, bestselling author Adriana Trigiani, for giving him the best advice for times when he's grappling for ideas. "She would say, 'It's not ready. Stop looking in the oven, the bread's not done. Get up and get away from your desk,'" King recalls. "So I've come to play with the idea that you're always writing and solving problems in your head, even when you're walking around or going to another movie. I call it mental fake pages." King laughs before adding, "And I can say that because I've never missed a deadline." **CS**



Mother and Child

Screenplay by Rodrigo Garcia

BETWEEN MOTHER and child, the gestation period is nine months. But for Rodrigo Garcia, creating his film *Mother and Child* took considerably longer. "In some ways, *Mother and Child* is not representative of how I work now. I was still learning how to write back then, so there was a lot of stopping and starting," recalls the writer-director, son of Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez, who labored with the screenplay for nearly a decade. "I didn't reach the last page until the ninth year," he says. According to Garcia, because the process took so long, the result actually reflects much of what he has learned in his decade-long screenwriting career.

The concept arrived early, around the release of his first film, *Things You Can Tell Just by Looking at Her*. In *Mother*, 50-year-old Karen (modeled on multiple actresses, but ultimately played by Annette Bening) is still coping with the decision she made at age 14 to give her baby up for adoption, while Elizabeth (Naomi Watts), her estranged and fiercely independent daughter, now 36, still faces echoes of that long-ago abandonment when making her own life decisions.

"The initial spark was this idea of people who are in each other's lives...who might be

influenced by and spend a lot of time yearning for one another, but may never be together," explains Garcia, whose own children were very young when he began writing.

He was fascinated with the parent-child dynamic in all its variations — adoption vs. abortion, biological vs. by marriage and so on — and wanted to explore that theme from every angle. "You don't want to talk about your ideas. You want to turn them into story," he says. "It took me a long time to dramatize who these women had become through words and actions, finding behavior for them that expressed what the last 36 years had been like without ever having to resort to flashbacks."

Managing the central Karen-Elizabeth dynamic proved challenging. It didn't occur to him at first, but over time Garcia realized that what interested him most was the story of how Karen came to accept the things she couldn't control. Garcia wrote the first act (until Karen's mother dies), alternating scenes between the two characters, but wasn't happy with the claustrophobic way the narrative seemed to ping-pong back and forth. The structure troubled him, as did what it implied about where the story was

headed. "Even if I never say these women might meet, and even though they're not actively looking for each other, the movie promises a reunion," he says. "And I knew there wasn't going to be a reunion, so I needed more elements to complicate the story."

So Garcia introduced more characters, including an infertile couple (Kerry Washington and David Ramsey), an expectant teen auditioning parents before offering her child up for adoption (Shareeka Epps) and their respective mothers (Lisa Gay Hamilton and S. Epatha Merkerson), but this complicated another element. "The three stories have different time frames, and they didn't coincide," Garcia explains. Karen's story takes two years, Elizabeth's story takes nine months, and the new characters' story spans a matter of weeks. "It was the structure that drove me batty," he says. "The fact that the stories were not running parallel to each other — that was the bulk of the work, trying to figure out what was going on at what point for whom."

With *Things You Can Tell Just by Looking at Her*, the vignettes lasted only a day or two. In *Nine Lives*, they unfolded in real-time, 10- or 12-minutes takes. "This was the longest and most complicated time frame I had ever worked with, so that took a long time," Garcia says. "Once I reached the last page, there was very little rewriting. Most of the scenes in the script were only written once or twice, but I did a lot of cutting and pasting, trying to find the right order."

In retrospect, Garcia says, he embarked on *Mother and Child* without having a clear idea of the three things he now considers essential before starting a script. "I need to know who the central character is and what the central problem is. I also need to know how it ends. I need a scene to drive to, and I didn't know that for a long time. That's what slowed me down," he says. "And most importantly, I need to know what the time span of the story is."

These days, it takes Garcia only months to complete a screenplay, thanks in part to the trial-and-error approach of *Mother and Child*. "I came to learn these things along the way. Now I do them all the time," he says. "In fact, I started writing *Mother and Child* such a long time ago that the movie is ultimately, believe it or not, gentler than it was before because I think you mellow out with age." **CS**



I Am Love

Story by Luca Guadagnino

Screenplay by Luca Guadagnino, Barbara Alberti,
Ivan Cotroneo and Walter Fasano

I AM LOVE represents the culmination of a decade-long conversation about love between Italian writer-director Luca Guadagnino and indie stalwart Tilda Swinton, something the pair first attempted to capture on film in the intimate 2002 self-portrait *The Love Factory*. At face value, all this talk of love must seem rather mushy, like a brainstorming session at Hallmark headquarters — until one considers the source.

In life, as in her acting career, Swinton is a radical thinker. Married with children, the Oscar winner openly maintains a lover and rejects many of the assumptions society holds about relationships — particularly the one that sees love as an antidote for loneliness. With the encouragement of her equally subversive director, Swinton allowed Guadagnino to turn her philosophical thoughts on the subject of love into the basis for a character study — and so *I Am Love*'s Emma Recchi was born.

As a model, Guadagnino looked to the Thomas Mann novel "Buddenbrooks: The Decline of a Family," borrowing the concept of an outsider who marries into a decadent mercantile family. He was captivated by the notion of his central character's "secret, mysterious loneliness within these golden walls" and made the Recchi character Russian as a tribute to his mother (who is Algerian), which helps explain the character's detachment as she's a stranger to Italy as well. Rather than watching

the Recchi family unravel over multiple generations, as the Buddenbrooks do, Guadagnino focused on a relatively narrow window in which this selfless matriarch was permitted to experience an intense, passionate affair with one of her son's friends.

"Basically, I wrote the story in a few hours one day instinctively, and what became the script and the film was almost entirely in those pages," Guadagnino remembers. But that was only the beginning of a process that took many years and the director is the first to admit, "I'm very lazy. I don't like to write. I thrive on partnership." And so, with Swinton's ideas in mind, Guadagnino expanded the conversation to include other collaborators as well.

First came Barbara Alberti (*The Night Porter*), an old friend whom he'd met years earlier when both served on a festival jury at a Torino Film Festival. Alberti helped Guadagnino write his previous film, *Melissa P.*, and was happy to accept his invitation to stay at a beautiful hotel in Bellagio, Italy, on Lake Como, where they could work on *I Am Love* — only the process was less like work than it was an applied vacation in which ideas could marinate.

"We spent nearly a month there," Guadagnino recalls, "and we had this routine: morning, little walk in the village, then rest. Lunchtime, then rest. Then a long conversa-

tion in the afternoon. Then dinner, followed by another little walk in the village, then sleep." Instead of standing over a computer trying to find the right words, Guadagnino spent a lot of time walking, traveling by boat in the lake and listening to music. "For me, the process of writing is about finding time to think and talking, but the thinking is very important," he explains.

According to Alberti, working together in a beautiful setting like Lake Como was also vital to her process. "It's about the word, the use of words and it's about this almost inscrutable volcano that's in Luca's mind," she says. "I am an old-timer with white hair, but I'm always happy to go on the rounds with this young master. It's also about getting the right experience that the character is going to live — like going to San Remo or eating at a restaurant with the same food."

They emerged from Lake Como with a draft much too long for shooting, so the director hired a younger writer, Ivan Cotroneo, to downsize the script. "In the process, we lost complexity and pace," observes Guadagnino, who then turned to old friend and editor Walter Fasano (*Mother of Tears*) for another round of discussion and rewriting.

To create a more elegant opening, several early scenes focusing on individual characters were cut and instead the film begins with preparations for a big family meal. "It's easy to have two people in a room, but what happens when you have 22?" Guadagnino asks. "I wanted to put myself in the highest, most difficult position of choreographing people because this was important for me to step into another realm of filmmaking." And once shooting began and budget limitations revealed they couldn't afford the last act of the film, the filmmakers engaged in another round of rewriting to introduce hints of resolution into the final confrontational scene. Inspired by Roberto Rossellini's *Journey in Italy*, the epilogue would have reunited Emma, her daughter and Antonio in another town, exchanging forgiveness and kisses in the middle of a crowd. "Luca is so full of ideas and emotions to share, the problem is sometimes he doesn't want his movies to end," Fasano says.

"Self-indulging in your own ideas is very bad," Guadagnino acknowledges. "I learned never to be in love with my own ideas." And so he cut the scene, allowing the film to end on a note of tragedy, liberation, uncertainty and even hope that leaves Emma's character more lonely and, as it turns out, more consumed by love. **CS**

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Get Him to the Greek

Written by Nicholas Stoller (also directed)
Based on characters created by Jason Segel

SCREENWRITER NICHOLAS STOLLER

remembers the exact moment he got his first inkling of an idea for *Get Him to the Greek*. He was at the first table read for *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* and upon hearing Russell Brand and Jonah Hill interact he knew he had something special. “That’s a movie,” Stoller remembers thinking. “I don’t know what kind yet, but that’s a movie!”

Get Him to the Greek follows junior record executive Aaron Green (Jonah Hill) on his quest to get his favorite musician, Aldous Snow (Russell Brand) from London to Los Angeles to perform for a reunion show at the Greek Theatre. Of course, anyone who remembers Aldous from *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* knows his penchant for making even the simplest of tasks nearly impossible.

After *Forgetting*, Stoller wanted to challenge himself with a different kind of comedy. “I hadn’t seen a rock star road trip movie in years, so I approached Russell and Jonah with the idea,” he recalls. “I knew that if I used the same rock star, people would call me lazy, so I decided to [indulge] in my own laziness and treat it as a spinoff.”

Once Stoller has his story, he creates a

Word document that lists ideas that could happen in the story. After about a week, he goes through the lists and compiles them into an outline, which he uses to write what he calls his “vomit draft,” typically writing five to 10 pages a day. He credits his background in advertising for instilling a disciplined work ethic in him. “When someone hands you an Ericsson cell phone and tells you to write an ad for it — you have to,” Stoller says. “Even if you don’t think of something right away, you just have to start writing and trust that you will. Once I have my vomit draft, I put it down for a week and go away. Then I’ll re-outline it and figure out what works and what doesn’t. At that point, I usually bring in [fellow producers] Rodney [Rothman] or Judd [Apatow] to look at it.”

In addition to his producers, Stoller sought feedback from a couple cast members on two of the trickier elements of the script. As the movie begins, Aldous is heartbroken and off the wagon. As Stoller explains, Brand has personally overcome addiction and was helpful in addressing various aspects of it. Additionally, the music industry is a major part of the story, which was unfamiliar to

Stoller. Luckily, Sean “P. Diddy” Combs, legendary hip hop producer, was on set as an actor. “Having Diddy involved was great because I could just ask him questions and he could call ‘bullshit’ on stuff,” Stoller says. “Probably the biggest compliment I’ve ever gotten as a writer was when Diddy said that everything in the script made sense.”

Stoller views rehearsals as a time to do some “focused improvising.” That’s why he recorded all two weeks of rehearsals to ensure that they had the very best material at hand in case it was needed later. “We have these things called ‘alt pages’ that are lists of jokes we’ve come up with during rehearsal or while riffing on the script. We cover that as well as the script, plus the actors’ improvisations. By the time it’s shot, there’s no way of delineating between what’s scripted and what’s improvised.”

Because every journey needs an ending, Stoller knew exactly where he wanted this story to end: in a threesome. While he says that the actual threesome scene was a blast to write, the scene that directly precedes it — in which Aldous, Aaron and Aaron’s girlfriend Daphne (Elizabeth Moss) discuss having said threesome — was not as fun. “I always thought it would be funny if this incredibly self-destructive guy tried to destroy this other guy’s life,” Stoller says. “I thought that could be a funny ending and hopefully unexpected. But it was really complicated because you had to make sure all the emotions are lining up. The entire story is serviced in this one scene. It might not be particularly funny, but it had to feel real.”

While this is Stoller’s third produced screenplay and second directorial effort, *Get Him to the Greek* marks the first time he managed to direct his own script. He credits the process with helping him become more visually adept in his writing in terms of moving sequences out of cars and couches and into more visual settings. “Perhaps surprisingly, I used *Children of Men* as a touchstone,” he says. “In that movie, you can’t believe it’s still going and they’re being shot at and we’re still single-camera. I tried to use that in the comedy: to build to a place where people can’t believe how crazy it’s going. That took a lot of planning, even in the script stage, because you really had to know the blocking and where the jokes would be. Whereas when I’m just writing, I have the freedom to think of whatever I want and not really care what happens in production.” **CS**



Shrek Forever After

Written by Josh Klausner and Darren Lemke
Based upon the book by William Steig

WHEN JOSH KLAUSNER and Darren Lemke were brought on board separately to script the fourth, and final, installment of DreamWorks Animation's legendary *Shrek* franchise, they had the same thought: "What can you do with another *Shrek* movie?" Once a feared and unkempt ogre, the character of Shrek had turned into a loveable hero and, some would argue, the subsequent sequels in the franchise suffered because of this.

Initially, the DreamWorks brass wanted to focus on Shrek's new role as a first-time father and craft a heartfelt father-son story. Klausner, who was hired due to his rewrite work on 2007's *Shrek the Third*, at first wasn't enjoying the assignment. "It was a little bit painful," he admits. "It's always death for me when I know the story before the movie has even started." One element that was a constant this time around was the studio's desire to use the popular fairy tale character Rumpelstiltskin as the film's villain. Eventually, after much discussion, DreamWorks boss Jeffrey Katzenberg was convinced that the movie's plot had to be altered.

Rather than fighting against the character Shrek had turned into, the scribes used it as inspiration for a new story. "I'm a firm believer that the best protagonists we can have are the ones where we see them the way they see

themselves," Klausner explains. "As the years have gone on, he's gone from feared to being on lunchboxes," Lemke adds. "So the idea to put Shrek in that same mindset was brilliant. Villagers used to be scared of him; now they want his autograph on their pitchforks." The writers gave Shrek what they desired for him as well: a return to the real ogre he used to be.

The plot of *Shrek Forever After* centers around Shrek's (Mike Meyers) desire to be a simple ogre again, if only briefly. He comes across the mischievous Rumpelstiltskin (Walt Dohrn), who promises to grant him that wish. As it turns out, the deal is actually a trick that turns Far Far Away into a kingdom ruled by Rumpelstiltskin. In a case of "be careful what you wish for," no one in Far Far Away knows who Shrek is anymore, including his close friends and wife, Fiona (Cameron Diaz).

Their fresh start freed the writers to bring more originality to the property — no easy feat for a franchise's fourth chapter. Lemke and director Mike Mitchell came to describe this as the *Empire Strikes Back* of the *Shrek* series, in that it is the darkest of all the films. That reference came up often when the tone was trying to be set. An example of this new tone was a scene that centered on an argument between Shrek and Fiona. Penning a

scene in which the franchise's first couple becomes cruel with one another was something that worried both writers.

"The question was always, 'How far are we going to go?'" Lemke recalls. "My first inclination was to play it a little safe." But it was Katzenberg who kept pushing them to take it further. "Lines are certainly crossed," Klausner says, "but it's a good way to state that this is different than the *Shreks* that came before." Lemke adds, "For me, that scene became the odometer for where we were allowed to go for the whole movie."

That particular scene was written and rewritten an estimated 45 times and, while that is on the high end, copious rewriting is not uncommon on animated films. The script process for animated movies involves writing a scene and then storyboarding it with temporary dialogue. Once that sequence is screened, revisions are done without a single frame of film wasted. Neither Klausner nor Lemke has an extensive background in animation writing, so this part of the process was a surprising, but welcome, addition to their scripting. "It was very liberating for me," Klausner explains. "You get this instant gratification of being able to watch your movie while you're editing. It's an amazing process to go through as a writer where you're able to easily discover what works and what doesn't."

Of course, such rewriting can also have its drawbacks. "Often, I would come up with a line and think, 'This is the one!'" Lemke laughs. "Then I'd realize that I wrote that same line three months ago." The writers knew their work was done not by how it read on the page, but how it played out in the screening room. "You know when you don't cringe in the screening room," Klausner says. "It's when a scene flows so smoothly that you don't even notice when it's on to the next scene."

Lemke likens writing for animation to putting together a puzzle — "but only if you're not doing the puzzle in sequential order," he says. Because of the storyboarding process, animation writing is more sequence-based. There are no page-one rewrites here, but more so the massaging and re-crafting of certain scenes based on their order in production. Though the process differed greatly from feature-based writing, both writers relished their collective opportunity to work on the film. "Nine times out of 10, as a feature writer, you're not going to be on set to fix problems," Klausner says. "But with animation, you're there. It was a real incredible boot camp experience as a writer." **CS**



Iron Man 2

Screenplay by Justin Theroux

Based on characters created by Stan Lee, Don Heck,
Larry Lieber and Jack Kirby

JUSTIN THEROUX (*Tropic Thunder*) isn't sure how he went from virtual obscurity to writer of two back-to-back tentpole films. "Your guess is as good as mine," he laughs. "I've been in Hollywood for about 20 years now. Everyone has a weird road in this town and mine's no different, I guess."

While working on *Tropic Thunder*, he met Robert Downey Jr. hot off the first *Iron Man* film, who suggested Theroux might be a good fit with Marvel Studios. A fan of "Iron Man" comics as a kid, Theroux was excited for the meeting. "I went when they were gearing up for the very first initial push into development for *Iron Man 2*," the screenwriter recalls. "I sat with them for a long time and had long discussions about the character and world. Shortly thereafter, they said they'd love to have me and I was completely flattered and floored, and we started developing the script right away." With director Jon Favreau working on *Couples Retreat* for portions of the time, they would meet as often as possible for long sessions with Downey, Marvel executive Kevin Feige

and producer Jeremy Latham. "Those guys had the benefits of doing [the first *Iron Man*] and were well versed in the pitfalls and problems of where certain ideas could take you. They were great at helping me eliminate certain things that I otherwise might waste time spinning my wheels in."

One idea stood out most when they began to talk about the story. "The one thing that was obviously on the table that we could not ignore was that [Tony Stark] was a public figure," Theroux says. "That was the first little piece of clay that we knew we'd have to build off of." The filmmakers quickly realized that there was a form of overconfidence and a whole new type of celebrity that paired well with the idea of Stark (Downey) being a public superhero. "So there's sort of an arrogance to Tony at the beginning of the movie," Theroux explains. Much of this comes from Stark knowing he's the only person in the world in possession of the Arc Reactor technology that makes the Iron Man armor possible. "The next dramatic device is... what if he's not?" Theroux asks. "What

if someone else can create it as good as he makes it — or almost as good?"

The idea of the technology becoming public, the proverbial genie getting out of the bottle, fed the next major idea Theroux bounced around with Favreau and Feige. "It's an arms race essentially," the writer says. While they sifted through the enormous list of Iron Man villains that such an idea could plug into, Favreau was struck with a new take on the character of Whiplash, a villain best remembered for a bright purple cape and a huge topknot. "Once Jon pitched the way he envisioned that character, which was very different from a guy with a big ponytail and a cape, we thought [it was] very cool. [Whiplash has] these big energized whips emanating from his center chest piece. It all organically started to take shape." Further discussions resulted in a new backstory for Whiplash (Mickey Rourke), tying him to the earlier, less morally responsible history of Stark Enterprises, which gave Theroux even more to work with. "We ended up getting three new characters for this movie — Whiplash, Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) and Justin Hammer (Sam Rockwell) — and realizing there was a very powerful dynamic between them."

This helped form a third theme for the film: Can a man always stand alone? "Are men islands in themselves, especially if you're Tony Stark?" the screenwriter wonders. This theme revolved around the addition of a later element from the "Iron Man" mythology, the heavily armed War Machine suit. "Our thinking was that Tony is out in the world and has perhaps bitten off more than he can chew. Without giving away too much, the War Machine armor — and who's using it — really complements that idea and theme. I found it a relief to have that character in the movie."

Theroux is also keen to point out that the wide array of new heroes and villains in the film was not because of any mandate from Marvel that required him to include a certain number of characters or classic elements such as Tony Stark's revamped briefcase armor. "To their credit, they really do give everyone involved in the process a blank slate to start with," he says. "That's a blessing and a curse. In the end, it always ends up being beneficial to them. You go in knowing anything is a possibility and they don't shut

any doors or windows to what you want to do until it becomes either cost-prohibitive or just doesn't make sense with the brand." The screenwriter compares having the whole Marvel Universe available to him with having a gigantic dessert tray where he can't decide what to taste first. "If anything, it just made me want to work harder at servicing every one of them. But I think we've done a pretty good job of tempering that and making sure it doesn't just turn into a Jackson Pollack. Everyone has a purpose in the film and I think as long as each one of those characters is well-defined and as long as they're purpose-driven, then at the end of the day, it just feels like a great big fun movie as opposed to a big, you know, cluster," he says with a laugh.

"The way I love to work is with someone whom I trust knows the material, like Favreau and Feige, and bounce ideas off of them," Theroux says. He praises both men as well as Downey for the constant stream of ideas and feedback he got throughout the intensive development process. While he worked up numerous outlines and notecarded many sequences with the others, Theroux takes a very straightforward approach to writing. "At a certain point, you just have to start trucking through the deep snow and shoveling your way into it — or out of it," he says. "When it actually comes down to writing I prefer to just wake up in the morning, make a cup of coffee and just sit down and start hammering pages. I write fast usually, and hope the director can help guide me. I'm a big believer in being in service to the director as much as possible."

Another element the screenwriter had to deal with was time. While the original *Iron Man* writing teams had years to work with Favreau to hone and polish the script, that movie's phenomenal success meant Theroux was coming onto a project that already had a release date set in stone, one that required them to start filming in less than a year. "While you're doing it you really try not to realize the pressure you're under," he says with a wry smile. "You try not to focus on it. You have to fake it and pretend you have all the time in the world to create it because if you put a calendar up and start X-ing days off, you'll go crazy." Even though he handed in a production draft that the assistant directors

and effects teams could begin to work off of, he says they continued to revise and polish the script as filming began. "Once we had the schedule for what we were shooting, we then knew we could go back in and really start finessing it. So I was working on stuff on set all the way up until the very last day of shooting."

The screenwriter also wrestled with the big picture — Marvel's interwoven movie universe wherein a wiser, more in-control Tony Stark can make a cameo at the end of *The Incredible Hulk*. "I feel like Marvel has a great tradition of screwing the next writer," Theroux says with a chuckle. "When they first started interweaving it, [cameos] were considered afterthoughts. Now they're starting to put a lot more thought into it and seeing it as a larger scheme. We have things in our movie that are doffing their hats or perhaps



telegraphing things that are going to happen in other movies. That's probably as much as I can say. It wasn't like we had a big meeting with Kenneth Branagh about *Thor*. There's just enough cross pollination to make it interesting, but not enough to start eating into other people's sandwiches. Once *Avengers* is up and running, you'll start to feel the cumulative effect of those little jigsaw puzzle pieces getting put together."

With that in mind, one has to wonder if Theroux planted seeds for a very likely third *Iron Man*. Diehard fans picked up on the name of the terrorist group in the first movie, "The Ten Rings," a reference to another classic villain, the Mandarin. "I'm not confirming or denying that remark," Theroux says with another laugh. "I think that's still in the distant future. But I would say if people looked for it, they would definitely find it." **CS**

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Ondine

Screenplay by Neil Jordan (also directed)

THERE'S AN OLD JEWISH saying that goes, "Don't ask questions of fairy tales." Well, *Ondine* does just that by presenting a fairy tale through a postmodern lens — questions and all. The project started in 2007 when screenwriter-director Neil Jordan was in Hollywood prepping for a studio film when the writers' strike derailed it. With no sense of when the strike would end, Jordan returned to his home in Ireland to work on a script he'd been thinking about for a long time. "I had that image of a fisherman pulling a girl out of his net," Jordan recalls, "and I just wanted to see where this would go. I knew I wanted to tell a fairy tale without any special effects or any elements of what you would traditionally think of as magic."

In the film, fisherman Syracuse (Colin Farrell) does indeed pull a woman named Ondine (Alicja Bachleda) out of one of his nets. As the film progresses, it's debatable as to whether or not she is a mermaid. Syracuse takes her home, where magical things may or may not start happening. He tells this story to his daughter, Annie (Alison Barry), who may or may not believe the fantastical tale at hand.

With his opening image in place, Jordan found himself facing a bigger question: Can you find in real life the archetypes found in fairy tales? To his surprise, combining elements from real life and fairy tales turned out

to be easier than he expected. Syracuse's ex-wife, Maura (Dervla Kirwan), became a sort of Evil Witch in the story, and Annie became the curious child who serves as the skeptical voice of the author. In fact, Jordan feels that writing Annie helped the script really take shape. "She was one of these kaleidoscopes through which you can see things in a different light," he says. "It helps that the character is 10 years old, so [she] can easily suspend disbelief when she needs to and still be very realistic and wise when she needs to as well."

Once all the elements were in place, Jordan sat down to write every day. He doesn't believe in making page-count goals, however. "If a story is flowing it flows, and if it doesn't flow then it doesn't flow," Jordan says. "There seems to be very little I can do about it. Sometimes, characters are just very unwilling to come alive and speak to you. If the character is alive, suddenly the dialogue flows and your instincts just know what should happen next. If I'm forcing it, it's generally a bad thing. I generally have to wait and let the story speak to me."

Jordan's desire to set the story in a small fishing town also helped him keep it grounded in reality. He explains, "I wanted a realistic portrait of a small fishing town [to explore] people living their lives the way they do nowadays. They're divorced, they have problems with their children, they have

issues. Some are trying to change their lives and some are not."

Syracuse is trying to change his life, having spent the last four years sober in an effort to win custody of Annie. But, as we know, drama is critical and our hero must choose between succumbing to his past, represented by Maura, or embracing what his future could hold, represented by Ondine and the town priest. "When I started writing this, I didn't know the character of the priest would be there," Jordan says. "I just thought it would be fun to have Syracuse in a town where they don't even have that language for AA and 12 steps, so he forces the priest to be his AA buddy in the confessional. But then Maura wants to bring him back into his old life, so she does that old Irish thing of giving him a drink. And once she's done that, she knows she's got him back into that mess he's been in forever."

This balance of fantasy and reality was the crux of Jordan's story and also prompted the dramatic question that Jordan felt would make or break his script. "I'm writing this fairy tale that turns out to have all of its basis in reality," he says. "The whole thing turns out to have a realistic explanation. But then I wondered, if you tell a fairy tale successfully enough, and then you reveal to the audience that it wasn't a fairy tale, will they be angry? Will they feel cheated? Will they feel manipulated in some way?" As with the fisherman pulling a girl from the sea, Jordan points to another image to answer this question. Late in the film, Ondine is sitting on a rock with the sun beating down on her. We see her shadow on another rock, on which she seems to have a tail — until it's revealed to be a piece of driftwood. "If she hadn't moved her legs it would've kept looking like a tail, but she moves her legs and it's a piece of driftwood," Jordan says. "It was that kind of movie. It's a particularly Irish story."

As Jordan explains, his passion for the film lies in the continual examination of how, when and even if people choose to examine their own lives and the lives of others through a fantasy filtered point of view. "It all comes down to how certain events are viewed," Jordan says, "When Syracuse pulls her out, if she doesn't come alive it's a horror story, and if she does then it's a fairy tale — simple as that, really. I just had that basic image and as a writer you have to ask what this image is trying to tell you and where does it want to go. That's what the script was about in the end." **CS**

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Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time

Screen Story by Jordan Mechner

Screenplay by Boaz Yakin and Doug Miro & Carlo Bernard

THE VIDEO GAME adaptation is a nut Hollywood has never quite cracked. It's only natural it keeps trying since video games are a multibillion dollar industry with a built-in fan base. The latest contender hoping to achieve big screen success is *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*. Based on the game series created by Jordan Mechner, *Persia* is a rousing period adventure that has all the right elements for a summer blockbuster: a dashing prince (Jake Gyllenhaal) who teams up with a beautiful princess (Gemma Arterton) to stop a villain from releasing the mystical Sands of Time and destroying the world. Oh, and it also has a dagger that can turn back time.

Persia's journey to the silver screen began in 2003 when Mechner pitched the project to screenwriter John August who then took it to Jerry Bruckheimer and Disney. "No game designer had ever successfully adapted his own game as a screenplay, so that was a hurdle," Mechner says. With August vouching for him, Mechner was given the go-ahead to take a crack at scripting. He wrote five or six drafts over the next year. Learning to think like a screenwriter rather than a game designer was challeng-

ing for Mechner. "The two art forms demand totally different approaches to storytelling and achieve their effects in different ways," he says. "The surface similarities are actually misleading, because what's fun to play isn't necessarily fun to watch."

After Mechner, scribe Jeffrey Nachmanoff (*Traitor*) did some uncredited drafts before the baton was passed to Boaz Yakin. "Jordan had really laid out the story and the atmosphere of the world was all there, but [the script needed] more dynamic relationships," Yakin says. His work focused primarily on the first act of the script, including one change that had major character implications. "In the original script, the main character was an actual son of the king," he recalls. "I changed it so he was an adopted street kid, hence having a sense of jealousy with his brothers and needing to prove something." Also, in previous drafts, Princess Tamina (Arterton) spent much of the film disguised as a servant girl. Yakin decided to reveal her true identity from the start, which changed the stakes and interactions between her and Prince Dastan (Gyllenhaal). "I upped the soap content so people have something they are focused on other

than the chase elements," Yakin says. All told, Yakin did one draft and a set of revisions before moving on.

Doug Miro and Carlo Bernard came on next as the project's final writers. While neither was familiar with the games, the script gave them a chance to work with Bruckheimer, something they'd always dreamed of. Bernard says the exotic setting also appealed to them. The partners set a high bar for themselves: "*Raiders of the Lost Ark* is the template," Miro says. Initially, the writers were asked to focus on the second and third acts, as the studio and producers were happy with the first 30 pages. "We outlined first," Bernard says, "primarily focusing on how to build the story from where the first act left off; then we circled back around to the first act. You familiarize yourself with the materials, then you step back and say, 'How do we build it into something that feels like a big movie?'"

The villain of the piece also needed rethinking as he was initially conceived of as a scheming older man — one who was brilliant and dangerous, but not much of a physical threat to an acrobatic warrior with a time-shifting dagger. "He didn't have a fighting force to act on his behalf, so we introduced that," Miro continues. The writers also conjured up a roguish ally for Dastan, a character known as Sheik Amar (Alfred Molina) and polished up the relationship between Dastan and Tamina.

Director Mike Newell was attached shortly before the 2007 Writers Guild strike but the writers didn't get to meet him until after the strike was resolved. In fact, the strike almost spelled "game over" for the project. After rushing to get as much done as possible, then chomping at the bit for months until the strike was over, the writers got to work on what would be the most definite draft — although they didn't know it at the time. "With the delay of the strike, if that draft hadn't been good enough, they just would have moved on," Miro says. "Luckily, all our energies had been pent up during the strike and we put them into the script."

Can *Prince of Persia* finally break the video game movie curse? As game creator Mechner puts it, "A movie based on a video game will work or not for the same reasons as any other kind of movie — because of the quality of its storytelling and filmmaking. It doesn't get to play by different rules just because it's based on a game." **CS**



MacGruber

**Screenplay by Jorma Tacome (also directed),
John Solomon and Will Forte (also starring)**

"MACGRUBER WAS one of the dumbest pitches I have ever had," chuckles Jorma Tacome. Tossing out ideas during one of *Saturday Night Live's* regular Monday pitch sessions, the writer-director suggested a character who could be the step-brother of TV cult-hero MacGyver, the big difference being that MacGruber made his bomb-defusing gadgets out of revolting materials no one else was willing to touch or work with. "It got a huge groan from everyone in the room," Tacome recalls, "so the fact that we are now making a movie out of it is mind-bogglingly wonderful for me in particular."

Co-writer John Solomon (*Extreme Movie*) admits when the idea of making a MacGruber movie first came up after the 2009 Superbowl it caught several folks off-guard. "Most people were baffled," he admits with a laugh. After all, in every one of the nine *SNL* skits featuring him so far, MacGruber died in a fiery explosion after failing to defuse a bomb.

Rather than see this as a limitation, however, Tacome, Solomon and writer-star Will Forte decided to see it as an advantage. MacGruber was virtually a blank slate, with nothing known about him beyond a collection of funny emotional issues and the fact that he was terrible at his job. "It was very liberating that we didn't have a backstory we had to stick to," Forte says. "It was wide open territory."

Rather than write a parody of espionage films, the trio found themselves intrigued by the idea of taking this character, who had no business being in an action film, and making him the hero of the action film.

In the film version of *MacGruber*, a brilliant madman named Dieter Von Cunth (Val Kilmer) stages a heist that leaves him in possession of a nuclear missile. The U.S. government is forced to turn to the only man with a hope of recovering the weapon: MacGruber (Forte). Although the insecure agent has been in a self-imposed retirement for the past 10 years, when he hears that his old nemesis has returned, MacGruber realizes he has unfinished business to take care of.

The three scribes often met at Forte's apartment, where they would plaster the walls with notecards of scenes and ideas. "Actually, it wasn't even notecards," Forte admits. "We would tear off pieces of paper." He also recalls that whenever they would meet at someone else's home, they'd have to transfer all the notes and end up with a huge mess of paper and tape. "There's probably a much more efficient way to do it," he chuckles.

Tacome explains that given the nature of the action genre format, certain scenes emerged relatively quickly: the cold open with the heist; the hero challenging the villain in a crowded

place; clues at a warehouse. They then fleshed out the story around these key moments.

Solomon says that while they toyed with creating a full outline, one never emerged. "We had a skeleton," he says. With the story beats mapped out, the three writers took turns writing scenes and sequences during *SNL's* brief hiatus and two actual production weeks. In just over a month, they turned out a monstrous 170-page first draft.

"It was flowing out of us," Tacome reveals. "A lot of that came from the fact that we picked a genre where everyone knows what the plot is [like in] that kind of movie. So you knew you'd have your whole opening crime and then the evil guy and then you find your hero." This presented one of the ongoing challenges of the script: the story began as a very true-to-form action film. "The beginning of the movie is rather serious for a cold open," explains the writer-director, "and, for us, part of the joke was that we're *not* winking. The music feels like it's of the genre, the way we're shooting it is of the genre, there's no breaking of the fourth wall. It's meant to really convey that tone. We were always concerned, 'Were people going to be on board for this?' It was that when-do-we-tell-the-audience-what-kind-of-movie-this-is sort of thing."

There was also the issue of expanding MacGruber from a one-note joke into a solid character, which was done by focusing on MacGruber's insecurities. As hinted at in the *SNL* shorts, he is a man with numerous issues, personal problems and a weak moral center. "He becomes, weirdly, a three-dimensional character because he is so flawed," Tacome says. "It was getting that right balance of lovably despicable. Will Forte is so supremely good at finding that balance. A lot of his characters have a wonderfully despicable quality. So even though he's flawed, there are some redeemable qualities about him. I love seeing movies where a character has a lot of personal problems and somehow you still want them to win."

Despite the fact that the director and lead actor both worked on the script, the writers are clear this doesn't imply a loose screenplay. "It is a very solid script," Solomon explains, "because there wasn't time or budget for much improvising." While both writers credit Forte's strong comedic skills for much of their success, all three knew there wouldn't be time for fooling around when working. "We had to get what was on the page and we had to *love* what was on the page," Tacome says. "Luckily, we loved what was on the page." **CS**



Survival of the Dead

Screenplay by George Romero (also directed)

EVEN THOUGH he's been making movies for over four decades, this is the first time horror icon George Romero has ever done an actual sequel to any of his famous *Dead* movies. "I wish I could connect everything the way Steve King did with the town of Castle Rock," the writer-director says, "but I can't. There are too many different owners. Different people own the different copyrights to the different films. It's only been the last two films, *Diary of the Dead* and this one that my partner, Peter Grunwald, and I have ownership in. So now we can do what we want."

After completing *Diary*, Romero toyed with the idea of continuing the story of those characters in another movie, but the film performed so well when compared to its small budget that the producers from Artfire Films wanted to make a sequel quickly. Romero soon found himself looking to characters who only made a brief appearance in that film for inspiration — a group of National Guardsmen who rob the main characters at gunpoint. "When I started to write this character for [actor] Alan Van Sprang, I could do anything I wanted," explains the filmmaker.

"[His] character in *Diary* is there for all of 30 seconds. We had no idea who that guy was or what he was about. So it was almost like writing a new character." This is Van Sprang's third film with Romero and the writer-director wistfully admits he'd like to pretend the actor was always playing the same character. To that end, he decided not to use the name he'd written in the script, Crockett, and simply let the character be known as "Sarge," with the quiet implication that Van Sprang may have been playing the same character in all three films — something he couldn't do because of copyright issues.

Survival of the Dead follows the story of the Guardsmen who decide to go AWOL under the leadership of their sergeant (Van Sprang) after their superiors make a series of rash and lethal decisions. An online video clip leads them to Patrick O'Flynn (Kenneth Welsh), a former fisherman who offers to lead survivors of the zombie uprising back to the safety of his isolated island home. The truth, though, is that Patrick has been exiled after a series of ongoing arguments with his rival island faction leader Seamus Muldoon (Richard Fitzpatrick).

The dispute centered on what to do with the undead scattered across their shared island — kill them or shelter them in hope of a future cure? With Sarge and the National Guardsmen in tow, O'Flynn heads back to the island to permanently settle the long-standing grudge between the two families while wiping out the undead as well.

Romero still approaches screenwriting the same way he did when he first crafted *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968: by working from a loose outline. "I keep little notepads of ideas that I don't want to forget," he explains. "Then I put those in a sequence and try to figure out a way to make those things happen with some sort of logic. Some of it is in notes and a lot of it is just in my head, in conversations." When he sits down to write the script, he starts on page one and goes

straight through. "I don't jump ahead and write later scenes or anything like that," the filmmaker says. "I much prefer to start at the beginning, go through to the end and then come back and do surgery on it. I'd much rather have it written down." Over the years, he's also found that this process gets him a polished script much faster. "If I can get it down on paper within two or three weeks, then I can take some time to step away from it and come back and look at it and see it with a fresher eye. See where it needs salt and where it needs pepper. To get to a first draft — or what I'm willing to publish — probably takes five or six weeks." Romero is quick to point out that he's sometimes spent over a year and a half polishing scripts in the past when trying to meet the demands of other parties. "In the past, maybe to my detriment, I've walked away from a couple of deals because I didn't want to go as far as people wanted me to go with changes."

Romero also credits producer Grunwald, who is his main sounding board, during the early development of a script. "Peter is a very good story editor," the filmmaker says. "We

kick the ball around before I sit down and start to write. We've been known to lock ourselves away for days at a time and really pound on something. He's a great foil. I find it very easy to work with him." Romero pauses and, chuckling, adds, "And sometimes frustrating, because his ideas are good and his complaints are always valid. Once we start to shoot I have a whole family — a director of photography, a wardrobe designer, an editor — whom I work with once the project's up and going. Occasionally, I'll talk to some of those people during the script stage, but never as intimately. It's all Peter, in terms of the early stages."

A large element of the *Survival* story is the hatred between the O'Flynn's and the Muldoons. The fight between the two families almost takes precedence over what they're fighting about: the walking dead. Romero admits that to a small degree some of the story grew out of the very angry, partisan nature of our times. "People can't disagree without being disagreeable," he muses. "Anger is permitted now." Though filming a number of acts of rage and rudeness sparked much discussion on set, the filmmaker insists the highly politicized nature of this conflict was not at the core of the script when he sat down to write it. "This film really isn't about what's happening today," Romero says. "Unlike all of the other [films] — which spoke much more about the times — this one is just much more general. It's about war and people unable to lay down their hatreds and enmities."

He also notes that the film has a very Western sensibility about it, which helps give the story more of a timeless feel. "The script was almost finished when I remembered this old Western called *The Big Country*," Romero recalls. "I told all the crew people to watch this movie." On the island that serves as much of the film's setting there are no cars, O'Flynn's daughter Kate is often seen riding her horse and the locals are armed with six-shooters and hunting rifles. "I was able to indulge myself with that," Romero says. With a laugh, he also admits that the freedom his deal with Artfire gave him may have been a bit of a liability. "There's nobody else to blame but me," he says. "I know I did some real loony tunes, silly stuff in this movie. The idea of turning it almost into a Western? Maybe I went too far over the line, but we'll see. Fans seem to dig it."

Helping tie the story to the Western era is a macabre collection of photos owned by Muldoon, each depicting a portrait of an ancestor after his or her death. "People used to do that," Romero says. He admits he's always been fascinated with the idea that people would take "final photographs" not only of celebrities but of favorite uncles, grandparents and children in an eerie attempt to hang onto these relatives after their deaths. The idea came to him when he was writing a speech for Muldoon, where the patriarch explains to a captured Guardsman (Athena Karkanis) his decision to shelter and save the undead. "It's the perfect justification for what he's trying to do."

Currently busy with publicity for *Survival*, Romero says it's tough finding time to work on the next two *Dead* movies in what he hopes will be a tight quartet of



stories linked through *Diary*. "If we end up making two more films, the other two characters we know a little more about," he says. "One would be a group of looters that the kids [from *Diary*] ran into. And then I was thinking about the blonde who got away at the end of *Diary*. I don't know if this stuff is going to happen or not, But I do have ideas and I already know what I would do with these two films."

The filmmaker also admits that two more *Dead* movies might be the end for his screenwriting career. "I'd love to do something else, but it's so easy having the creative control and being able to work with a family of friends," Romero says. "It's no stress. I don't know if I want to go back into that development business. At my age, it's tough to think about that. These couple of projects that we're working on are things that I really love, so I think I could get up a good fight to do them." **CS**

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Micmacs

Screenplay by Jean-Pierre Jeunet (also directed) and Guillaume Laurant

THE PARTNERSHIP between director Jean-Pierre Jeunet and his *Amélie* writing partner, Guillaume Laurant, hinges on a coincidence fit for one of the director's films. "It was a story of destiny," Jeunet explains. Laurant had written a spec script and wasn't sure which of the *Delicatessen* directors he should send it to, Marc Caro or Jeunet (at that time, the creative pair still collaborated on all their films).

"He opened up the phone book and there were two Marc Caros and only one of me," Jeunet says, so Laurant sent his writing sample to the latter. The director was tickled by what he read and called Laurant, only to reach a rather absurd outgoing voicemail message. Luckily for Laurant, his sense of humor piqued Jeunet's curiosity and the director asked for a meeting.

"We are so close in terms of spirit," Jeunet says. "We love the same things. When we work together, we watch TV and laugh about the same things." Jeunet, who thinks in almost purely visual terms, was particularly taken with Laurant's gift for dialogue. He asked the still relatively inexperienced writer to supply some lines for his next collaboration with Caro, *The City of Lost Children*, and when the time came to helm a solo effort, Jeunet asked Laurant to co-

write the screenplay that became *Amélie*.

At this point, the duo has been working together so long that their process comes naturally. Laurant writes the text, while Jeunet supplies the more image-oriented flourishes. The details themselves come from a metaphorical "box" — which is actually an ever-growing computer file full of inspirations, observations and all-around odd gags that Jeunet hopes to one day incorporate into all his films.

With each new project, the duo starts by assembling the skeleton of the story "in a very banal way, like everybody, I suppose," Jeunet says. "In fact, this is the most difficult part." For *Micmacs*, the platform is predictably eccentric: An orphan (Danny Boon) who lost his father in a landmine accident is nearly killed during a drive-by shooting, which leaves him with a bullet lodged in his brain (an injury inspired by an actual friend of Jeunet's, who committed a holdup in the '70s, was shot by police, survived and ultimately swam the English Channel). Vowing to bring down the weapons manufacturers responsible, he enlists half a dozen fringe friends, setting into motion an elaborate series of Rube Goldberg-style gags — the more convoluted, the better.

That's where the fun begins: Jeunet and

Laurant break the story down into scenes, put cards on a big board and attempt to distribute as many jokes and ideas from their stockpile among the scenes. According to Jeunet, "Sometimes we have a small idea for 20 years and we try to put it in, but it doesn't work." In *Micmacs*, for example, he shot a scene in the Paris subway that involved a gag he's wanted to do for decades but, alas, the scene ultimately didn't fit and was cut — an uncommon 15-minute omission in a process that is otherwise so tightly written and storyboarded in advance that Jeunet rarely has to trim more than a minute from his films. "I won't tell you the idea, because we might use it again one day," he teases.

However frivolous the approach may sound, Jeunet insists their fun isn't meant to undermine the film's *raison d'être*. "We use whatever is best for the story," he says. With *Micmacs*, the central concept was driven by three creative impulses: First, tell the story of a weapons dealer. "It's been on my mind for a long time," he says, "not to give a message, not to make a political movie, but just to be able to speak about these strange people. They are very nice guys. They love technology, but they completely forget what it is designed for — to kill and destroy."

Second, work with a broadly drawn band of misfit characters, à la *Snow White* or *Toy Story*. "For [*Micmacs*], the idea was to make a slapstick story or a live cartoon," Jeunet says. "In real life, characters are very complicated psychologically. In my film, they are exactly like the Seven Dwarves," — an oddball ensemble in which each is defined by a single trait, à la Happy, Grumpy, Sleepy and so on.

And third, make a revenge movie worthy of his idol, Spaghetti Western legend Sergio Leone (*Once Upon a Time in the West*). Jeunet previously dedicated many months to the process of adapting Yann Martel's fantasy adventure novel "Life of Pi," but couldn't muster the budget to see his vision to the screen (Ang Lee took over the project), and so *Micmacs* offered Jeunet a chance to clean the pipes and indulge in all sorts of crazy ideas while telling a relatively simple story.

"I need to surprise myself," Jeunet says of the schemes Basil and company cook up. "If at the end of writing a scene, I don't have a smile on my face, I think it's not enough, I have to rewrite it the day after. I am like a chef. After I prepare a good dish, I test it. I need to find something funny for me and then I want to share it with others." **CS**



The A-Team

Screenplay by Brian Bloom and Joe Carnahan
Based off characters created by Stephen J. Cannell

IN A WAY, Brian Bloom was there at the beginning of *The A-Team*. Starting out as a very young actor in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America*, Bloom grew up in Hollywood and can remember being on the Universal lot when episodes of Stephen J. Cannell's series were being filmed. "I believe I was around when the pilot was being shot," he says. He'd always been interested in writing, but never thought of passing his material to anyone outside his circle of friends. It wasn't until he became friends with writer-director Joe Carnahan (*Smokin' Aces*) that he started to consider writing as a career. "He began to encourage me to, let's say, come out of the closet with this writing," Bloom chuckles. "We started working together on a couple of things, which was great, and here we are."

In a divine coincidence, the two men were working on a script about a four-man team when Carnahan was approached in early 2009 about taking over *The A-Team* film. While numerous versions of the script already existed from writers Michael Brandt, Derek Haas (*Wanted*) and Skip Woods (*X-Men Origins: Wolverine*), Carnahan felt they all stayed too loyal to the original show and didn't appeal to his own sensibilities. He asked Bloom to join the project and the two men took the

mindset they'd already developed for working with a four-protagonist story and applied it to their full rewrite of *The A-Team*. "We didn't borrow anything from ourselves," Bloom clarifies. He points out that juggling four main characters takes a different skill set than just one or two, especially with four iconic characters who deserve equal time in the film and within the structure of the story.

In the opening of the original show, a voice-over hinted at a dark past for these former soldiers who had disappeared into the Los Angeles underground. Both Carnahan and Bloom were struck by the fact that this aspect of the team — their origin as mercenaries — was glossed over in that brief prologue. "The promise of that team doing something intense that related to ending the war in Vietnam and then they stayed together in the underground," Bloom muses, "there's something heavier about that." The writers realized that to have a potential franchise, these origin events needed to be seen, not just taken on faith and decided to take the story back to the beginning — showing the men as a closely knit team of special forces Rangers. "It's an origin story," he says. "but the entire film doesn't spend its time in those origins."

To get a complete idea in front of the studio as quickly as possible, Bloom and Carnahan wrote a short story rather than a traditional outline or treatment. This unusual approach showed their take on the plot and the characters and ultimately got them the go-ahead for a full script. The two writers used notecards to outline a few scenes of their screenplay, "but I think there's something to be said for flying by the seat of your pants," Bloom says. "[It helps in] understanding your characters and understanding your structure." They continued to shoot ideas back and forth, fleshing out beats, and had a solid first draft in less than six weeks. Though there wasn't an official deadline, both men sensed the producers' desire to have the screenplay done *now*. "This script and our process and some of the timetables just required a relentless togetherness. As much as there's autonomy, there's also the studio, the actors, the budget and the calendar."

In the revised script, the story was updated from Vietnam to modern-day Iraq. The armed forces pull-out has begun and Baghdad is off limits for all military personnel. However, a set of U.S. Treasury engraving plates has been mistakenly left behind and Colonel John "Hannibal" Smith (Liam Neeson) and his special forces Alpha Team are sent on a black op to retrieve them. The team pulls off the heist without too many hitches, only to discover they've been framed for stealing the plates. With no written orders to validate their mission, the A-Team is forced to escape and try to learn who framed them, all while being pursued by a military captain (Jessica Biel), who has her own ties to the team.

Bloom mentioned that even original creator Cannell was concerned with the extreme level of action in the film, given that the show was legendary for its minimal, inoffensive violence. Bloom agrees this was part of the show's charm. "Sort of the vortex of the Velveeta," he chuckles. "And that was terrific. So did we do that in the movie? Let's say our kill count is a lot more than zero." The screenwriter makes special note of that number zero, pointing out that since no one ever died — or even bled — in the show that it's not a huge leap for the film to be considered more violent than its source material. Bloom believes this violence was necessary to portray the events that set up the A-Team everyone knows. "We decided to build that bridge for you," Bloom says. "Hopefully we go over it together and it's fun." **CS**



The Good Heart

Screenplay by Dagur Kári (also directed)

FRENCH BORN, Icelandic writer-director Dagur Kári is fluent in several languages, having made films in Icelandic (*Nói Al-bínói*), Danish (*Voksne Mennesker* aka *Dark Horse*) and now makes his English-language debut with *The Good Heart*. Regardless of language, all his films speak of a common phenomenon: that of people on the fringe of society. His latest film is no exception.

The Good Heart features Brian Cox as Jacques, the curmudgeonly and often bigoted owner of an inner-city bar populated by a diverse crew of low-maintenance regulars. With time and his caustic attitude quite literally killing him, a heart attack sends Jacques to the hospital. There he befriends a kind-hearted, young homeless man, Lucas (Paul Dano), and decides to take Lucas under his wing, intent on bequeathing him the bar and teaching him how to navigate its sometimes harsh environment.

How does a filmmaker from Iceland create a story about two English-speaking outsiders living in a decaying urban center? One piece at a time. “The title of the movie was one of the first ideas, and that led me to the main theme of the story,” Kári explains. “Quickly afterwards, the

two main characters appeared to me.”

When it came to crafting the script, telling the story in English was always part of the plan. Kári says that he is fascinated by languages and loves to study the nuances of how people speak. But that’s not his only reason for telling stories in other tongues. “Strangely enough, I almost find it easier to work in foreign languages,” he says. “The Icelandic language is terrific for literature, but it’s very stiff when you’re writing dialogue. So I feel more free when I’m working in Danish or English. It’s a more playful process.”

The scribe-director has already developed a great reputation for having well-developed characters and what’s unique about *Good Heart* is the contrast between two very different men who need what the other can provide. Jacques, the aging bar owner, seems to despise every human being he comes into contact with, while the much younger and homeless Lucas routinely takes in strays and really cares about everyone. So what is Kári’s recipe to creating such diverse characters? Infuse each one with a piece of yourself. “I can see myself in both characters,” he says. “I have the

open and naïve elements of Lucas along with the more cynical views of Jacques.”

Rich characters are only the beginning of a much larger and longer process of story creation. Once Kári knows the characters, he begins the process of gathering all the loose story elements into one place and allows them to form organically. “I look at writing in terms that I’m just hanging out with the material,” he says. “I hang out a lot with these ideas and slowly it kind of all comes together like a puzzle and I see the order.”

Improvisation is also part of the process in most of his films. Though he adheres closely to the script, as a director he actually plans on improvising some smaller scene material, something that he used extensively with scenes featuring the regular bar patrons in *The Good Heart*. “All of those scenes were improvised,” Kári reveals. “I would just show up with a very vague idea of a scene, but then we would improvise the dialogue. A lot of nice and unexpected material came out of that process — hilarious stuff that I would not have thought of beforehand.”

One scene in particular got an impromptu performance from a duck. In the film, Jacques buys a duck and keeps it in a cage in the bar, planning to “marinate it from the inside out” for a Christmas feast. But one of the bar’s regulars has another idea and opens the cage to liberate the animal, urging him to be free. The duck, however, simply waddles right back into the cage. The subtext of this moment symbolized the mentality of the film’s characters on many levels, but Kári says the whole thing was unplanned. “That was just something the duck did,” he recalls. “It was a magical performance to me. It just all happened on the spot.”

Though he enjoyed creating *The Good Heart*, Kári plans to shoot his next film in Iceland with a much smaller crew. Despite its independent size, when compared to most studio films, the larger size of the crew on his New York shoot made Kári appreciate the creative freedom of smaller productions. “When you’re working with really big crews, there is a big risk of the process becoming more of an execution than a creative process,” Kári says. “That’s the trickiest part of filmmaking wherever you are — trying to keep the shooting process flexible and alive.” **CS**

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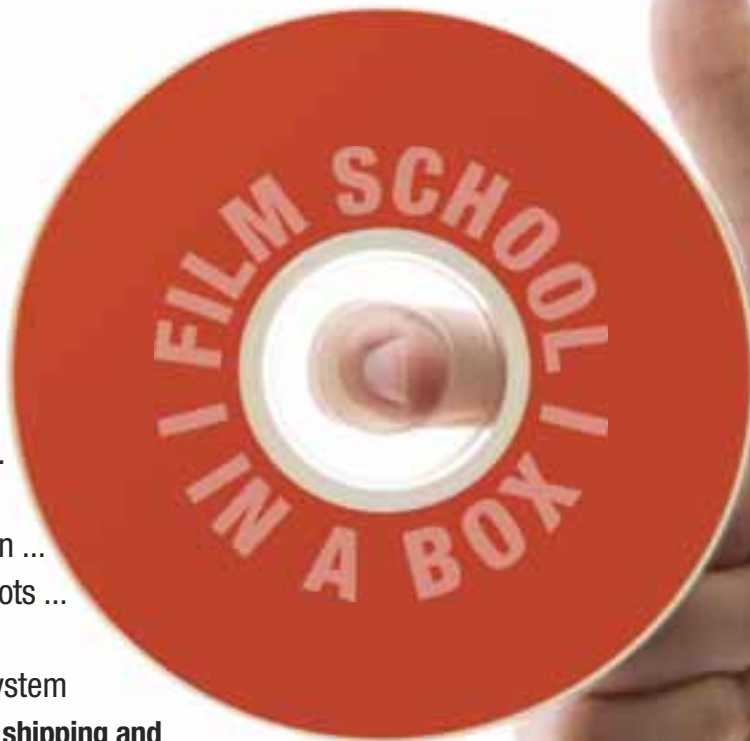
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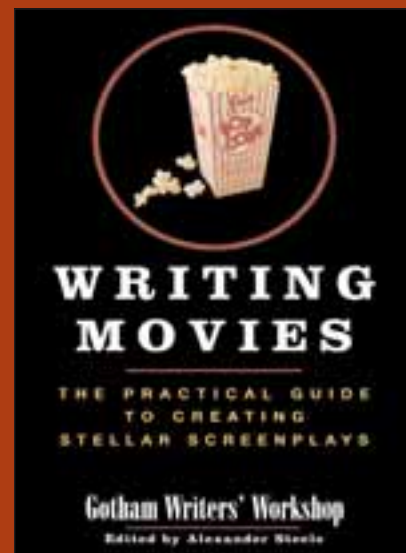
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