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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2011
Volume 18, Number 1



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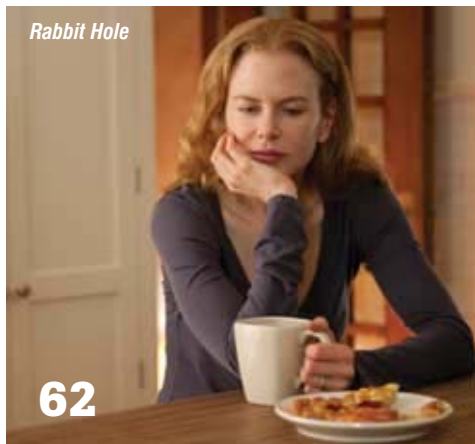
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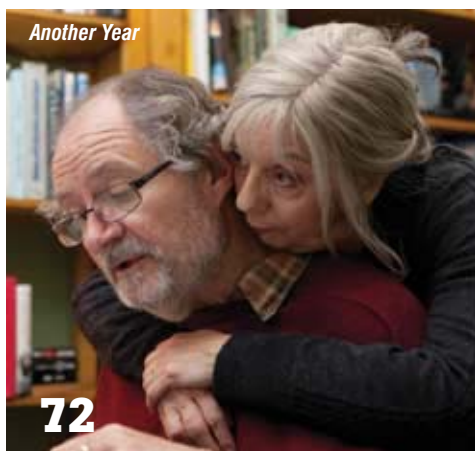
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Podcast Alert! *Creative Screenwriting* now brings you podcasts of interviews with your favorite screenwriters! Go to www.creativescreenwriting.com for more info.

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- ◀ Budgeting and scheduling
- ◀ Guilds and unions
- ◀ Formats: HD, 35mm, DV, 3D
- ◀ Indy Filmmaking A to Z
- ◀ The key elements
- ◀ Contracts and agreements
- ◀ Hiring crew
- ◀ The 1-, 2- and 3 week shoot
- ◀ Cameras, lights & sound
- ◀ Screenwriting A to Z

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- ◀ Budgeting tricks
- ◀ Managing Pre-Production
- ◀ Shooting and Directing A to Z
- ◀ Getting 25-35 shots per day
- ◀ 3D Cameras & Equipment
- ◀ Finishing your film
- ◀ Renting the equipment
- ◀ Scheduling
- ◀ Directing the crew
- ◀ Directing post-production
- ◀ Music, score & lab
- ◀ The answer print
- ◀ Digital Filmmaking A to Z

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- ◀ Marketing Do's and Don'ts
- ◀ Attracting a distributor
- ◀ Deal memo points
- ◀ Foreign sales
- ◀ PPV & VOD windows
- ◀ Hiring a publicist
- ◀ Creating a buzz
- ◀ Sundance & Cannes
- ◀ Which agent to hire
- ◀ Net vs. gross deals
- ◀ On Demand, DVD & Cable Deals
- ◀ Maximizing revenues
- ◀ Studio Dealmaking A to Z

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- ◀ Movie Money A-Z

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Dear Subscriber,

Christmas season in the Southland. 85 degrees outside. The time of year when that "Bah-humbug!" spirit suffuses the soul...

Admittedly, by the time you read this, the holidays will be past us. So begging your understanding on timing, here are ...

A Few Christmas Presents to Some of Our Contest Correspondents

I inherited the job of managing our screenplay contests when budget cuts scrooged out the prior holder of the position. Since taking over this (nonpaying) post, I'm the one who is tasked with communicating with producers, agents and managers who want to see the best scripts from our Expo Screenplay Competition and AAA Screenplay Contest (which is open to submissions, by the way – see <http://creativescreenwriting.com/aaa/index.html>).

In this role, I suddenly find myself as one of those gatekeepers with a small role in deciding whose scripts get the industry's attention.

Also, I created an online system for our contest judges to provide brief, free (other than the basic contest entry fee) feedback to contest entrants. We just used it for the first time to send feedback to writers who entered the 2010 Expo Screenplay Competition. Nothing's perfect in its first iteration, so in the interest of seeking improvements, I asked contest entrants for feedback on our feedback.

Here is some of the writer feedback on our feedback, in italics, with my replies ... and stocking-stuffers for a few of these correspondents...

"I want to thank you for the feedback. I wanted to also ask you if you still have the feedback for the 2009 contest."

My Christmas wish: I truly hope the feedback helps you win a contest or two and sell your screenplay in 2011. And sorry, we don't have feedback from prior contests because we didn't create this system until this past September. But we will offer it, hopefully improved, in the currently open AAA Screenplay Contest and others in the future. And Ho-Ho-Ho, I just sent you a coupon code worth \$45 off the entry fee on the AAA Contest, so you could enter that other script you mentioned for a mere \$5 and get feedback.



"I would like to call you and ask if I could hug my judge and thank this person for the spark, the few suggestions they offered and in few words the crux of making a potentially good script marketable and sellable... I plan to share my excitement about this contest with other new writers and hope to speak with you about this soon. You folks have challenged me to write more, and divvy up my time sitting around the campfire telling a good story, with fine tuning the art of being a good technician. These two elements thrown into the cauldron of writing success will feed lots of hungry and fascinated story listeners. Next time I enter, you are going to see me in the winners circle."

Wow. Thank you. Nothing else to add except: Enjoy the \$45 off coupon I sent to you.

"I can't remember how much I paid for this and will go back and look, but I hope it was very little or free. If it was more, I will

have to lodge a complaint as this was the least helpful feedback I have ever received... If this feedback was free, then I suggest not bothering with it or charging so you can offer the entrant something that can be useful."

It was free. Very sorry we did nothing but annoy you. We do like your suggestion to provide a paid version with more depth. We've asked our developer to revise the contest entry system to allow writers to add in-depth notes for a fee.

"You need better judges. Mine wrote: 'Scene slugs are never written in bold; and every slug must have DAY or NIGHT indicated.' This silly and outdated advice is contradicted by the recent Academy Award winner for Best Original Screenplay:

http://content.thehurltlocker.com/20100103_01/hurtlocker_script.pdf.

I will never enter your contest again."

First: I do understand that rejection is painful and that placing your future, even for a moment, in the hands of a judge you regard as nitpicking can be a terrible frustration. However, I'm unable to find confirmation for your assertion that the judge's advice is "silly and outdated." A quick search turned up two message-board discussions on this very question, and other resources:

<http://messageboard.donedealpro.com/boards/showthread.php?t=11895>

<http://forums.celtx.com/viewtopic.php?f=7&t=534>

<http://www.storysense.com/format/headings.htm> (Michael Ray Brown)

AFI Basic Tool Kit & Resource Guide for Young Filmmakers:

http://www.myhero.com/myhero/go/theteachersroom/pdf/AFI_BasicsHandbook.pdf

They're all in agreement: no boldface. I thought the comments from a script reader on the Done Deal Pro board were quite to the point. Boldface annoys this reader, and since you won't be there to explain to whomever the reader works for that his/her view on boldfacing is "silly and outdated," why risk it?

However, if script readers aren't up to date on acceptable style, maybe it's time to bring them up to date? Anyone with a view on either side of this question may send it to publisher@creativescreenwriting.com.

"Feedback you provide is thinner than [celebrity name deleted] after a three-day meth bender."

I'm too busy to follow the dietary/pharmaceutical intakes of the Hollywood glitterati, so I have no basis for comparison, but it's a nicely written insult. You might try putting some of that vinegar into your characters' dialogue.

"I don't know how the judge's comment equates to a 42 out of 100: 'The world of the story is very credible, and the action is harrowing. The lead character is sympathetic.' As a professional screenwriter (WGA for many years and international screenwriting contest winner), I know I have a tight, well-written screenplay with a great structure. Other professional writers have read it and agree."

I don't know how the judge came to that conclusion either. Since we're not going to reopen the contest, we sent you a coupon to try again with this or another script free of charge. Best wishes and thank you for your feedback.

"Don't open a script — EVER — with a voiceover. It's lazy storytelling. If the writer can't be bothered to construct scenes that show us how Liz actually developed..." ± quote from your 'judge.' I'm sorry — I don't know who this judge is — but their advice is idiotic. There are so many awesome scripts that start off with a VO (American Beauty, Curious Case of Benjamin Button) that to tell a writer they can NEVER open with a VO — it's just stupid. And harmful."

I read a bit of your script. I liked the use of voiceover in this instance. I thought it created a very efficient opening and got her character down pat in half a page. Also

continued on page 73

CALL FOR ENTRIES

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Submit online (preferred) at www.beatificvision.com or mail to PO Box 735, Lee's Summit, MO 64063.

(Make check payable to "Beatific Vision".)

ENTRY FEES

Submissions received by April 1: \$10

Submissions received April 2 - June 1, 2011: \$25

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Entry fees are non-refundable. Scripts will not be returned. Scripts received after the final deadline will not be considered for the competition, though may be considered for future option and development by Beatific Vision, Inc. All entrants and submitters of creative work acknowledge that, should their work be selected as the "winning" entry, Beatific Vision, Inc. will thereupon option it in consideration for the \$5000 grand prize. Should Beatific Vision find no suitable script (as determined by its own independent methods and procedures) among those submitted as part of the Seraphim Screenwriting Contest, the company shall neither be bound to declare a winner nor award any prize money in consideration of script optioning. All entrants and submitters of creative work waive any and all rights as against Beatific Vision, Inc. under state or federal law. Neither Beatific Vision, Inc., nor its corporate directors, officers, affiliates or subsidiaries shall be liable for any alleged copyright infringement for work submitted for the Seraphim Screenwriting Competition or otherwise.

Software Giant Adds Scriptwriting to Arsenal

SOON ENOUGH, screenwriters will be able to use Adobe Story, a collaborative script development tool Adobe Systems will be releasing in the near future. Perhaps it should not come as a surprise that Adobe has created software for Hollywood, considering that its products such as Photoshop, Dreamweaver and others are already widely used in the industry. "Adobe has always been in the business of building great tools for creative people," says Adobe Story product manager Anubhav Rohatgi. "We have leading video postproduction applications in Adobe Creative Suite 5 Production Premium and entering in the preproduction space is a logical extension of our product line." The current version of Story is still in beta form, meaning it is currently available for free, but will eventually be bundled with CS5 Production Premium once it's ready to hit the market. Here's a look at what it has to offer screenwriters.

Online/Offline Platforms, Collaboration and Importing/Exporting

Users can access Adobe Story in two settings: online (Web-based) and offline by downloading the Story AIR application to their desktops. The online setting allows users to share scripts in a variety of ways. The sender can email a URL and the receiver can simply click and open the document. The receiver can be assigned one of three roles: co-writer (access to write and change the script), reviewer (access to read and make notes on the script) and reader (access to only read the script).

The offline setting is much like traditional screenwriting software that can be downloaded to a computer. Any changes made to a script in the offline setting are automatically synced once the user is back online. Scripts can be exported in a variety of formats: PDF, XML, Text, Word and Movie Magic Scheduling. Users can im-

port scripts created in Word, Final Draft and Movie Magic.

Organizing, Tagging and Other Innovative Tools

Several kinds of documents can be created in Story, including scripts, loglines and character bios. Additionally, each project can have several scripts within itself. This is a good idea in case a writer has a different version of a script — say, one with several different endings. Words and phrases can be



tagged to create reports in Excel sheets. The SmartType feature helps speed up typing. Story builds an Outline as a script is created and allows users to see scene headings that can be selected to instantly "jump" to the place in the script. The Outline also shows which characters are present in the scene by displaying a unique color square that represents each character. Another great feature is the shot duration capability, which assigns each scene with an approximate estimate on how long it would take to play out.

"Adobe Story treats the script as a blueprint or framework for video projects during production and postproduction," Rohatgi explains. "Utilizing script metadata increases efficiency in the workflow." Adobe Story is envisioned as being an all-in-one package option for production companies, studios and independent writer-producers. Essentially, Story uniquely connects a script-writing software with other production functions such as filming, editing and after effects. To this end, Adobe Story is intertwined with OnLocation CS5, Premiere Pro CS5, Encore CS5

and Flash DVD Player, and can also be used to serve as a collaborative tool for different people in a production process. "It is really the next generation in scriptwriting tools. It combines previously separate processes into one, providing a backend database, film script format, A/V format, Multicolumn format, shoot script and tagging," Rohatgi says.

Recent Success

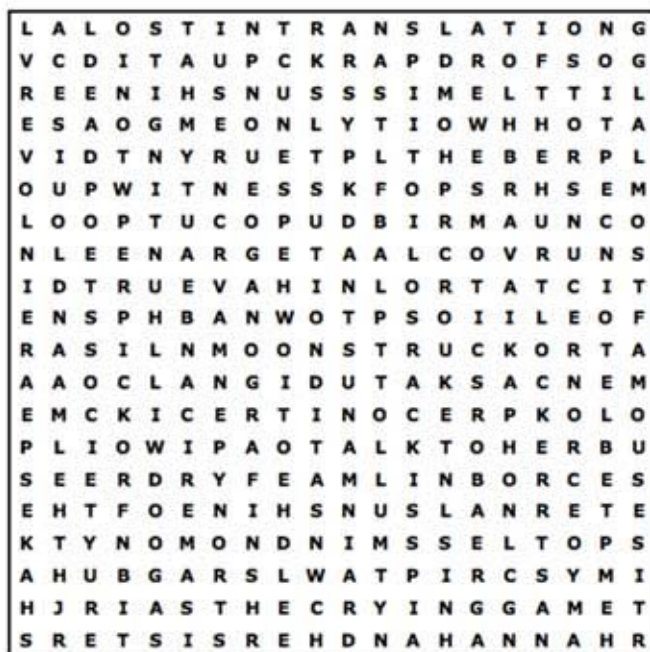
Interestingly enough, CS5 has already been used in some of Hollywood's biggest movies last year: *Avatar*, *Monsters* and *The Social Network*. According to Adobe's website, Adobe Systems worked closely with James Cameron's production crew to create the characters and the virtual world of Pandora. This process of creating characters began in Photoshop. The initial footage for *The Social Network* was edited in Final Cut Pro and imported into

Adobe Premiere Pro CS5 software, where it was then entirely conformed in After Effects CS5.

What to Expect

Since Adobe software is already part of the fabric that makes up Hollywood's tools, it is likely to ultimately be integrated into the production process. Adobe Story is not completely ready, but interested consumers are encouraged to sign up for a free account to try it out. Readers are encouraged to wait until the polished version is available for purchase. Rohatgi expects Adobe Systems to "continue to innovate Story's film and shooting script formats as well as its breakdown reports. We anticipate filmmakers will see Story as an essential tool to the video production workflow as well." With this in mind, it would behoove screenwriters to give Adobe Story a look. **CS**

What's the buzz? Send questions, news, observations and points of view to buzz@creativescreenwriting.com.



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In the latest news...

- ◆ 2010 Silver Prize winner Cody Yarbrough has just signed with Geoff Alexander of 6-17 Management and has inked a deal to write the martial arts/fantasy feature **Karate Cops** for Birch Tree Entertainment.
- ◆ Radar Pictures is attached to produce and finance the 2009 PAGE Award-winning script **Endangered** by Mark Kratter. Mark has also been hired by Solipsist Films to adapt a graphic novel for the screen.
- ◆ Trigger Street Productions and American Original Pictures are attached to produce Alex Hollister's 2009 Silver Prize-winning script **Shotgun Cinderella**. Alex also recently landed an assignment to adapt a DC/Vertigo graphic novel.
- ◆ 2009 Silver Prize winner Fawaz Al-Matrouk shot his PAGE Award-winning short **To Rest in Peace** in Kuwait. The film premiered on the Paramount lot in May.
- ◆ 2008 Gold Prize winner Lisa Cole won a Hollywood F.A.M.E. Award for her VH1 rock documentary **Do it for the Band: The Women of the Sunset Strip**. Lisa currently has a new feature in development with her husband, Mark Monroe, who won a 2009 Academy Award for his documentary **The Cove**.
- ◆ Martin Wallner's 2008 Silver Prize-winning script **A Lost and Found Box of Human Sensation** was produced by Lailaps Pictures/Dancing Squirrel in Munich, Germany. Voiced by Joseph Fiennes and Ian McKellen, this stunning animated short is now racking up accolades and awards on the international film festival circuit.
- ◆ 2007 Gold Prize winner Marc Conklin was commissioned to write the new feature **Souvenirs**. The movie was shot on location in Minnesota last summer, starring James Cromwell and Jonathan Bennett.
- ◆ Christian Parkes' 2006 Silver Prize-winning script **P.O.V.** has been optioned by The Film Department, and his new spec **Pyramid** has been picked up by Mandalay.
- ◆ 2006 Silver Prize winner Sang Kyu Kim is now a story editor on the TNT series **Hawthorne**, starring Jada Pinkett Smith.
- ◆ 2005 Silver Prize winner Janet Lin is now co-producer of the FOX TV series **Bones**.
- ◆ Adam Balsam's 2005 PAGE Award-winning sitcom pilot **Present Tense** was optioned by James Brown, and his animated musical adaptation of the Roger S. Baum novel **Dorothy of Oz** is currently in production, voiced by an all-star cast that includes Lea Michele, Dan Aykroyd, James Belushi, Kelsey Grammer and Patrick Stewart.

Will **you** be the next PAGE success story? Enter this year's contest and find out! For more information, please visit www.pageawards.com

Timothy Dowling

Timothy Dowling's father took him to see *Star Wars* at the age of three. He had to know his son would end up poking fun at George Lucas and remaking *Cactus Flower* with Adam Sandler.

AT THE TENDER AGE of three, Tim Dowling's father took him and his sister to the local theater in Wellesley, Mass., where *Star Wars* was playing. As they emerged from the cinema, Dowling looked up at his father and said, "That's what I want to do." While his dad probably thought he meant blow up Death Stars, Dowling had been bitten by the movie bug.

This initially manifested, as it so often does, in a desire to act. Dowling started in local theater and improv comedy groups, then attended USC's Theater program. It was there that he met Joe Nussbaum and Joseph Levy, with whom he created the short film *George Lucas in Love*, a comedic take on the genesis of *Star Wars* that echoes the concept of *Shakespeare in Love*. It was 1999, and Internet video was in its infancy, but nerds will be nerds so the short made its way around Hollywood, eventually securing distribution both online and on home video, where it spent two years as the bestselling VHS movie on Amazon.com. Needless to say, the three principals became hot commodities and it didn't take long for Hollywood to come calling.

Dowling's first feature-length screenplay effort was *Back to the Teen Movie*, a spoof of the *Naked Gun* variety. The story followed Doc Brown and Marty McFly-type characters who start out in a comparatively innocent '80s teen movie, and then are thrust forward into a gross-out '90s teen movie. The script had many fans, but unfortunately went unproduced. Still, it provided an alluring calling card that helped studios keep Dowling in mind for future work. One such studio was Sony, which bought his spec, *Outsourced*. While this also went unproduced, it landed on Hollywood's coveted Black List and found an ardent fan in actor

Will Smith, who insisted Dowling be brought on board *This Means War*, a project Fox was developing with Smith.

Smith eventually left the project, but Fox's interest never did and *War* went into production in 2010. That same year, Dowling's version of *Just Go With It*, Happy Madi-



Timothy Dowling

son's long-gestating *Cactus Flower* remake, convinced Adam Sandler to star in the film as well as produce it. After years of false starts, Dowling's career was finally taking off.

Dowling credits his acting background with providing his writing with a voice to which actors respond. "I love language and banter, and writing fun things for actors to say," he explains. While he admits to overwriting, he feels it's essential to finding and conveying the flow and rhythm of the piece. "When you're watching a movie and you're in that moment, you can use a silence to great effect, or an actor can convey everything with a look. But in a script, these are much more easily conveyed through dialogue. Then it goes into production, and you have to go back and edit it down and realign everything, which is also kind of fun."

When breaking a story, whether it's an original work or a studio assignment, Dowling uses a simple rule: "What is the version of this story I want to see?" He begins with the type of story he wants to tell, then figures out the type of characters who would be on this sort of journey. He feels his acting background informs this well, as it allows him to better appreciate the role each individual character plays in the larger story. Once he knows all of the characters and how they relate to each other, he's able to move toward finding the sort of set pieces that form the meat of the film. "Of course, you have to be able to adapt," he continues. "Sometimes you start with the characters, sometimes you start with an idea for a set piece. It's just a matter of putting the puzzle pieces together."

While his writing career has taken off quite nicely, Dowling has also managed to keep working as an actor. He admits that his focus is almost entirely on writing, though, so the parts have come primarily through friends or people he auditioned for years ago who want him to be a part of a new project. Occasionally, people will remark that he should write himself a part, something which he is very wary of. "You have to be sensitive to its role in the story, make sure it makes sense in the script overall. Because if you're forcing it and just putting that character or scene so you have something to do, it takes away from the entire script." Still, Dowling admits he'd love to act more and hopes that with multiple projects coming together and being released now, he'll soon have the cache to get some passion projects off the ground and onto the screen — meaning those Death Stars are safe for a little while longer. **CS**

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Truby's former students' work have earned more than \$7 billion at the box office, and include the writers, directors and producers of such film blockbusters as *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *X-Men I/II/III*, *Shrek*, *The Surrogate* (2012, with Halle Berry), *House*, *Lost*, *Planet of the Apes*, *Scream*, *The Fantastic Four*, *The Negotiator*, *Star Wars*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Outbreak*, *Saving Milly* and more. His classes regularly attract everyone from first time writers to A-list writers, producers, directors, filmmakers, story executives, novelists, fiction writers and more.

In addition to his sold-out seminars, John Truby remains on the cutting-edge of technology having created and developed Truby Blockbuster - the bestselling software designed to intuitively help writers learn and understand the art of developing their story ideas into fully realized, professionally-structured scripts.

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"Truby's screenwriting class is a course that allows a writer to succeed in the fiercely competitive climate of Hollywood." - [American Film Institute](#)

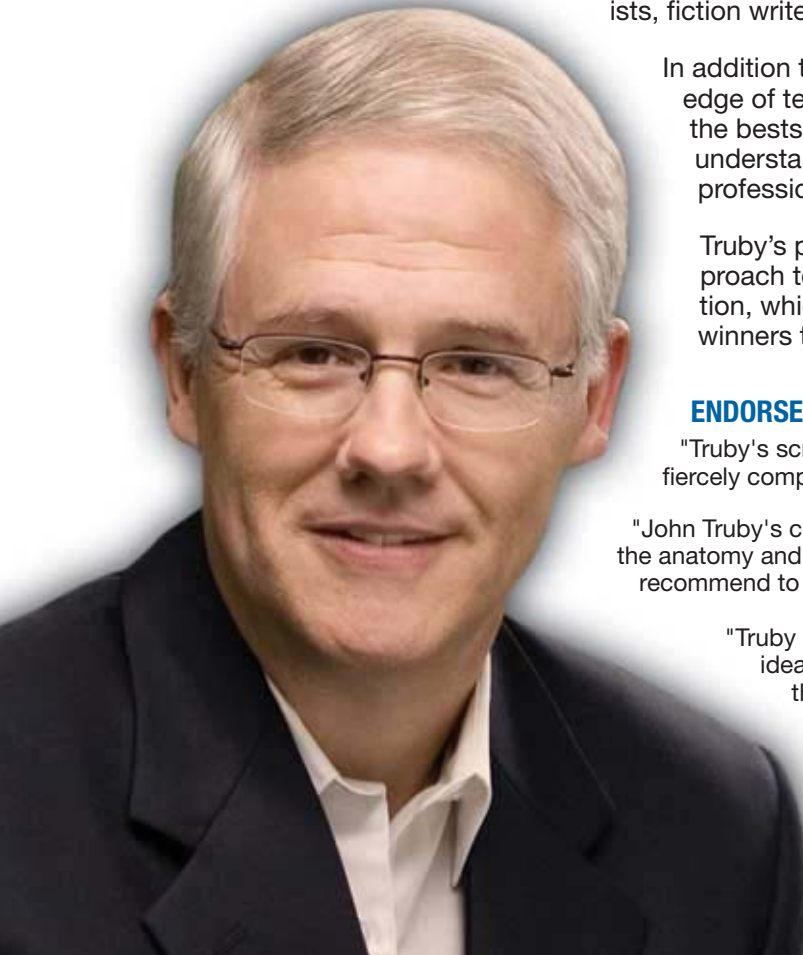
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2010 Screenwriting Expo Screenplay Contest Winner: Dale Botten

ALAMO-DULUTH: Anatomy of a Lynching

NEARLY 58 YEARS after the Emancipation Proclamation freed black slaves from the tyranny of their white masters, in Duluth, Minnesota — about as far north as you could get in the Union at the time — on a dismal, drizzly June morning in 1920, the John Robinson Circus rolled into town. And what should have been a festive summer reprieve for the hard-working, blue-collar town exploded into a powder keg of prejudice, hatred and intolerance instead, culminating in a horrific event that would scar this seemingly progressive city for decades.

Three African-American circus workers were attacked and lynched by a mob after unsubstantiated rumors spread that six African-Americans had raped a teenage girl. No evidence of the crime was found and the murders made national headlines.

This painful chapter of American history unfolds in grim, no-uncertain detail in *ALAMO-DULUTH: Anatomy of a Lynching*, written by 2010 Expo Grand Prize winner Dale Botten. The entry into the contest, like the screenplay itself, appears to have come about through what the screenwriter calls “divine providence.”

Botten entered his script into the Austin Film Festival competition, where he had been a quarterfinalist before. He had planned to spend part of his October at the festival in Texas, “But that’s when one or more of the aforementioned mystical forces stepped in,” he says. “Something gnawing in my gut told me that Austin would not be a good choice... at least, not this time. This feeling plagued me for several weeks and I began considering other festivals.” Botten decided to skip Austin and attend

the 2010 Screenwriting Expo (run by *Creative Screenwriting*) instead, which is also held in October in Los Angeles.

Before entering the Expo’s competition, he made some important changes to the material he had submitted to other contests. “I perused my script again,” he explains. “Something was not right. The opening scene did not portend the power of the script inside. I reasoned that, since it

not ignore. As I got deeper into the project, the telling of the story consumed me. I needed to tell this tragic story in a profound way that would convey the horror and the pathos. I had no time for other considerations, only that it was a story I had to tell as well as I could.”

Around this time, Botten’s wife was admitted to a Duluth hospital, near the place where the men were murdered and a memorial had been set up. As he drove past this spot every day on his way to the hospital, he gained deeper insight into what his script was really about. “That’s when I realized that the story I was so focused on was not about three bronze statues,” he says. “It was about three real flesh-and-blood innocent human beings, who were murdered in cold blood, not only by a mob but by a whole society — a society that allowed intolerance and hate to slime their way in to control what normally would be peaceful, tolerant people, using the guise of justice.”

Botten used what he felt was an opportunity to write something great, and it paid off: He is the Grand Prize winner of the 2010 Screenwriting Expo Screenplay Competition, a title that comes with \$20,000 cash and exposure to producers and reps in Hollywood. Botten’s says his experience with the Expo has been worthwhile. “Had I not won the Grand Prize, I would still have considered my experience at the Expo valuable,” he says. “I have had some read requests and have been able to network with some new and very good industry people.”

Let us hope. And, perhaps, Providence will again look favorably upon Dale Botten. We should all be as lucky. **CS**



Dale Botten

was based on a true incident, the eventual outcome was no surprise.” This led to Botten cutting the original opening and replacing it with a more powerful one that was previously at the end of the film. “So the script I entered at the Expo was different than the Austin version,” he continues.

Similarly, the genesis of the screenplay also came from chance. “As a writer, I am always on the lookout for a good story,” Botten says. “Good stories spark a writer’s imagination and get his or her wheels turning.” A friend of his wanted him to read Michael Fedo’s “The Lynching in Duluth” and Botten was floored. “When I first read Michael’s excellent book, I got excited — even giddy,” he continues. “Here was a tragic but amazing story that I simply could

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2010 Suzanne's Prize Winner: Jason Groce

Finding Love In *Transit*

A METRO SEATTLE BUS serves as a metaphor for the ever-changing nature of love in this year's Suzanne's Prize winner from the 2010 Expo Screenplay Competition. Named for *Creative Screenwriting* publisher Bill Donovan's late wife, Suzanne's Prize is awarded to the best love story entered in the competition. The winning script is the brilliant *Transit*, written by Jason Groce, which tells the story of bus driver Max Witham, whose route takes him to many places, including romantic ones.

Groce, who works full-time at Microsoft as a publishing engineer, drew from his experiences to construct his tale of the drivers and passengers in life. "Some years ago, I was going through some financial trouble and my car got repossessed," he recalls. "I had never really taken the bus before that, but here I was really forced to just to get around. I started observing other passengers and bus drivers, and the idea of writing an ensemble comedy about bus drivers came together. A year of taking the bus to and from work and I had all the material I needed to get started."

From that point forward, Groce explains that the script came together via the usual speed bumps involved in being a new screenwriter. "The most difficult part was taking it from its initial inception as an ensemble comedy of observational humor to something with more of a romantic comedy arc to it," he remembers. "Then, once the central spine of the plot came together, it was hard to get rid of all the subplots and other material that no longer fit. There's nothing harder than having to lose some of the original inspiration." Groce decided that his story should focus on Jessica, a lost soul who stumbles onto bus driver Max's bus in the arms of a giant inflatable penguin.

Taking inspiration from his writing heroes, Woody Allen and Charlie Kaufman, Groce sought to discover the correct tone for his project. "[Allen and Kaufman] can

both be side-splittingly funny yet deftly become touching and poignant without you really being aware of it," Groce says. "Their characters are so unique that you just fall into whatever the situation happens to be, and you let yourself get pulled along, laughing or crying."



Jason Groce

Groce admits, "The movies that inspire me come from a variety of genres but all have complex characters and intelligent dialogue that creates tension and delight. I can enjoy movies on a number of levels, but the ones that inspire me to write are ones that display a compelling vision and an original wit."

Groce also likes to employ quirky characters in humorous situations to reveal the characters' humanity. He says, "I consider myself primarily a writer of comedies of manners, in which awkward characters try to navigate their way through the social hierar-

chy to find some kind of acceptance."

A typical writing session for Groce starts early. "It can vary, but most days I'm up at 5 a.m., and I'll write for a few hours before going to work," he says. "In the evening when I get home or on weekends I'll revise what I did or work on the outline of another project. Writing in the morning gives me my best work; the only problem with it is getting on a roll and having to break off."

Groce finds that writing can be quite hard, even for an award-winner such as himself. But he is excited by the feedback he is getting from some of the contests he has recently entered. "I can have characters talk at each other for hours; the trick is making believable dialogue that propels the story forward with a minimum of words, but I've enjoyed learning how to do that and look forward to honing this more," he says.

So what does Groce hope to get from winning this year's Suzanne's Prize, aside from the cash prize and access to industry insiders? "As someone new to screenwriting, I'm just hoping to learn more about the world of screenwriting and hopefully gain access to some new opportunities for my writing," he claims. "More than anything so far since the contest results were announced, I've felt a great new enthusiasm for my writing and a renewed passion for my existing projects. Having success with this script has really helped me understand what I do well as a writer and how I can develop."

Groce ultimately wants what every aspiring writer wants: to hammer away at the keyboard for a living. "Like a lot of others, I've worked a full-time job for the last 10 years and have been writing on the side, and my goal is to be able to spend my days working on my writing projects," he says. "Whereas now I have to make myself put the laptop down each morning to go to work, it would be a great freedom and opportunity to just be able to keep plugging away." **CS**

Monster World is the sci-fi/fantasy beast in the 2010 Expo contest

Father-son duo, Pat and Wyatt Carey, slay the competition.

WHY LISTEN TO your inner child when you have a 6-year-old muse to fan the flames of creativity? At least that was the thought that crossed Pat Carey's mind as he considered his latest writing effort. "It started as my imaginary world when I was, like, two," exclaims Carey's son, Wyatt, referring to the fictional land of *Monster World*, where their script is set. "Then when my dad started writing, I told everybody about it."

Wyatt's imaginary world first met the real world as a school journal assignment. While most kids wrote about their day's activities, Wyatt used the assignment as a creative outlet, drawing sketches of a whole host of creepy characters taken from his imagination. "Every entry was a drawing of different characters from *Monster World* and what happened there," Pat Carey says. "He's got a whole book full of them."

So how did a young kid come up with such ideas? Carey believes it goes back generations. "People in my family are good storytellers. A lot of my standup was basically monologues and stories about my family growing up." Carey even put a collection of the stories in his own book, *Growing Up Irish Catholic and I Survived My Mom's Eleven Sisters*, in which Carey chronicles his childhood in a "low-budget family" living in the Boston area. Though his experiences are a perfect springboard for standup comedy, Carey was working as an education director for the Boys and Girls clubs in the San Francisco area, as well as a social worker in the foster care program.

It was that marriage of Carey's background, combined with his son's fantasies, that gave *Monster World* its bite as well as its depth. The result is a tale of an orphaned boy who struggles to transcend the death of his parents before embracing his new

family, who live in a fantasy monster world. "It plays with the notion of kids with real severe and amazing imaginations," Carey explains. "That can be extremely positive and, at times, people see it as a negative because they're so completely involved in their own ideas that they tune out the world a little bit."

Carey, however, definitely didn't tune out his son, Wyatt, who provided regular ideas



Pat and Wyatt Carey

and feedback as the script was created. "He's been more actively involved than people would assume," Carey states. "As I was writing the pages, I would read them to him at night when he was going to sleep. Basically, it was bedtime reading." Yet at times it was more like a regular story conference you'd find at any studio or production company in Hollywood. "He told me, 'There should be less talking and more action.' That's the most common note I got from the 6-year-old development exec at my house."

Carey listened to other suggestions, like naming the lead character... Wyatt. "The kid that's Lion Boy is named Wyatt," Wyatt explains, "and the kid that's Werewolf Boy is

named Owen, just like me and my baby brother." Wyatt and his brother even dressed as their namesakes for Halloween last year with the help of a very creative seamstress called Grandma. Carey has to admit the characters are thinly veiled versions of his kids, but it's all a tribute to the imagination of his son. "I just wanted to show him that his fantasy world could be a real book or a real movie," Carey says. "Kids see books and movies and think they're so far removed from that. I just wanted to show him that something he came up with in his mind could become that."

The first step in making it a reality was getting the script some attention. Having moved his family to Los Angeles to pursue screenwriting, Carey was studying screenwriting at UCLA and decided to enter the script in a screenplay competition, where it scored an honorable mention. Feeling encouraged, Carey rewrote the script and entered it in a few more competitions, including the 2010 Screenwriting Expo contest.

The result? The father-son duo took home the sci-fi/horror genre prize. Carey could hardly wait to break the news to his son. "I said, 'Hey Wyatt. Our script, *Monster World*, just won \$2,500!'" Wyatt was jazzed. "I thought kids would really like it," Wyatt says, "but I never knew it was going to get such a big award!"

Of course, the duo split the money and Wyatt took the trophy to school for Show and Tell. But, most of all, Wyatt really loves to encourage other kids to write. "He's really into the idea of trying to inspire other kids to tell their own stories," Carey says. "He tells other kids in school that if they have imaginary worlds or fantasies, they should try to develop them into stories, books or movies." **CS**

Evan Daugherty's *Snow White and the Huntsman* braves a malevolent spec marketplace to find a fairy tale ending.

WOE BE TO MANY a foolhardy adventurer who has attempted to brave the spec market recently. The chances of making a sale are akin to being struck by lightning in the midst of an earthquake while completing a Rubik's Cube blindfolded and underwater. Despite these long odds, Evan Daugherty's spec script *Snow White and the Huntsman* hunted up a reported \$1.5 million against \$3 million if the film is produced.

Daugherty grew up in Texas and attended film school in New York. "I came out of NYU with a few scripts," he says. "I came out to Los Angeles and kind of failed miserably. I had to move back home, and live and eat for free while I wrote some more, hopefully better stuff." The better stuff came. Daugherty's spec *Shrapnel* won the Script Pipeline contest in 2008 and caught the attention of manager Jake Wagner, who was with Energy Entertainment at that time. "They sent me the top 10 loglines and said, 'Hey, the script that won, *Shrapnel*, we think it's the best script that's ever come through here,'" Wagner recalls. "They were absolutely right on. It's a phenomenal piece of writing." Wagner signed Daugherty and, after a bit of work on the first act, sent the script around town. Daugherty nabbed agent Tobin Babst at UTA and eventually landed his first writing assignment: *Grayskull*, the reboot of the popular "He-Man and the Masters of the Universe" franchise.

But it was the success of Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* that rekindled a fire for Daugherty. "Literally, that week — this was sort of reactionary and knee-jerk — but me and Jake sat down and I said, 'Well, I have this script that's an alternate *Snow White*. Maybe we should try and do something with it,'" he recalls. In the original story, the Huntsman was a character sent to kill Snow White, but instead he sends her off into the woods and is never heard from again. Daugherty saw this as a springboard for a new take on the classic tale. "One of my earliest movie memories was seeing a reissue of Disney's *Snow White* and being very affected by the striking imagery, especially the scariness of the queen," Daugh-

erty says. "I remembered the character of the Huntsman. That word, 'Huntsman,' is so powerful sounding. [It seemed as though] you could build a whole action movie around this character. I just went in and sort of kept the story the same up to that point, took a left turn at the point where the Huntsman leaves Snow White, and then crafted a whole new story that incorporates elements from the original, but hopefully spins them and plays with them in an interesting way."



After working with Daugherty on a few drafts, Wagner considered how to get the script out there. "I thought to myself, 'Who better than the producer of *Alice in Wonderland*?' " Wagner cold-called Palak Patel, who runs Joe Roth's Roth Films, a producer of *Alice*. "I gave it to him on a Friday," Wagner recalls. "Monday morning, first thing, he calls me and goes, 'Dude, I love it. I think it needs some work. Let me meet with Evan, give him my notes.'" Three months and five or six drafts later, the script was ready to go.

Then came the poison apple. Daugherty and his team knew that Disney had a competing live-action project — a script titled *Snow and the Seven* — but no one was especially worried since it had been in development for years with little forward movement. "What I didn't know was that there was actually a writer currently rewriting it and a big director attached," Wagner says. The other shoe dropped when another competing Snow White project sold right before *Huntsman* was to go out. Wagner recalls the panicky email Daugherty sent about the sale of Melisa Wal-

lack's revisionist take on *Snow White*, which sold to Relativity, with Brett Ratner producing. "It was exactly what we were working on," Wagner says. Daugherty was terrified. "I thought it might be over at that point," he recalls. "Someone had beaten us to it."

But Patel and Babst were unfazed. "The other projects were a concern," Babst admits. "At a certain point, you just have to go for it. If a rough draft had gone out, maybe it would have been more of a problem, but the script went out in great shape with the right producer and director. It wasn't looked at as 'development'; it was looked at as 'let's make this.'" With red-hot commercial director Rupert Sanders attached and the wind at their backs, the script went out to the studios. The response was strong. "Over the course of one week, literally, Joe Roth, Palak and Rupert met with all the studio heads," Daugherty says. "Thankfully, I wasn't there. I prefer to not be in the midst of all that action. It's so intimidating."

Babst says the buyers "were aggressive about not only wanting to meet with Joe and Rupert, but also saying that they wanted to make the movie." Wagner adds, "We wanted a progress to production. We wanted a studio that really was going to make the movie the following year. We let it be known, through some back channeling, what we were looking for and then we let them come at us." And they came strong. After a bidding war, Universal grabbed the prize. "They were like, 'This is going to be a 2012 tentpole for us,'" Wagner continues. "They were talking about the ride for their theme park. They were all in: 'We need this franchise. It's going to be huge.'"

Talk about your fairy tale ending! As casting rumors abound (Johnny Depp and Charlize Theron?), Daugherty is finishing the draft for the studio and marveling at his success. "Some people have accused *Snow White and the Huntsman* of being a sort of cynical reading of the marketplace," he says. "This is a script where I felt like I really tapped in and connected to the main characters. It was very heartfelt. You have to really feel a deep connection to the characters you're writing. I think it's only when that happens that the script becomes really engaging and the characters jump off the page. Write stuff that you're passionate about. If you believe in it and stick with it, there's a good chance that it will pay off." **CS**



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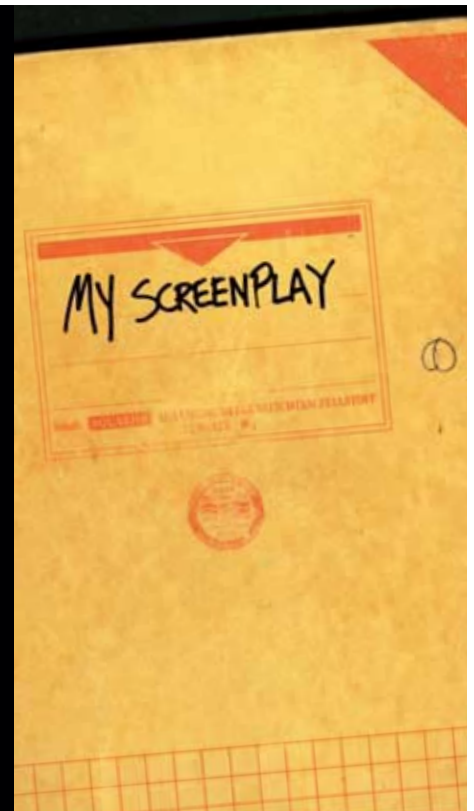
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For *Allan Loeb* (21, *The Switch*), working with director Ron Howard on his latest film, *The Dilemma*, was like pitching a complete game. Yet Loeb admits that he wouldn't even be on the mound if it weren't for some frustrating years that changed the way he played.

I WASN'T A CREATIVE WRITER in my teens or my college years. I loved movies and I had a very active imagination but I never really wrote. A friend of mine moved out to LA to be a screenwriter and he was telling me about how that worked. It was in the early '90s when young kids would sell spec scripts for \$1 million. My friend was like, "You know you write a movie script and you can make a million dollars," making it sound that easy. He was playing that lottery and I said, "Wow, that's interesting to me!"

He would send me the scripts he was writ-

ing and they weren't any good, but I would read them and learn the format and give him my opinions: "I wouldn't end it like this; I would end it like that." And just off that, he said, "Wow, you're pretty good at this. You should come out here with me." And I did. I moved to LA, took a class at UCLA Extension, wrote a few scripts with this friend, and then he was out of the business because he was never really a writer.

By then I was hooked and had to teach myself the whole thing. I read books and took classes on screenwriting. I also had to

teach myself the English language. I was not a real writer. I wasn't good at essays. I wasn't a good student. So I took vocabulary and grammar courses, and did anything and everything I could to continually arm myself with the tools I needed to become a screenwriter. I was self-taught in my early twenties and I wrote script after script after script.

Those years were kind of my minor leagues when I taught myself the fundamentals of writing. At that point, I was absolutely hooked and became better with each script and eventually became a professional.

Yet it was frustrating on the business end, because you're young and expecting riches and working hard and getting rejected. But that's it. That is the process. And if you can't survive that, you'll never make it. That process and that frustration taught me how to be a professional, which I didn't know at the time.

My career went in stages. Those five years in the '90s were the stage of being brand new and working on the craft. Then there were the early professional years, which were more frustrating than anything because I had gotten an agent, I had sold a thing or two, but nothing ever really cooked. I got replaced on every project and I never really made that much money. So I had enough rope to hang myself with; plus, I was getting older. That sec-



Allan Loeb

ond stage, where I was actually a professional, was much more frustrating than the years of being a kid who just didn't know better.

Those were the years when I pondered and actually did leave the business at one point and constantly told myself that I had to figure something else out. I needed a Plan B. I was getting older, I had reached my thirties, I had lost my agent, I was broke. It was pretty dark.

At that point, it wasn't, "Am I good enough or not good enough?" It was simply, "This is too hard to succeed at and I need to be realistic." So I decided to become a stockbroker. But I never quite got there because the market crashed in 2001.

So I was stuck trying to be a stockbroker, and I was still writing scripts but they weren't going anywhere. I didn't have a car. I didn't have an agent. Those were the darkest days.

At some point, I had an epiphany where my success was not going to be based on getting an agent, selling a script and making money. I couldn't keep depending on that because it wasn't happening. I told myself, "If the script I write is better than the last — if, within the process I'm getting better as a writer — then I am a success. It doesn't matter if it sells; it doesn't matter if it gets me an agent. That's my parameter."

That was my big lesson. I had to redefine success and success was getting better at my craft and finding my voice as opposed to selling a script, getting an agent and making a lot of money.

But there were a few years when I was frustrated because I knew I was good enough to be at the table. Often, it's not a case of not being good enough. It's a simple case of it being that hard to get a seat. There are not a lot of seats at the table and there are a lot of people trying to sit at the table. It's that simple.

For me, it was going to New York to write a script that had been kicking around in my brain that everyone responded to, called *The Only Living Boy in New York* — that was the one that got me at CAA and noticed.

The most interesting thing was because of the frustration — because I was writing at a professional level a few years before I broke onto the scene in a major way — I was ready. I could hit it and I did.

A lot of people get there prematurely. They get there too young. They get there because of a great idea or a hot spec, and they don't know what to do with it. It's just as hard, if not harder, on the inside than it is on the outside, by the way.

That's the thing that people don't realize. Everybody just assumes it's all talent and talent is important, but talent's just your outside jumper. You need to play defense. Defense is professionalism and part of professionalism is you have got to be on time. You've got to hit your deadlines.

I don't wait for inspiration. Does a brain surgeon say, "I can't do surgery today. I don't feel it." No, he goes in and he does it every day. It's what he does for a living. You're a professional. You've got to act like a professional. It's huge in terms of getting work.

The Dilemma wasn't my idea. It was Brian Grazer's idea at Imagine Entertainment. My agent called me and said, "Brian Grazer has a very basic notion for a movie idea. It's basically a question: If your best friend's spouse was cheating and you knew, do you tell him?"

I was going to say, "I don't think I can do this, because I don't think it's a real question. I think that the guy code response is, 'Of course you tell him. That's man code. You tell him immediately.' But then I went to a few dinners with a group of people and I floated the question and it was such an active debate. Not everybody said yes, and many people, in fact, said, "You don't tell him." Some people said, "No, you go to the spouse and give them an ultimatum and say they have 24 hours to tell them. And if they don't tell them, you will." I said, "That's fucking great! That's a scene in my movie right there."

It got me engaged. I realized it was a really live-wire issue and I was thinking, "Wow, I get to go write this. I get to bring this debate to the screen. What a great gift!"

That's what I love about writing: It's the most fulfilling pursuit. I get to work through everything I see, feel or go through in my life on the page. It's the greatest gift and blessing of all. It's not even a job. It's free therapy and they're paying me for it. **CS**

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Showing Their True Grit

BY JEFF GOLDSMITH

AFTER A WELL-DESERVED eight Oscar nominations and four wins — including Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay — for 2007's *No Country for Old Men*, a script that also took the WGA's Best Adapted Screenplay award, so many reviewers suggested the film was a modern-day Western that it came as no surprise that co-writer-directors Joel and Ethan Coen finally decided to make an actual Western. *True Grit* is based on the popular 1968 serialized novel by Charles Portis and is a throwback to the stylized Western genre that the Coens grew up

thought he would be interested in it because the protagonist is a child. For the same reason, I think it could be very interesting to kids as a movie. That was the ambition from the beginning."

Tonally, the book and the film's well-written protagonist ultimately bridges all age groups. "The tone of the narrator is very matter of fact," Ethan recently told Kristopher Tapley of InContention.com. "'Yes, I'm a 14-year-old girl, but I went and found the coward Tom Chaney and shot him,' and the matter of factness is actually a hallmark not just of

the book and of her character, but of young adult adventure stories. They're all, 'This kid goes and plunges himself into a strange adult world and these things happen.' There is something unvarnished about those stories that's part of what makes them fun, part of what makes them what they are."

Yet, don't call it a remake. As far as the Coens are concerned, it's simply their own loyal interpretation of Portis' novel and is not "based" on the previous film. As Joel explains to *Creative Screenwriting*, any similarity between their film and the previous work barely qualifies as an influence, "It's all subliminal... because we haven't seen it since it came out in 1969. So we only had a dim recollection of the original movie."

Set a few years after the conclusion of the Civil War, *True Grit* tells the story of 14-year-old Mattie Ross (Hailee Steinfeld), who is joined in her quest to avenge her father's death by Rooster Cogburn (Jeff Bridges) — a rough, boozy, one-eyed U.S.

Marshall — and LaBoeuf (Matt Damon), an idealistic, by-the-book Texas Ranger. As their journey into Indian territory deepens, the group learns that justice is rarely by the book and their trail heats up as they close in on the capture of Mattie's father's assailant, the "coward" Tom Chaney (Josh Brolin).

SLUGGING IT OUT

The Coens like to write lean scripts that, interestingly, lack sluglines. "We've always been that way," Joel says. "We're just trying to



The Coen brothers with Hailee Steinfeld on the set of *True Grit*.

appreciating. (The novel was first adapted in 1969 into an acclaimed film that starred John Wayne.) While most of their work skews toward R-rated adult fare, with this film they expanded their horizon into the realm of a PG-13 film that will also work, in the words of Norville Barnes from *The Hudsucker Proxy*, "You know, for kids."

As told to the *Los Angeles Times*, the brothers were inspired to make the film after reading the book to their kids a few years ago. "A movie that younger audiences wouldn't be excluded from — that was important," Joel said to the *Times*. "There was a reason I read it to my kid. I

make the script readable,” Ethan adds. Eventually, someone else on their production team will add technicalities like scene numbers. “They will make it a little bit more user-friendly for people who have to break down the script for production information,” Joel says.

Oftentimes, all the brothers will write for a slugline is the name of the location, such as “PIT.” Since they rarely bother with clarifying interiors, exteriors or even time of day, which they sometimes put in their descriptions, their style flows smoothly, proving that when information is kept simple, not only does it read faster, but it remains obvious and in no need of further explanation. Consider this example from the 6-12-09 draft:

STREET

Mattie strides along, looking at facades. She stops, looking at the signage on a barn-like building:

Col. G. Stonehill. Licensed Auctioneer. Cotton Factor.

INSIDE

Mattie steps to the doorway of an office set in a corner of a stable.

As seen in this less-is-more approach, the scene works perfectly by conveying everything the reader needs to know, without adding any superfluous information.

THE FINAL CUT

Amusingly, for filmmakers who made a film titled *The Man Who Wasn't There*, that is the perfect description for their longtime, reclusive British film editor named Roderick Jaynes, which is a pseudonym the brothers use when editing their own films. As far as aliases go, Jaynes is their most famous, but they've also written a commentary track full of false film information under their faux film historian alias,

Kenneth Loring, (played by an actor), who can be heard on the *Blood Simple* DVD. Similarly, they wrote comments for Mortimer Young, who also perpetuates false information on *The Big Lebowski* DVD. Yet Jaynes was their first alias and, as Joel explained long ago, the brothers had a simple reason for his creation: “There were already enough Coens in the credits of our movies.”



Showing Their True Grit

Jaynes, although a figment of the Coens' imagination, has been Oscar nominated twice (*Fargo*, *No Country for Old Men*), yet regrettably has never taken home a statue (his speech alone should be worth the votes). As evidenced by their earlier films and more recently in their script for *True Grit*, working all these years as editors, it can be argued that this experience helps the brothers on the page as well — specifically, when it comes to inserting smart visual transitions that utilize their spare slugline style, evidenced in the scene right after Mattie first learns about U.S. Marshall Rooster:

Mattie

Where can I find this Rooster?

MATTIE'S HAND

Rapping at a door of rough plank.

After a beat, a voice-rasping and slurred:

Voice

The jakes is occupied.

Wider. We see that Mattie stands before an outhouse.

Joel explains that the writer-director-editors' film-making process "gets so mushed up with us into one amorphous thing — it's all [part of] making a movie." They see the screenplay as the blueprint and admit that their editing experience helps with structure and transitions on the page, but ultimately Joel feels that editing is "just a later part of the process." He adds, "Instead of chiseling the shape out of the stone in the editing part, you're polishing it. You're sort of inventing a story or adapting a story, just getting the blueprint down from here to there but — and, I guess in a weird way — editing our own stuff must inform that."

Yet even the Coens still fall prey to the same errors that affect all filmmakers: Every once in a while, they find themselves in the editing room wishing they'd scripted a scene differently. "I don't know if I can give you an example of it off the top of my head, but I know that it's happened," Joel admits. "And more often coverage like, 'Why didn't we get this?' than scripting per se," Ethan adds. "You kick yourself on very specific coverage things — that happens to everybody, I'm sure."

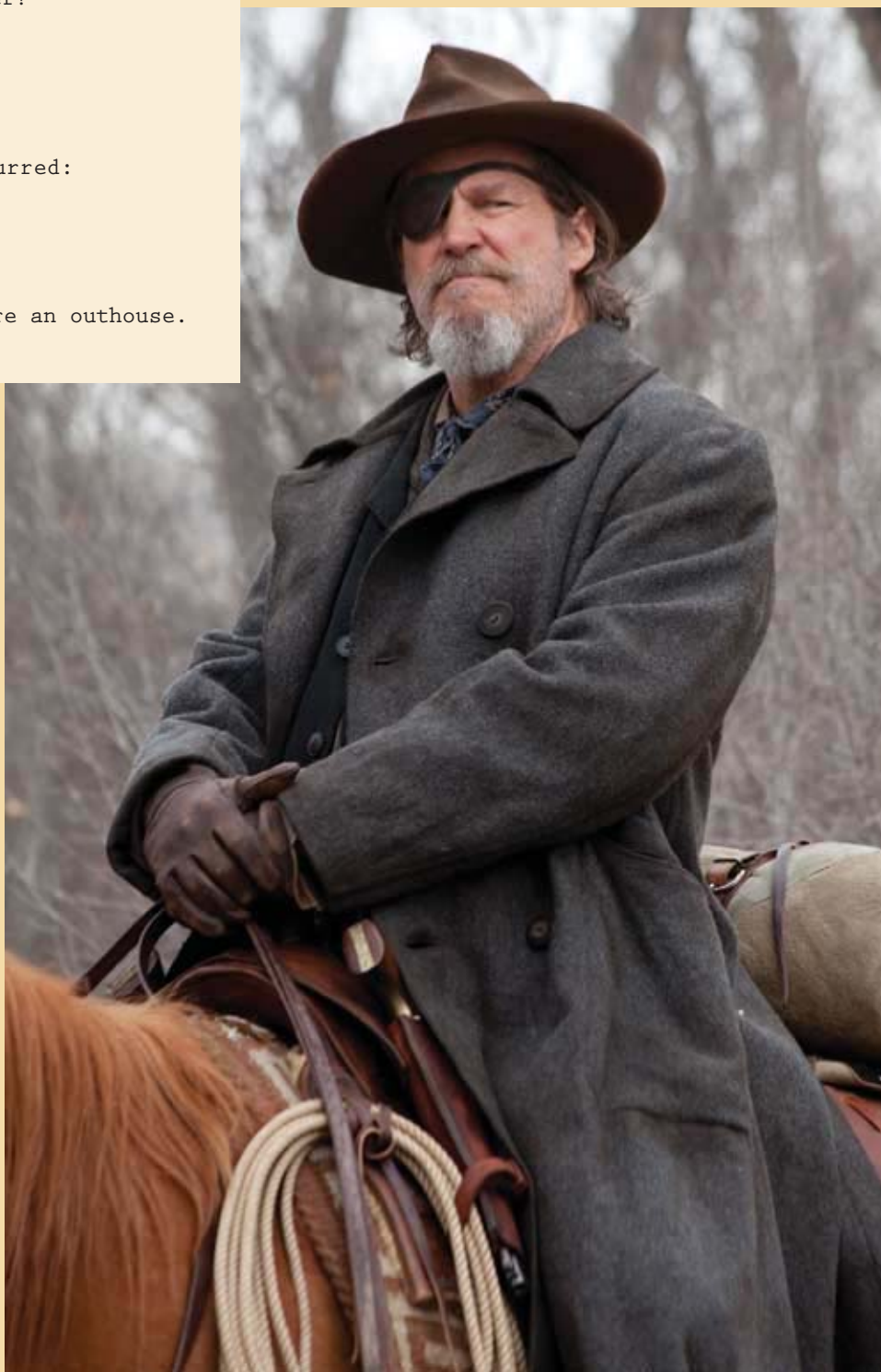
OLD TIMEY TALK

The Coens are often regarded as two of the greatest contemporary American dialogists, because audiences equally revel in their dialogue, whether it's quirky/character-driven (*Raising Arizona*, *Fargo*), tough guy (*No Country for Old Men*, *Miller's Crossing*) or emotionally resonant (*A Serious Man*, *The Man Who Wasn't There*). It seems as though the Coens have reinvented a subtler, more contemporary version of Shakespearean-styled iambic pentameter. Yet for *True Grit*, the brothers were so in love with Portis' dialogue that they decided to leave much of it untouched. This also meant that there was little reason for

the scribes to research that era's speech patterns. "We did not," Ethan says. "Portis clearly did and clearly immersed himself in the ephemera, periodicals and newspapers of the day, and it's just obvious reading the book. But given that we had all that, that he had already done it, we just tried to fill in the blanks."

Since the story is a straightforward revenge tale, there was also less need for exposition through dialogue. "Sometimes that's a challenge," Ethan says. "Not particularly in this movie, with this adaptation. But sometimes you have to get information across and that's always dull and you've got to figure out how to put it across painlessly."

Here the Coens did manage to wrangle a sense of theme into the script, particularly in terms of how the rule



of law is no match for the chaotically cold violence of the Wild West. The following scene contains this tasty bit of theme, which is not only reinforced through dialogue but also by LeBoeuf's comedic tongue injury, which gives him a speech impediment and changes how his dialogue is delivered (*see script excerpt below*):

The scene's topper is, of course, Rooster chiding such legalese, which follows on the heels of the previous scene's violence. As it turns out, some bits of dialogue percolate within the Coens for years, with this particular exchange predating their writing of *True Grit*. "That is not in the book," Ethan says. "It just seemed like Matt is a kind of full-

LeBoeuf

Azh I understand it, Chaney — or Chelmzhford, azh he called himshelf in Texas — shot the shenator'zh dog. When the shenator remonshtrated Chelmzhford shot him azh well. You could argue that the shooting of the dog wazh merely an inshtansh of *malum prohibitum*, but the shooting of a shenator izh indubitably an inshtansh of *malum in shay*.

Rooster is a voice in the darkness:

Rooster

Malla-men what?

Mattie

Malum in se. The distinction is between an act that is wrong in itself, and an act that is wrong only according to our laws and mores. It is Latin.

We hear the *pthoonk* of a bottle yielding its cork, followed by the *pthwa* of the cork's being spit out.

Rooster

I am struck that LeBoeuf is shot, trampled, and nearly severs his tongue and not only does not cease to talk but spills the banks of English.



of-shit character and there's an instance of it. Actually, didn't we put it in *The Big Lebowski*?" Joel thinks about it for a moment and says, "That dialogue? Yes." Ethan adds, "And we cut it out. I think [John] Goodman, who's a similar character, was gabbing—" Joel cuts in, "—About *malum in se* and we cut it out. It originally came from — 'Firing Lines' — William F. Buckley used to talk about it. And I think in one place where we saw it, he was having a discussion with G. Gordon Liddy, if I'm not mistaken. I may be wrong about that."



ADAPTIVE ABILITIES

Though, technically, this is the Coen's fourth produced adaptation, their 2004 remake of the 1955 film *The Ladykillers* and their looser adaptation in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, which is based on Homer's "The Odyssey," the brothers have penned more than a few as-of-yet unproduced adaptations. These include everything from a remake of the 1966 Michael Caine-Shirley MacLaine film *Gambit* (that's heading to the screen, but without their direction), their work-for-hire adaptation of Elmore Leonard's "Cuba Libre," their more recent adaptation of Michael Chabon's "The Yiddish Policemen's Union" and, of course, their endlessly stalled adaptation of James Dickey's "To the White Sea."

What's so fascinating about their adaptation of Dickey's novel is that, in *Sea*, they wrote a 90-page script that really has no more than 11 total pages of dialogue, as it's a first-person subjective adventure story about a downed U.S. airman trying to find safety behind enemy lines in Japan. The lack of dialogue was the initial challenge that drew the usually dialogue-heavy writers to the project. "It was attractive," Ethan recalls. "That was part of why we thought, 'Oh, this would be interesting to do.'"

The artistry on that project is evident in the Coens' use of description, which follows a near haiku fashion. Rarely did they ever write a full paragraph on the page, usually nailing what they needed to convey in just one to three sentences tops, with plenty of white space in between, which makes for a fast and engaging read.

Consider this *To the White Sea* passage, which has U.S. airman, Muldrow, hiding in the cab of a crane in Tokyo harbor, when its Japanese operator shows up for work in the morning and settles in:

He is reading the newspaper.

He turns a page.

There is a long silence.

With an absent shift of weight, the sole of his right foot twists on the floor.

The foot has been resting on the silk of a tufted-out piece of the stowed parachute. Its slick twist underfoot is apparently sensible.

The foot twists again, experimentally, and there is another creak and shift of weight as the man leans to look down at the floor.

After a moment, fingers reach down to feel. A murmur.

Another still beat.

But now a drop of blood hits the white silk. And another drop. Blood patters down onto the silk.

We are close on the man's eyes: they do not move.

We pan down to his slashed throat.

Muldrow holds the man's head by his hair, holding the head forward, forcing the flow of blood outward onto the floor.

It patters now onto the cab floor like rain on a tin roof.

It's a fantastic screenplay that sadly never prevailed over its budgetary woes. "I don't think anything will happen with it," Ethan says. "We couldn't get it made and we came just short of getting money for it... even with Brad Pitt basically doing it for free." Joel chimes in, "Don't set a movie in Tokyo during the firebombing — unless you have lots of money to pay for it. That was the lesson we took away from that. It's pretty straightforward. I don't think our method of taking a book and adapting it into a screenplay has changed that much since we did *To the White Sea*." Although it's destined to sit on a shelf, their hard work wasn't without reward. The long stretches of silence found in *Sea*, as Muldrow stealthily makes his way across the Japanese countryside, were later echoed in the Coens' equally nuanced, silent scenes in *No Country for Old Men*.

While there's a level of artistry in crafting a loyal adaptation, one wouldn't expect filmmakers such as the Coens to not create their own material as well. Standout cre-



ations in *True Grit* include an eerie scene with a hanging corpse and the meeting of a strange, bearskin-clad medicine man. The Coens felt that both scenes helped reinforce the strange world that Mattie was entering,

as all semblances of her known world faded away. "There was a little bit of this idea that when Mattie goes into Indian territory, of her crossing over into a kind of 'never, neverland,'" Joel says, "like Alice going through the looking glass, she enters this realm where bizarre things happen, bizarre characters appear — anything can happen."

Ethan's the faster typist so he does the majority of the typing when he and Joel work on their scripts. When it comes to choosing between writing something original or adapted, the Coens have no allegiance to either. "It's good doing your own stuff because that's stimulating, but it's good to be stimulated by a third party," Ethan says, "[particularly,] a story you would never come up with yourself because there's something stimulating about that, too." Joel adds, "That's the key. You don't want to, or we wouldn't want to anyway, adapt something that sometimes people assume, 'Oh well, you should adapt this because it's right up your alley.' And really, that's the last thing I'd rather do. I want to



adapt something that I wouldn't be able to come up with on my own because that's more interesting."

Similar to their original scripts, the brothers don't outline and, as Joel says, "We just start at the beginning and think it through, write it through — except, of course, you have this *furtherer*, this guide which is the novel." It took the brothers "a couple of months" to complete *True Grit*'s adaptation, which had very few subsequent rewrites.

THE FINAL SHOWDOWN

As for the film's ending, the minute that Mattie kills Chaney, the recoil of the rifle sends her hurtling into a pit, where she's bitten by a snake and then rushed to the nearest doctor by Rooster. As we see, some 25 years later, her revengeful journey that ended in a snake bite ultimately cost her an arm.

Coming on the heels of *A Serious Man*, a film that arguably ends with acts of *force majeure* that are seen as a punishment to various groups of small-time sinners, it might seem that *True Grit*'s action-reaction climax also suggests the intervention of a higher power. As it turns out, the Coens were simply following Portis' structure and insist there isn't anything else to it. "That's interesting, it is *force majeure*... but we thought of it more in terms of the kind of *The Perils of Pauline* (the 1914 serial Western) nature of that kind of adventure-fiction," Joel explains. "As soon as one thing happens, another thing happens immediately afterwards, and there's that willy-nilly action that goes on. That was more of the way we were — we weren't really connecting that in any way to the *force majeure* at the end of *Serious Man*."

As in the novel, there's an ending that includes a 25-year jump in time, which the Coens could have interrupted to allow the characters more time to say their traditional goodbyes (which is what the 1969 film did), but ultimately they saw no point in straying from the novel they love. "That's the end of that story," Joel says. "And all that remains is the non-retrospective part of this story — the part that shows you where she was coming from as she was narrating it." Ethan summed it up to InCon-tention.com: "The immediately striking thing about the novel is it's a first-person story told by this 14-year-old girl, well, actually she's more like 40 talking about what happened when she was 14."

It's rare for too many changes to occur between what the Coens write and what audiences see on the screen, but voiceover is usually the one element that most filmmakers will adjust because of the ease involved in reconfiguring it. Sampled for your reading pleasure is a quick glimpse into a longer, tonally different final monologue for Mattie that no longer appears in the film, even though it did in the book:

visually at this point, they're seeing a woman in her late forties, and the monologue speaks to a woman's views much more than a girl's.

If there is any lesson to be learned about the writing habits of Joel and Ethan Coen, it's that there is a sanctity to the simplicity of their prose, dialogue, structure and transitions, which prove that the simplest, cleanest route to conveying information is always

Voice-Over

...It's just like a cranky old maid to pull a stunt like that, burying him in the family plot. They say I love nothing but money and the Presbyterian Church and that is why I never married. It is true that I love my church and my bank. I will tell you a secret. Those same people talk mighty nice when they come in for a crop loan or a mortgage extension. I care nothing for what they say. I would have married a baboon if I had wanted and fetched it its newspaper and slippers every morning but I never had time to fool with it.



"There was a lot of great stuff in the novel and we tried to put as much as we could in the voiceover in the script, but there just wasn't time," Ethan says. Interestingly, the elimination of this monologue helps maintain the true voice of the young girl the audience has come to know since,

the best way to align both readers and audiences with a narrative. The brothers are creatures of habit who've made very few changes to their process over the years and, when asked what change stands out the most, Joel reflects, "Using the computer. I mean, we used to use a lot of Wite-Out." **CS**

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Obsessive



Compulsion

BY PETER DEBRUGE

THE FILMS OF DARREN ARONOFSKY ARE a study in self-destructive obsession. *Pi* delves into one man's suicidal search for a number that will explain all of nature. *Requiem for a Dream* profiles a mother-son pair of junkies spiraling out of control. *The Fountain* charts the search for eternal life across three separate eras. *The Wrestler* takes that fatal leap into the ring alongside a man who puts fame ahead of family. And now, with the director's latest, *Black Swan* shows how one ballerina's pursuit of artistic perfection leads to her own mental unraveling. Considering the subject matter that drives him, it should come as no surprise that Aronofsky is more than a little obsessive himself.

In the case of *Black Swan*, the director spent 10 years fixating on making a thriller set in the world of ballet. He developed the idea with three different writers — Andres Heinz, John McLaughlin and Mark Heyman — with a specific star in mind, approaching Natalie Portman about the project before making his second film. A decade later, the project would finally crystallize in his head.

"When I read Andres' script, I was cutting *Requiem for a Dream*," Aronofsky recalls, thinking back to 2000. "I always wanted to do something set in the ballet world because my sister was a ballet dancer," he says, but for a whole range of reasons, he could never crack how to tell a story in that milieu. As the years passed, he remembers Portman saying to him, "I'm getting too old to play a dancer. You better hurry up."

Though Aronofsky wrote his first two films himself, with *Black Swan* he saw an opportunity in a spec script called *The Understudy*, which had been acquired by producer Mike Medavoy's Phoenix Pictures. Though *The Understudy* provided the skeleton and many of the key ideas for *Black Swan*, it would take several years and a page one rewrite from Heyman before Aronofsky felt ready to step behind the camera.

"My original screenplay was set in the off-Broadway world, so it was actually an actress, not a ballerina, who undergoes this process," Heinz explains. "It was still centered around a performance in that it was

an actress who was thrust into a lead part, and through the pressure of the performance, coupled with her unstable mind, she had this psychological breakdown."

Heinz wrote *The Understudy* with the in-



Director Darren Aronofsky with Natalie Portman

tention of directing the film himself. After finishing NYU's graduate filmmaking program, he made a feature, *Origin of the Species*, which he had not written. "I felt after directing that film I needed to concentrate on scripts that fit me more," he explains, "and that was why I wrote it in my little East Village tenement apartment."

Heinz had long been a fan of Roman Polanski's films — from *Rosemary's Baby* to *The Tenant* — and considers "that psychological spiral Polanski does so well" to be one of the major influences on *The Understudy*. "I watched *Repulsion* and just could not get it out of my head for weeks. Also, right around that time, I read 'The Double' by Dostoevsky and, all of the sudden, I found a story," he says. "You just feel it in your bones when you have a good story, when you can kind of see the film already from beginning to end."

Heinz immediately began outlining the story, which pulled in elements from *All*

About Eve and other cutthroat showbiz stories. The script opened with a murder, which created the opportunity for a young actress to step into the lead of the show. While a detective investigates the mystery, the performer becomes increasingly paranoid that her understudy — a character designed to be played by the same actress, according to Heinz's original vision — is trying to murder her and take her part.

"I guess in my script, [Aronofsky] found the elements that he needed to graft this idea of the ballerina world that he was fascinated with and, specifically 'Swan Lake,' because already in our first meeting he had that idea of how he wanted to rewrite this," Heinz recalls.

But it wasn't so simple. Though Aronofsky was interested in Heinz's script, Phoenix Pictures was unable to make the director's deal, so development on *The Understudy* moved forward without him. Heinz estimates that he spent a year and a half mak-

ing changes for other directors, including Alfonso Cuarón, none of which factored into what *Black Swan* would ultimately become.

"Andres had the spark of something, but we realized there were fundamental flaws of something set in the off-Broadway world. For one, there are no understudies in the ballet world," says Aronofsky, whose obsession with making a ballet thriller remained unabated. Instead, the director turned his attention to *The Fountain*, a passion project with its own gauntlet of setbacks and obstacles, but not before calling in another writer, John McLaughlin, to try his hand at *Black Swan*.

Second Act

A horror-savvy scribe, McLaughlin previously worked with Aronofsky on an HBO pilot called *Riverview Towers*, about a haunted housing complex, and was tasked with trying to translate *The Understudy* to the world of ballet. Together, he and Aronofsky spent a lot



of time hanging around the American Ballet Theatre in New York, where ballerina Gillian Murphy helped convey to them the stress and commitment involved in her work.

"You have to be really tough mentally because the lifespan is so short," McLaughlin explains. "I think something Darren's obsessed with is the nature of getting to the top and then having to leave. That's under a microscope in the ballet world."

During their research, Aronofsky and the writer were allowed to sit on the stage during a rehearsal of "Swan Lake." "I think we really felt how brutal it was in person," McLaughlin says. "These people are really powerful. They're landing these jumps and your chair is flying up in the air because of it. You watch a ballet from far away, and you think it's this beautiful, graceful thing, but when you're inside of it, it's like this brutal sport. If someone hurts themselves, it's awful—but also an opportunity for someone else."

Armed with Heinz's script and fresh insight into the ballet world, McLaughlin set about his own series of outlines, presenting each one to Aronofsky for feedback. The director was always heavily involved in the process, and though Aronofsky wasn't penning the screenplay himself, by working very closely with the writers, he could be sure the result was a reflection of his vision—a vision that was still very much in flux at this stage in *Black Swan's* evolution.

"With every project I've done a rewrite on, there is an elastic quality about the source material that brings you back," McLaughlin says. "At first, I went further away from *The Understudy* and then, in the next draft, it snapped back to that. An artist can't always identify the parts that are working for him; whatever Darren saw in that first draft, you always want to bring that back."

With both McLaughlin and Aronofsky in New York, the writer's work amounted to an extended conversation with the director, during which McLaughlin would present his progress for discussion, then go away to incorporate Aronofsky's notes, come back to present again, repeating this process for roughly two years. "While you're writing, you might take a little turn, and sometimes he'll respond to that, and sometimes he won't. Sometimes he'll respond to something that wasn't in the script at all," McLaughlin says, citing a detail that had intrigued Aronofsky and factored into his rewriting, but never made it to the screen: "When we were hanging around the ballet, there were these weird

stage-door ballet fans, and we both found them so unsettling. I'm sure they're very nice people, but some of them wait with these big notebooks of ballet autographs. He always wanted that in."

According to Heyman, who had come aboard as Aronofsky's assistant around this time, "In my time working with him, I've realized that Darren is a filmmaker where the idea needs to live with him and be in his soul. So the development process is very



important, because he really needs to get his head wrapped around it and get his hands dirty with it. He's not a person where a script just shows up and he says, 'All right, let's go make this.'"

"His process is finding the real soul of the story he wants to tell," McLaughlin agrees.

"When you're writing with him, he's very involved, and he likes to try different ways until he can see the exact thing that he's wanted. And I would imagine he's still hammering down his idea even as he's shooting, even in the editing room."

Though Heyman would ultimately start over when his time came, a number of the film's themes seemed to take shape during McLaughlin's leg of the process. "It became very much about finding the dark side of your personality to create your art," says McLaughlin, who was still working within *The Understudy's* notion of a doppelganger and the possibility that the audience would never be quite sure whether the dancer's

rival was real or imagined—a complex driven by her determination to succeed in the highly competitive arena. "The funny thing is, Darren is such a nice guy, but he likes to take characters to these dark, dark places," McLaughlin says.

Rehearsal With Aronofsky

Even when he isn't writing himself, Aronofsky functions as an auteur. Lest anyone look at the credits on *Black Swan*

and *The Wrestler* and think that Aronofsky is the sort of filmmaker inclined to take an unproven writer's script and make that movie, it's actually far more useful to think of him as a director who commissions the kind of screenplays he might otherwise write himself.

On *The Wrestler*, the idea was also one that Aronofsky had been obsessed with for years. After reading a dark, sports-related spec script called *Big Fan* by Robert Siegel, former editor-in-chief of *The Onion*, Aronofsky contacted the writer and asked him to help tackle the wrestling movie he had always wanted to make. With *Black Swan*, Aronofsky never planned to shoot *The Understudy*; rather, he saw it as a step toward the ballet movie he had in his head. In both cases, the other common link was Mark Heyman.

Heyman met Aronofsky at NYU, where the director was a guest teacher during the aspiring screenwriter's final year of graduate school. "I said something in class that

he kind of liked, and then a classmate of mine asked me to stay behind to take his picture with Darren, and that created the opportunity to chat as we walked out of the building,” Heyman recalls. “By the end of the conversation, he was like, ‘Why don’t you come work for me?’ So I contacted his producing partner, who told me, ‘I don’t know what he’s talking about. We don’t have any jobs.’”

A few months later, Aronofsky’s assistant left, opening up a job for Heyman while the director focused on postproduction for *The Fountain*. Instead of finishing NYU, Heyman went to work for Protozoa, Aronofsky’s production company. “After *The Fountain* ended, he promoted me to be his development guy, and then on *The Wrestler*, he said, ‘Why don’t you develop this thing with Rob Siegel?’ There had been just one draft of it by that point.”

Though Heyman was not writing *The Wrestler*, he still became acutely aware of the

intense way Aronofsky could work with a writer to will the screenplay into what Aronofsky envisioned. That film emerged through trial and error over the course of 25 to 35 drafts, with Aronofsky constantly testing the progress with new questions and ideas, while Heyman served as the go-between (Heyman actually earned a producer credit on *The Wrestler* for his efforts).

“Rob Siegel, bless his heart, went through so much work and drafts with us through that process, and *Black Swan* is no different,” Heyman explains. “It’s karma. We did it to Rob, and then I had it done to myself, which amounts to just a lot of very deep conversations with Darren. Basically, you write a draft, and he’ll say, ‘I don’t think that works,’ and he’ll throw an idea out that will fundamentally change it, and you’ll just have to go with it. It’s not necessarily little page notes, little tweaks, either. It can be thinking it and rethinking it and trying and trying until it

feels like it’s settled into a shape that he’ll be like, ‘Yes, this is a movie I can understand. This is a movie I can make,’ and then you can start to finetune.”

During the shooting of *The Wrestler*, Heyman often rode to set with the director. In one of their conversations, Heyman mentioned that he wanted to get back into writing, so Aronofsky suggested resurrecting the idea of the story set in the ballet world. At that point, work on Heinz’s and McLaughlin’s scripts had stalled, and though Heyman was familiar with the project as part of his development role, the job essentially called for him to start over.

“This isn’t an ego thing, but I didn’t look at the former drafts of the script at all,” Heyman says. “John’s draft had been sitting there for a while. It had probably been a couple years since we had last engaged with it, and I never looked at *The Understudy* once when I was doing my writing. That was never part of the conversation.”

By that point, whatever elements had interested Aronofsky about those scripts had been distilled into certain guiding ideas — namely, the notion of Nina’s double and the essential *All About Eve*-style dynamic of a woman in a role competing with another woman who wants that same role.

“As Darren and I talked during *The Wrestler*, I suggested, ‘Why don’t we take “Swan Lake,” since that’s obviously an element that you love and want to be part of this film, and instead of it just being one aspect of the movie, why don’t we make *that* the movie?’” explains Heyman, who suggested that Nina’s arc follow that of the princess in Tchaikovsky’s story. “That’s as far as we got in our conversations about where we could go with this thing. So the start of my process was outlining a version of the story that really used ‘Swan Lake’ as its starting-off point, so all the characters, the swan transformation — all of that is ultimately built out of the ballet.”

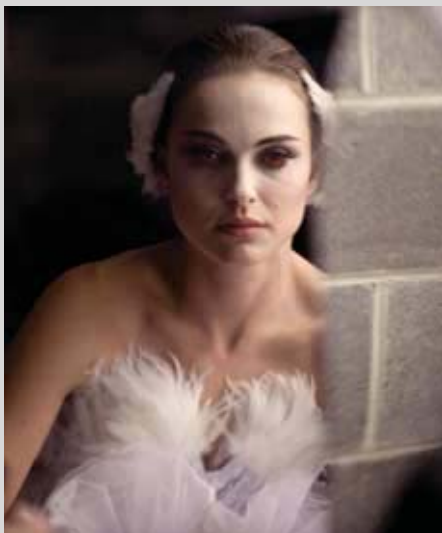
Stage Directions

In “Swan Lake,” an evil sorcerer transforms Princess Odette and all the other girls into white swans. The most beautiful of the birds, Odette is discovered by a handsome prince, who pledges his love just before the sorcerer steals her away. The next day, the sorcerer tricks the prince by introducing his daughter, Odile, who is dressed in black in the play but typically performed by the same dancer. Deceived, the young prince pledges to marry this Black Swan instead. Upon real-



izing his mistake, he and the White Swan run off together, jumping into the lake and breaking the spell at the tragic expense of their lives.

Even with Tchaikovsky's famous ballet as a starting point, Heyman acknowledges, "We still had to go down a lot of wrong roads before getting to the final script." Without Heinz's murder mystery angle, Heyman had to figure out what would serve as the plot engine to drive the story forward. "It's very hard when you're talking about training for a role," he says. "That's not a particularly dramatic or universal thing for the audience." So Heyman experimented with various ideas that might make the story more compelling. In one early version of his script, Nina was



close friends with the ballet company's resident star (a character played by Winona Ryder in the film), until Nina did something incredibly back-stabbing to get the role. "That was a wrong path," Heyman says.

If Nina was to be the princess (the White Swan of Tchaikovsky's ballet), and the show's director-choreographer was a stand-in for her prince (played by French actor Vincent Cassel and modeled after George Balanchine, who famously married and divorced his muses over the years), Heyman still had to figure out who the sources of conflict would be. "The unifying arc was going to be how someone who's a White Swan transforms into a Black Swan, personality-wise, character-wise — what that means, in terms of being darker, seductive, free, as opposed to rigid and controlled," Heyman explains.

In *The Understudy*, Nina and her rival, Lily, were actually the same character. "That was the supernatural, scary aspect," says Heyman, who came up with the idea that Lily would be a different dancer (played by Mila



Kunis) who embodied the Black Swan qualities that Nina needed in order to properly play both roles in the ballet. "That's where the tension started to come from, so that was one of the elements we settled on early," he says. But something was still missing.

Eventually, they landed on the relationship between Nina and her domineering mother (Barbara Hershey). "If this is about a White Swan who becomes a Black Swan, the mother becomes the real thing standing in the way," he says. "Nina really needed to escape her mother to achieve what she wanted, and that relationship is what helped pull us through and gave us the real-world

dramatic storyline outside of just dancing."

But because so much of the film is happening inside Nina's head — very much in the mode of Polanski's *Repulsion*, which had appealed to both Heinz and Aronofsky from the start — the character is effectively her own antagonist as well. "We worked very hard to make sure that all of the surrounding characters of the film were actually real antagonists, too," Heyman says. "It's hard to pull off something where it really is just all in her head. It's hard to sympathize with a character like that." So it became a challenge to figure out how everyone could be seen as either a positive

or negative influence on Nina: “Like that director character, he’s trying to help her, but his methods are a little bit questionable. And Lily’s trying to befriend her, but it’s clear that she has an agenda. And her mother really cares about her, but a little too much. I think that was important. All the characters have that duality, where there’s a good side and a well-intentioned side, but also the dark edge to that and some other ulterior side,” he explains.

A Transformative Idea

For Heyman, the process of writing *Black Swan* took a year and a half, a span during which the writer also worked as a producer on *The Wrestler*. He did much of his early work on the script while traveling back and forth from New York City to Providence, RI, by train, where one of his then-girlfriend’s (now his wife) plays was being produced. “Trains are incredibly peaceful, and there’s something about the constant forward motion that I found helpful, since you can feel incredibly stuck staring at a computer trying to write,” Heyman says. Of course, by that point, he and Aronofsky had done much of the heavy lifting via outlines and discussion, and it was simply a matter of transforming what they had agreed upon into script form.

All three writers swear by the outlining process, which helped Heinz from the very beginning. “I like to take wild right-hand turns that often lead me, sometimes frustratingly, to dead ends, but I try to do that in the outline form, because I find that it saves a lot of time,” Heinz says. For Heyman, “I would write outlines until Darren felt good, and then write a draft off of that outline, and then we’d have a conversation about what still needed work.”

But Heyman knew he couldn’t rely solely on Aronofsky to be sure his progress made sense. “The key is showing an outline to someone who doesn’t really know the story, because that will force you to really flesh things out so it’s understandable,” he says. Every time Aronofsky introduced a new idea, Heyman would outline again — always going back to that stage to explore each concept, no matter how crazy. “The way Darren works, you have to fully execute these ideas. Even if they don’t work, you learn something.”

At one point, Aronofsky suggested a notion that sounded nuts, but ultimately became the backbone of the film. As Heyman remembers it, “He said, ‘Why don’t you make this like a werewolf movie, but a ‘wereswan’ movie? Let’s have a Black Swan trans-

formation, but physicalize it.’” That set the tone for every draft that followed and introduced the idea of Nina’s rash — a physical manifestation of her mental state, as well as a setup for the movie’s supernatural climax.

While it’s possible to tweak and adjust in outline form, with every new draft, Heyman insisted on starting from scratch. “Otherwise it can start to feel piecemeal,” he says. “If certain ideas find their way back in, that’s fine, but you have to avoid copying and pasting.” In that way, a number of the themes from Heinz and McLaughlin’s work on the script

as a coming-of-age story for someone who should have come of age 10 years earlier,” he says. But when Heyman showed a draft to a ballerina friend who’d had a harrowing experience after dancing professionally, she told him, “You understood the intensity of that world very well, and you definitely got the scariness of it all, but I don’t feel like you’ve really shown why people do it.”

As the project approached production, Heyman kept thinking about that conversation with his retired friend, in which she’d explained the almost transcendent feeling



were constantly being polished and re-examined, while new ideas were allowed to emerge organically. One of the key themes of the final version — Nina’s obsessive, impossible pursuit of artistic perfection — actually surfaced quite late in the process.

Like McLaughlin, Heyman had spent a couple months sitting in on rehearsals at the American Ballet Theatre and reading up on the ballet world, but his research tended to focus on thriller-ready details, such as the rigid codes of appearance (suggested through scenes of bulimia and bodily violence) and intense discipline required of performers who began at a very young age (hence, Nina’s stunted girlishness). “I thought of this

she missed most from her ballet career. With that in mind, he went back through the script and rewrote several key moments, threading in this new, clearer idea of what Nina’s character wants. As superficially different as the ballet milieu might have seemed, it was this change that ultimately distinguished *Black Swan* from the equally obsessive worlds of *The Wrestler* and Aronofsky’s other movies.

“I realized there’s almost a spiritual goal in all this,” Heyman says. “Even as you’re destroying yourself, there’s something bigger and higher that you’re striving toward, so it’s not just punishment for punishment’s sake. They’re not masochists.” **CS**



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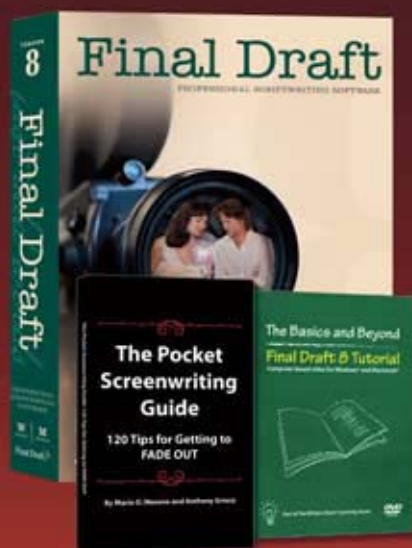
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Lean, Mean and *Green*

BY **PETER CLINES**

CO-WRITERS SETH ROGEN AND EVAN GOLDBERG

were on the set of their film, *Pineapple Express*, in 2007 when producers Neal Moritz and Ori Marmur came to them with another project. They were considering a big-screen version of the cult radio/serial character the Green Hornet and wanted to know if Rogen and Goldberg were interested in taking a stab at the script. "The initial concept was a very expensive, creeping-up-to-\$100-million action movie," Goldberg says. "And we said yes."

It was a perfect assignment since the writers had always wanted to make a giant action movie that revolved around the relationship between a hero and a sidekick. "That's what we'd always been trying to write and we had a hard time cracking it," Rogen says. "As soon as Neal said they wanted to make a big-screen version of 'The Green Hornet,' we told him we really wanted to focus on the relationship between Kato and the Green Hornet. We wanted it to be unconventional and

different, and we really wanted to show the journey of a guy going from the last guy you would expect as a superhero to an actual hero." While developing this idea, they realized Rogen would be perfect for the lead. The writer-actor laughs and says, "If there's one guy who's not a hero, it's me."

RETRO TECH

"The Green Hornet" began as a 1936 radio show created by George W. Trendle and Fran Striker. Newspaper publisher Britt Reid would fight criminal syndicates each night as the masked hero, aided by his martial-arts expert, valet and driver, Kato. The show was quickly adapted into a pair of movie serials that ran at the start of World War II and were later turned into a 1966 television series that starred a then-unknown Bruce Lee as Kato.

In recent years, a few ambitious writers tried reconciling the many different versions of the Green Hornet as a family legacy, the same identity taken on by generation after generation of vigilante crime fighters (as a fun side note: In Striker's original '30s-era stories, the Hornet is the grandnephew of the Lone Ranger, another Striker creation). The end result was that Goldberg and Rogen had a plethora of material to work with. "It's not like we were the most rabid Green Hornet fans," Goldberg admits, "but we both watched the show, we read some of the comics. We really liked the Green Hornet."

Though both writers wanted to keep as many original elements of the character as they could in the film, they also made the de-



cision to keep the show very grounded. "When we wrote our first draft, we were like, 'Let's make this 100% realistic,'" Goldberg says, "and that was our starting point. We kind of got a little more surreal after that, but it's still pretty realistic. So we removed things that were impossible." A miniature flying saucer/surveillance drone that launched from the trunk of the Green Hornet's car went away. So did "the Hornet's Sting," a telescoping cane that used energy waves to blast open locks, start fires and even take down criminals from a distance. "You have to pick and choose," Goldberg says. "What are we going to re-explain to the world in this re-imagining? And the answer is, not the crazy hard-to-explain

things." The writers agreed that though such elements were fun, they'd ultimately be too distracting and time-consuming.

Because movies such as the *Iron Man* franchise made such a solid claim on high-end technological heroes, the writers wanted *The Green Hornet* to have a much more do-it-yourself feel, and wanted whatever gadgets that made their way into the script to also become key elements of the story. "We wanted to incorporate as much stuff as we could," Rogen says, "but not sacrifice the story or the character." One such item was the Green Hornet's gun, which shoots knockout gas, a weapon the writers realized would reinforce critical character elements. "In our movie,

Britt Reid gets a gas gun because he's not as good at fighting as Kato is," Rogen explains. Both men agree that the gas gun is a mild insult coming from Kato, who doesn't need a weapon and also doesn't think Reid can handle an actual firearm.

The scribes agree that a major moment in development was the selection of the Green Hornet's legendary car, Black Beauty, a vehicle so heavily armed that it could give *The Dark Knight's* Batmobile performance anxiety. "We had a lot of companies bring us a lot of crazy different car designs," Goldberg says. Several people in development wanted to bring the story into the present day and have the car be a very sleek, futuristic vehicle. The



writers, however, pushed to stay with the classic, recognizable sedan that fans knew and loved. “In the end, the studio was going to go with whatever Neal Moritz said,” Goldberg recalls, “because he’s the guy who developed *The Fast and the Furious*. And, thank goodness, Neal made the right choice.”

STRANGE ORIGINS

We wanted to avoid doing an origin story at first,” Rogen says, “and the first few drafts of the script told an origin story.” Following their desire to be original, the screenwriters thought it best to skip the “first movie” franchise conventions and go right to the point when Britt Reid and Kato had been vigilantes

for years. “They pretty much had all the same emotional problems that they have now,” Rogen explains. “We just made it like it was building to this kind of emotional [crisis] that they were having.”

After trying a few different takes on that story, the writers realized they were left with too many unanswered questions. “We also started to realize we could have a lot of fun with the origin aspect of it,” Rogen says. “That, in and of itself, we could reinvent and subvert the notion of a superhero origin as opposed to just trying to avoid it altogether.”

The co-writers are big advocates of outlining, but it wasn’t always this way. “I would say that it was on *Superbad* that we learned to become outliners,” Goldberg chuckles. Their goal was to create an outline so detailed that anyone would be able to pick it up and turn it into the right script. This, in and of itself, is a two-month project under normal circumstances, but *The Green Hornet* was far from normal.

The screenwriters estimate that they went

They joke that, in the end, the outline process ultimately took them close to two years.

In the film, Britt Reid (Rogen) is the irresponsible, hedonistic son of publisher James Reid (Tom Wilkinson). When James dies from an allergic reaction to a bee sting, Britt finds himself bonding with the man who takes care of his father’s car collection, a mechanical genius and amazing barista by the name of Kato (Jay Chou). After a drunken attempt to desecrate his father’s grave leads to a thwarted mugging, Britt decides the duo should find purpose by becoming crime fighters — not publicly, though, like all those other superheroes in the movies. The two of them will pose as criminals instead and “take over” Los Angeles, taking out every level of crime without exposing themselves and eventually working their way up to the city’s uber-crime lord, a man called Chudnofsky (Christoph Waltz). Thus begins the legend of the Green Bee... who Kato quickly renames *The Green Hornet*.

“What this movie had that none of our

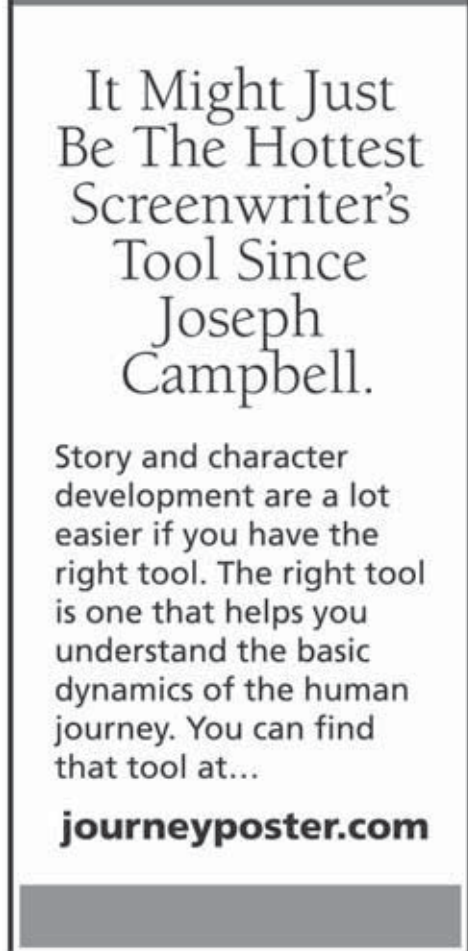


through seven major versions of the script as they showed it to different studio heads and directors (original director Steven Chow left the project and was replaced by Michel Gondry). One version had Britt Reid and Kato meeting in China. Another had an elaborate frame story that began in the thick of the action before it flashed back for a third of the script. There were also drafts with the Green Hornet fighting a super villain syndicate that had put a price on his head and another that involved elaborate arms deals with the military. For some versions, Rogen and Goldberg were creating outlines in just a few weeks.

other movies had is a real plot,” Rogen says with a completely straight face. “You learn that this guy’s secretly been working for *this* guy and secretly *this* guy killed *this* guy. It made me really nervous because we’d never done anything like that. I was amazingly thankful and relieved when we finally showed the movie to audiences and they totally went along and really liked it.”

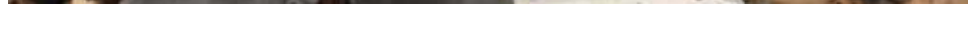
HERO TRAINING

When it comes to the actual writing of the script, though some writing teams divide the project by pages or scenes, Goldberg and



Despite being known for his ad-lib skills, Rogan insists that his scripts are filled with solid, funny material. "You have to write jokes or the studio just won't make the movie," he says with a chuckle. "I wish I could just write a script that wasn't funny and say, 'Don't worry, we'll make it funny when we shoot it.' They just don't trust you." That being said, he also says that *The Green Hornet* uses a lot of the natural, on-the-fly dialogue and humor that marks his other movies. Goldberg is quick to point out, though, that the final cut of *Superbad* was still almost 90% scripted material. Rogan agrees with a shrug and says, "You'll improvise stuff for two hours and then you'll end up using exactly what you wrote in the first place."

Despite this, while both writers agree that inventing scenes filled with gunfights and martial arts was a dream come true, they also feel that a good action-comedy may be the hardest genre to write for. Or, at least, the hardest to write well. "If it's good, you really want the action to be part of the story and the characters," Rogen says, "and at the same time tonally not feel different from the rest of it. So



to feel like it's the same movie when there's two guys just talking about stupid funny stuff as it is when there's 50 guys shooting at those two guys — it's a real challenge to do all that."

One thing *The Green Hornet* had, which the writers' previous films didn't, was a plot that hinged on a solid villain. "For *Pineapple Express*," Goldberg explains, "Gary Cole really nailed it, but we only had two days to

film his villain stuff and the story was really all about Seth and James Franco. In *The Green Hornet*, the story is really all about Jay and Seth, but Christoph Waltz has his own plot and his own story." They stress that their villain, Chudnofsky, isn't just someone for the Green Hornet and Kato to fight but a fleshed-out character with his own growth and story arc. Much as Britt Reid is the regular guy who becomes a superhero, Chud-

"As we fleshed out the idea," Goldberg notes, "we realized, 'What's the best thing about the Green Hornet?' It's that Kato's the real superpower, shall we say, and Britt Reid is just a [regular guy]. We needed someone who was not a hero. And that," he says, "is Seth's forte. It allows us to build from square one up to 'heroic,' which makes it the most emotionally satisfying for the audience."

As Rogen points out, many superhero



nofsky mirrors this development of a regular gangster who becomes a supervillain. "In the end, the audience doesn't want to see the Green Hornet battling a dude with a gun who's totally normal," Goldberg says. "They want some kind of escalation."

Both writers also admit that after Heath Ledger's Oscar-winning performance as the Joker in *The Dark Knight*, the bar had become significantly higher for superhero movie villains. "We felt that we had to up our game a little bit," Rogen says, "and make it something interesting and unique." Rogen and Goldberg also make the observation that in *The Dark Knight*, the Joker comes out of nowhere, lacks an origin story and has no arc whatsoever. Normally, this would be the antithesis of a strong antagonist, "but they really did a lot with it," Rogen points out. "So we really had to make our villain memorable and awesome."

All this leads to one of the biggest questions circling the script: Can there be a serious *Green Hornet* movie with the comedically talented Rogen in the title role?

films begin with characters who, one way or another, are already a few steps down the superhero path. In *Iron Man*, for example, Tony Stark is a genius billionaire with a weapons-manufacturing empire at his beck and call. *Spider-Man*'s Peter Parker is a character whose instincts always guide him toward being a good guy. "We wanted to deconstruct all that," Rogen explains, so they began with a character who physically and emotionally was almost incapable of doing anything for others, let alone performing actual heroic acts.

After a bit of thought, Rogen offers that this may be one of the inherent reasons people still enjoy older superheroes like the Green Hornet. "I think what is appealing about pulp heroes is that most of them don't have any superpowers," he says, "which just makes it seem that much more obtainable. It just makes it that much easier for the average person at home to think, 'Hey, I could do that.' It's easy to relate to a guy who builds a car with machine guns." **CS**

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THE BEST SCREENWRITING

Favorite Opening Scenes of 2010

Peter Debruge: It's hard to top the break-up that opens *The Social Network*, which sets the tone for the talky, hyper-articulate, put-down parade that follows, though I'm also a great admirer of the way *Rabbit Hole* begins, establishing Nicole Kidman's character in a nonverbal way: She's lost a son and has learned to cope with her grieving by gardening and baking, two fields that restore a certain measure of control in her life. We see

her planting seedlings in the yard — symbols of new growth — and then the neighbor comes by to invite her to dinner, accidentally stepping on a plant in the process, and from Kidman's reaction, we realize just how fragile she really is.

Jeff Goldsmith, Danny Munso and Nev Pierce: The best-written scene of the year comes from Aaron Sorkin's *The Social Net-*

work: Future-billionaire Mark Zuckerberg is being dumped by his girlfriend during a concerto of dialogue that finishes with the perfect line: "You're going to go through life thinking that girls don't like you because you're a tech geek. And I want you to know... that won't be true. It'll be because you're an asshole."

Jenelle Riley: *The Town*, *The Last Exorcism*

Favorite Characters of 2010

Peter Debruge: *Greenberg* is just a genius creation — one of those rarities in Hollywood: a main character who's allowed to be a bastard for the entire movie and, unlike *As Good As It Gets* or a hundred other such films, never encounters that one thing that makes him want to be a better person. And because he's been written by Noah Baumbach, he comes across as the real deal, matched only by Lenny, the deeply flawed father in the Safdie brothers' *Daddy Longlegs*, who crushes sleeping pills

and feeds them to his two sons when he can't find a babysitter.

Jeff Goldsmith: Jennifer Lawrence as Ree in *Winter's Bone* shows both vulnerability and resilience in her gritty quest to solve the mystery of her father's death. I must also concur with Debruge, though, that as a new father, Lenny the busy dad from *Daddy Longlegs* resonated for quite a long time with me, although I'd never do anything that selfish to my kids.

Danny Munso: The 13-year-old Hit-Girl from the under-appreciated *Kick-Ass* steals the film with her, um, "colorful" language.

Nev Pierce: Mark Zuckerberg (*The Social Network*), Omar (*Four Lions*), Eames (*Inception*)

Jenelle Riley: Stanley Tucci and Patrica Clarkson as Olive's parents in *Easy A*; Jennifer Lawrence as Ree in *Winter's Bone*; Chloe Moretz as Hit-Girl in *Kick-Ass*

Favorite Scripted Ensemble Cast of 2010

Peter Debruge: *I Love You Phillip Morris* — I can't believe that this movie exists, and the fact that it took this shape is even more astonishing to me. It's impressive that the cast was willing to go "full gay" (to twist an idea from *Tropic Thunder*), defusing whatever homophobic tension might arise through comedy (as opposed to the insulting *I Now*

Pronounce You Chuck & Larry, which copped out by having Adam Sandler ogle Jessica Alba for the whole movie).

Danny Munso and Jeff Goldsmith: It's a tossup since *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World's* Edgar Wright and Michael Bacall brought Bryan Lee O'Malley's characters to life with the same wit and

comedic timing they had in the original comics. Yet it's hard to ignore that Aaron Sorkin created a masterful and memorable ensemble in *The Social Network* as well.

Nev Pierce: *The Social Network*

Jenelle Riley: *Inception*, *Get Him to the Greek*, *Easy A*



OF 2010

OUR WRITERS AND EDITORS list their favorite scripts, characters, moments and more from 2010 — an amazing year for screenwriting.

Favorite Dialogue

Peter Debruge: Aaron Sorkin's the closest thing we have to Paddy Chayefsky working today and, while *The Social Network* is no *Network*, it features scene after scene of blistering dialogue and withering put-downs.

Jeff Goldsmith: *The Social Network* is a textbook of near-perfect dialogue. However, my favorite line is from *Winter's Bone* — when Teardrop grips his gun and is about to face off with the corrupt Sheriff, he says everything by barely saying anything:

TEARDROP: Is this our time?

Danny Munso: From *Inception*:

COBB: What's the most resilient parasite? An idea. Resilient... highly contagious. Once an idea has taken hold of the brain it's almost impossible to eradicate.

Nev Pierce: (all from *The Social Network*)

MARK ZUCKERBERG: "If you guys were the inventors of Facebook, you'd have invented Facebook."

HARVARD BOARDMEMBER: "I don't understand"

ZUCKERBERG: "Which part?"

ERICA ALBRIGHT: "The Internet's not written in pencil, Mark. It's written in ink."

Jenelle Riley: There's two I love, both from Stanley Tucci's (Dill) character in *Easy A*:

"After we watch *The Bucket List*, remember to cross 'watch *The Bucket List*' off our bucket list."

And when his black son says he's adopted:

"WHAT? OH MY GOD! WHO TOLD YOU???? Guys, we were gonna do this at the right time!"

Favorite Setting of 2010

Peter Debruge: The Island of Berk in *How to Train Your Dragon*, where humans live in constant fear of dragon attacks and one boy who has the courage to think differently proves that the two species can actually ben-

efit one another by working together.

Jeff Goldsmith, Jenelle Riley and Danny Munso: Chris Sparling's sparse and brilliant *Buried* uses one location to maximum dra-

matic effect, a feat more impressive given that that location is the inside of a coffin.

Nev Pierce: Dom Cobb's mind — or is it? (*Inception*)

Favorite Action Scene of 2010

Peter Debruge: Hiccup's first flight in *How to Train Your Dragon*.

Jeff Goldsmith: I know it's geeky and obvious, but I'm still blown away by the multi-tiered dreams within dreams of *Inception*'s climax, which tracks multiple action se-

quences all at once and was amazing to see on the screen. And, honestly, it's equally incredible to read on the page as well.

Danny Munso: Not sure they technically count as "action" scenes, but the tensiest moments I witnessed on screen came

in the final act of *Black Swan*, where the lines of reality become dangerously blurred.

Nev Pierce: The final dance in *Black Swan*

Jenelle Riley: The nun bank heist in *The Town*





Favorite Emotionally Poignant Scene

Peter Debruge: Roger Ebert once said, “Tears come not because something terrible has happened, but because something good has happened, which reveals the willingness of people to be brave and kind.” This year, *127 Hours* serves as a perfect example of that point. It’s a heart-wrenching movie in which we watch someone brought to the brink of death forced to make an impossible decision (to remove his own arm or die trapped beneath a boulder), but the moment that gets me is when he cries out to the first people he sees after emerging

from Blue John Canyon. Without hesitation, they run to his aid, offering him water and assistance. I wept at that moment.

Jeff Goldsmith: There’s great emotional material throughout *Winter’s Bone* as Ree continues to get pushed around by the world, but without a doubt the scene where a wave of emotion washes over her as her journey concludes and its final horror begins when she has to help chain-saw off her father’s hands in order to prove he’s really dead, not just skipping bail, so that she

can save her family and house – now that was an emotional scene not to be forgotten!

Danny Munso: See my answer in the next category for the rare instance where a crisis point can be the most emotional moment in a film.

Nev Pierce: Omar (Riz Ahmed) being encouraged in his jihad by his wife and child (*Four Lions*).

Jenelle Riley: Phillip Morris (Ewan McGregor) racing to the prison yard for the first time in order to catch a parting glimpse of Steven Russell (Jim Carrey).

Favorite Crisis Point or Climax

Peter Debruge: I have issues with *Toy Story 3* that nearly every other critic in America didn’t see, but I am in awe of its climax, as Woody, Buzz and the gang are dumped off the end of the conveyor belt into the pit where toys go to die. Of course, they won’t die — this is a billion-dollar franchise, after all — but just the fact that they come that close to being melted down into plastic globs is gutsier than I would have imagined. And though the rescue depends on a massive *deus ex machina*, it works, serving as a satisfying callback to the first movie in the series (the claw!).

Jeff Goldsmith: The climax of *Winter’s Bone* really grabbed me, but I’d be lying if I didn’t say I wasn’t riveted by the incredible climax in *The King’s Speech* (his speech), *Inception*’s ultra-inventive climax, *127 Hours* shocking climax and lightning fast denouement (see this issue’s *Lost Scenes* article for more on that), *Toy Story 3*’s emotional climax and resolution, *Four Lions*’ tragically hilarious climax and, of course, the transformation of the White Swan into the Black Swan makes for a tour de force entire third act — I can’t pick just one! Next time you hear some idiot talk about 2010 being a bad year for movies, please kick ‘em for me.

Danny Munso: Near the end of *Toy Story 3*, the toys appear headed toward their demise. Their touching reaction: to grab each other’s hands and accept their fate — a heart-wrenching sequence for anyone who’s spent the last decade loving these characters.

Nev Pierce: Omar’s crisis of conscience at the marathon (*Four Lions*); Teddy Daniels in the lake (*Shutter Island*)

Jenelle Riley: The Black Swan dance in *Black Swan*

Favorite Ending

Peter Debruge: *Never Let Me Go* — This movie is engineered to break your heart, but it also dares to ask the big questions. It’s the year’s best meaning-of-life movie and one of the few to ask the question (the only other ontological film that comes to mind is *Toy Story 3*, in which toys are created to provide companionship to humans). The ending, like so much of Alex Garland’s excellent adaptation, improves on the book for a couple of reasons: First, it opens up the film, defusing the mystery about the sci-fi story’s cloning premise. Second, it allows us to see the donation process and realize the horror of it, which is compounded by the characters’ resignation to their fates. In any other film,

when Ruth flatlines, the doctors would rush to her aid and try to save her, but here, they walk away, allowing her to “complete.” It’s all very British (such resignation would never fly in an American movie — and it didn’t in *Logan’s Run*), but the characters accept their fates here, and it’s devastating when we learn the secret: “We didn’t have the Gallery in order to look into your souls. We had the Gallery in order to see if you had souls at all.”

Jeff Goldsmith: *Black Swan*, *127 Hours*, *Winter’s Bone* and *Four Lions* each have such riveting endings that I can’t pick which one I liked best, because they’re all so incredible. And who

could ever forget the spine-chilling ending of *Buried*?! Hell, I love the end of *Inception*, *Never Let Me Go* and *Toy Story 3* as well. So do you think you could ever possibly guess who failed this part of the quiz?

Danny Munso: I’ll be the one to give the clichéd answer. Let’s be honest: You’re still not sure if the top was going to stop spinning, are you? (*Inception*)

Nev Pierce: The cloth on the fence, as Kathy watches on (*Never Let Me Go*)

Jenelle Riley: *Toy Story 3*

Top 5 Adapted Screenplays of 2010*

Peter Debruge:

The Social Network
How to Train Your Dragon
Rabbit Hole
Never Let Me Go
I Love You Phillip Morris

Jeff Goldsmith:

Winter's Bone
The Social Network
127 Hours
I Love You Phillip Morris
Toy Story 3

Danny Munso:

Toy Story 3
The Social Network
The Town
Scott Pilgrim vs. the World
Winter's Bone

Nev Pierce:

The Social Network
Never Let Me Go
Shutter Island
Nowhere Boy
Scott Pilgrim vs. the World

Jenelle Riley:

Winter's Bone
The Town
I Love You Phillip Morris
The Way Back
Scott Pilgrim vs. the World

* Note: Very few staffers had seen *Rabbit Hole*, *Tron*, *I Love You Phillip Morris* or *True Grit* at presstime.

Top 5 Original Screenplays of 2010

Peter Debruge:

Secret Sunshine
The Kids Are All Right
Tiny Furniture
Greenberg
Blue Valentine

Jeff Goldsmith:

Inception
Black Swan
The King's Speech
Four Lions
Buried

Danny Munso:

Inception
The King's Speech
Black Swan
The Kids Are All Right
Easy A

Nev Pierce:

Four Lions
Inception
Black Swan
Africa United
Skeletons

Jenelle Riley:

Easy A
The King's Speech
Black Swan
The Last Exorcism
Buried

Movie Most in Need of a Script

Peter Debruge: *I'm Still Here*. Joaquin Phoenix may have given the riskiest performance of the year in this pseudo-documentary about his decision to quit acting and begin a hip-hop career, but

the movie is a disorganized and unstructured mess. He and director Casey Affleck should have learned something from the team behind *Borat*, who prepared Sacha Baron Cohen before send-

ing him into situations and came away with comedy gold. Instead, they seemed to be making things up on the go, and the record of their experiment is excruciating to watch.

Documentaries We Love

Best Worst Movie, *Gasland*, *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, *Catfish*, *Restrepo*, *Waste Land*, *The Tillman Story*, *Babies* and *Inside Job*

More Love for *Inception*

I knew as I wrote this section that it had too much spoiler information to run with the July/August 2010 cover story of *Inception*, which hit the stands a week before the film

came out. (If you didn't read it – visit creativescreenwriting.com to learn how you can digitally download that issue). Yet, now that the film is on Blu-Ray and DVD, Mr.

Nolan is happy for this information to be shared — so, loyal reader, here's just a little bit more about the antagonist from one of this year's most original films (spoiler alert!):

The Enemy Within

Heist films often have loosely conceived antagonists and, similar to a mission-focused war film such as *The Guns of Navarone*, the heist or situation of the impossible mission often becomes a silent antagonist. Or as Nolan explains, "They usually focus on a character who's in the way of the obstacle and try to give that person a little more reason to hate them, but they're not true antagonists." He upped the ante with *Inception* and returned to the concept of a protagonist being his own worst antagonist (like he did

in *Memento*) by diving deeper into the human psyche and internalizing its struggles with itself.

According to Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, males and females have an opposite-sex persona buried deep in their unconscious, known as the *animus* and the *anima*. Thus, Cobb's construct of his deceased wife, the aptly named Mal — the film's antagonist — is someone who is embedded in his dreams and is also a function not only of his own consciousness but also of his anima, which again shows just how unreliable and dangerous the landscape of Cobb's plans and

dreams have become. "He's at war with himself," Nolan says. "It's a huge leap to make. For me, it was important to set her up as an antagonist for the audience, right from the get-go, that she be a *femme fatale*. She's very mysterious. She's very aggressive at times. She's quite frightening, but she's also very desirable — he clearly loves her. So with that antagonist relationship, it felt like what we're doing is taking a film noir trope that I've always enjoyed tremendously to its logical conclusion about who this person is and about what they represent."

— Jeff Goldsmith

OPENING DOORS

The Don & Gee Nicholl Fellowship

WHEN GEE NICHOLL first approached the Motion Picture Academy in 1985 about setting up a program to help new writers, most screenwriters were still chained to their typewriters and personal computers were still in their infancy. Though rumor has it that she made a similar proposal to the Television Academy, she opted to go with the Motion Picture Academy instead, and together they launched the first competition in 1986, which was named after her late husband, TV writer-producer Don Nicholl (*All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons*).

The inaugural contest was open only to California college students. Entrants were allowed to submit a variety of formats, including screenplays, teleplays, fiction or stage plays. In that first year, there were 99 entries with three winners — or “fellows” — chosen. The original three included indie filmmaker Allison Anders (*Gas Food Lodging*, *Mi Vida Loca*), Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and playwright Dennis Clontz and Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Jeffrey Eugenides, author of “The Virgin Suicides” and “Middlesex.” Not a bad catch for such a small net!

The following year the contest expanded to college students in nine states and residents of Texas. Two years after that, the contest was expanded to any U.S. resident. Yet as the competition grew (by 1990, there were 2,888 entries), so did the need for a permanent director for the program.

It was around that time that Greg Beal caught wind of a new job at the Motion Picture Academy. “It was one of those things where I just happened into it,” Beal recalls. “I was working at AFI at the time and somebody told me, ‘There’s this job over at the Academy; you should apply for it.’” Beal was quickly hired to oversee the fledgling contest and has since seen it grow from the original 99 entries to 6,300 entries and beyond (2009 set the record with 6,304).

THE CONTEST

So how does Beal sort through such a mountain of material? Assisted by Nicholl program manager, Joan Wai, Beal has cultivated a host of professional readers (56 in 2010) who help narrow the field, one script at a time. And lest anyone think their scripts are just carelessly tossed into an electronic slush pile for



some random reader, Beal reassures that each script is handled with care. “I basically select every single script for every single reader, one by one, for the entire competition,” he says. “We have asked every reader what kinds of scripts and genres/subject matter they like and don’t like, and I have that all in front of me at all times when I’m assigning.”

THE RULES

(according to <http://www.oscar.org>)

Original, feature-length screenplays only (only adaptations of your own work are allowed).

Up to three different scripts can be submitted.

Scripts must be submitted electronically in PDF format with NO name on the document.

\$45 entry fee for each script.

All scripts must be received by 11:59pm on May 1.

In addition, every script must be submitted without a name or other identifying information on the cover to ensure a “blind” read. In fact, Beal has even gone to the trouble of making sure every electronic file is stripped of any identifying information or metadata. “We found as we started dealing with PDFs that the metadata, the properties table, often had names so we had to figure out how to strip stuff out of that, too.” Now the process is automatic. Entries are stripped of any metadata as they are received, so there is absolutely no chance of biasing a reader in any way, which allows the writing to speak for itself.

Beal even makes sure that writers who have entered scripts previously get a fresh read from a new reader each time they re-submit their work, so that no script is read twice by the same reader.

And though it seems that many of the winners are English-speaking, male residents of California, the results are simply a reflection of the entries. According to the Academy, 30% of entries come from female writers and a similar percentage of women have won the

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BY SEAN KENNELLY

Nicholl (roughly 27%). It should also be noted that many aspiring screenwriters move to California to break into the business. So while their home may be a California zip code, many have come from places far and near.

JUDGMENT

All in all, the Nicholl Fellowship is as fair a contest as you'll find anywhere, and Beal states that the only criteria he gives the readers is to find the best. "We're looking for the best screenplays, the best stories, the best writing, the best craft, the best characters." That said, Beal revealed that there is a 100-point scale and scripts that score at least 60 or higher are read a second time by a different reader (last year, just under 2,900 out of 6,380 were read a second time). Those scripts that receive at least

one score of 80 or better are then read a third time (900 scripts last year). Finally, those scripts with two scores of 80 or better advance to the quarterfinals (325 last year).

Much like the initial round, the quarterfinal scripts are read twice, with the higher-scoring scripts being read a third time for a total of six reads. Then the scripts with the best five out of six scores are sent to the semifinals (114 made the cut last time).

The semifinalist screenplays are read by four industry pros, who are all members of the various branches of the Academy — from editors to actors and even a few agents (who are associate members). From there, the best 8 out of 10 scores are tallied and the top 10 advance to the finals (interestingly Beal noted there was one year that 11 were selected).

Finally, the 12 members of the Nicholl committee are given the scripts, again without names or identification, for an unbiased read. Chairing the 2010 committee is producer Gale Anne Hurd (*The Terminator*), who guides discussions over the scripts with the other committee members, who include cinematographer John Bailey (*As Good As It Gets*), writer-producer Naomi Foner (*Running on Empty*), former WMA agent and executive Ronald Mardigan, producer and former head of 20th Century Fox Bill Mechanic (*Coraline*), screenwriter and former WGA president Daniel Petrie Jr. (*Beverly Hills Cop*), cinematographer Steven Poster (*Donnie Darko*), writer Thomas Rickman (*Coal Miner's Daughter*), actress Eva Marie Saint (*North by Northwest*), producer Peter Samuelson (*Arlington Road*), producer Robert Shapiro (*Empire of the Sun*) and writer-producer Dana Stevens (*Julie & Julia*).

After the reading period, committee members are given letters written by each writer that provide background on themselves and their plans for the fellowship year, should they be chosen. The committee then meets to debate the merits of each script and writer, with up to five fellows chosen from among the finalists (though in 1988 no fellows were chosen). According to Beal, those discussions can be rather passionate, with some committee members hating the very script another member adores.

Yet even those who fail to make the cut

often come back for more and, sometimes, they win.

One screenwriter got cut in the final round, entered again the following year and became a fellow with the exact same script. Her name: Annmarie Morais (*How She Move*). Although she received detailed notes from Oscar-winning committee member and former WGA president Frank Pierson (*Dog Day Afternoon*), she skipped the rewrite and entered her script in the competition again and won.

Though this year's fellows can't claim to have made the finals two years in a row with the same script, their stories reflect the passion for writing that seems to beat in the heart of every Nicholl fellow.

DESTIN DANIEL CRETTON

Growing up in Maui, Hawaii, with three sisters and two brothers, Destin Daniel Cretton discovered that he had a strange addiction. "I was kind of addicted to making these little movies with my grandma's video camera," he admits. "I honestly didn't know that filmmaking was an option, that you could do something like that in life."

When he got to college, he found there was a Mass Communications major that offered a video production class.

So he jumped in with both feet and initially started writing and filming short films that began to get some attention. One of the shorts, *Short Term 12* — which was based on Cretton's experiences working in a group home for troubled teens — won the 2009 Sundance Short Filmmaking Award and was a semi-finalist for the Student Academy Awards.

"After seeing the response the short got," Cretton says, "I realized it was a bit more of a universal subject than I expected." So he set out to write a feature-length version of the short, but stretching the characters and stories to fit a longer format wasn't working. "It just wasn't working at all," he recalls. "I felt like I was copying somebody, even though it was myself." So Cretton decided to change the main character



FELLOW WISDOM aka DON'T QUIT YOUR DAY JOB

"Don't think about the competition. Think about the work. Think about the art. Think about the story you want to tell. You can't control the competition. You can control what you create."

— Cinthea Stahl

"If you're writing trying to please someone else, you're fucked. You're not going to be able to write shit. Please yourself first and then you can please that other person."

— Marvin Krueger

"I think working in a short format, whether it's writing short scripts, short films or short stories, really helped me focus on the bare essentials of what is needed in a story."

— Destin Daniel Cretton

"I don't think you should necessarily try to write for the market or try to predict what you think the Nicholl Fellowship would want. Write the subjects you love."

— Micah Ranum

"I know people have to make a living, but if you're going into this business because you think you're going to be rich, you're wrong. The only reason you should go into this business is because you just have to."

— Marvin Krueger

NARROWING THE FIELD – 2009 STATS

6,380 entries

2,900 read twice

900 read three times

325 read five times

180 read six times

114 read 10 times

10 read by a committee of 12 for
a total of 22 reads for each finalist
with 5 fellows selected

THE GENRE REPORT

*Winning Script Genres from
1989-2009*

37 – dramas

22 – comedy

17 – thrillers

11 – war/terrorism

8 – action-adventure

3 – horror

3 – Western

2 – science-fiction

from a 35-year-old male to a 25-year-old female, sparking new life in the story and paving the way for the feature version of *Short Term 12*: the story of a 25-year-old girl who supervises a teen group home and struggles to care for her teenage patients while desperately avoiding the residue of her own dark past.

Entering the contest on a whim, Cretton had no idea it would “go this far.” In fact, he missed Beal’s initial call and when he dialed the number back to find out who had tried to contact him, he got the receptionist at the Motion Picture Academy. “My heart dropped. I got really nervous and didn’t know what to say.” Finally, Cretton realized that he had entered the Nicholl and was transferred to Beal who gave him the good news.

“The cool thing about this whole Nicholl process is it’s a complete level playing field,” Cretton remarks. “Even though my short film won Sundance, I wasn’t allowed to allude to any of that when I submitted my screenplay. And if a kid growing up in the dirt and living out in the country in Maui, Hawaii, can win a fellowship, anybody can.”

MARVIN KRUEGER

While the average age of a Nicholl fellow is just under 36, Marvin Krueger, age 62, never

let that enter his thinking. “There’s a texture to life. If I hadn’t had the kids and the family, I wouldn’t have anything to write because there wouldn’t be any soul there,” Krueger explains.

“I’ve been writing all my life,” he continues. “It just never seemed to come together well.” The turning point was when he tried his hand at writing a play. After working on and off for nearly eight years on his screenplay, Krueger decided to try something new. “I made an exercise: two characters, one location, real time and that’s it. Forcing that to work gave me the creative skill level that I didn’t have before.”

And it worked! A table reading of the play produced the insights that Krueger had missed and brought a momentum to his writing that couldn’t be denied. “That day with that audience kind of made everything make sense.” Energized by the success, Krueger rewrote his script and produced a gem — *And Handled with a Chain* — the story of a delusional homeless woman and a young drug dealer who have to



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help each other recover the money from a drug deal gone bad, saving each other's lives in the process.

In years past, Krueger would place in various contests such as Scriptapalooza (quarter-finals), but the year he won the Nicholl, something strange happened. "I submitted to nine or 10 different contests and it didn't even make the first cut in any of them." Sometimes truth really is stranger than fiction.

ANDREW LANHAM

"My whole life has been moving me toward writing," says University of Texas grad student Andrew Lanham. "I don't really think there is any other option for me." The only Fellow to hail from outside California this year, Lanham originally wanted to be an actor, primarily because his Tourette's Syndrome symptoms would vanish the moment he stepped on stage.

Lanham's parents worked for the international entertainment group Up with People, so

he began writing monologues for the group and found that writing gave him direction. "It's really given balance and structure to my life and helped me understand what I want and what my goals are." So when Lanham settled on screenwriting, he did it without any formal training. In fact, he had never even read a produced screenplay. His first script came in at 250 pages. He knew it wasn't a movie, so he rewrote the script about 20 times, each time starting from page one. "I tend to go about things in the most difficult way possible," he admits.



THE RULES

(according to <http://www.oscar.org>)

Original, feature-length screenplays only (only adaptations of your own work are allowed).

Up to three different scripts can be submitted.

Scripts must be submitted electronically in PDF format with NO name on the document.

\$45 entry fee for each script.

All scripts must be received by 11:59pm on May 1.

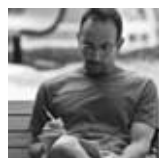
Luckily, Lanham met horror scribe Ray Wright (*Pulse*) through a friend, and Wright agreed to read Lanham's second effort, *The Jumper of Maine*, about a paramedic with Tourette's Syndrome who is forced to come to terms with his life and his condition when he falls in love with a single mother who has ties to his past. Lanham's inspiration? "I don't think there's a really good movie about Tourette's, so I wanted to write about it."

Though Lanham faithfully executed Wright's notes, it wasn't until his script was up for a public reading in his first year of grad school that he kicked in the after burners, writing a new draft in eight days. "I remember I finished the draft and printed it the day of the reading, so nobody had seen the draft yet."

A professor who attended the reading liked what he heard and urged Lanham to enter the script in competitions. "He told me, 'You're a writer and you need your stack of rejection letters. What's the worst thing that could happen? You win?'" Lanham sent *Jumper* in that same day to the Austin Film Festival and the Nicholl. It won both!

MICAH RANUM

Originally from a small town of Viking, Minnesota (population: 92, as of the 2000 census),



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Opening Doors for 25 years

Micah Ranum also went the film school route, attending the MFA program at Florida State University's College of Motion Picture Arts. A finalist for the 2008 Coca-Cola Refreshing Filmmaker Award, Ranum moved to Los Angeles shortly after completing his degree and began writing full-time with the assistance of a "very supportive spouse."

As luck would have it, a manager saw his thesis film at FSU's annual student film screenings and signed him right out of school. Not long after being signed, Ranum came up with the idea that would become *A Good*



Hunter. "Originally, I just wanted to tell this story about this guy in isolation who's flawed and doesn't want to interact with a lot of people," Ranum says. "Then suddenly, he sees this guy hunting human prey on his land and he needs to go out and do something about it."

Ranum worked with his manager to develop the screenplay and, once it was polished, shopped the finished product around town. Yet as much as some people liked the script, they were gun shy when it came to pulling the

trigger for a sale. Given the positive attention the script had garnered, however, Ranum decided to enter it into the Nicholl competition. "It felt lucky," Ranum recalls. "I thought about entering more than one script, but I knew this was my best script so if this didn't make it, I knew the others wouldn't." And though he had some concerns about placing in a contest that seems to heavily favor dramas, Ranum felt his little thriller had a fighting chance. And he was right. "My script is a genre piece. People say only dramas win the Nicholl and a lot of dramas do win, but there are certainly thrillers and comedies, too."

CINTHEA STAHL

Though Cinthea Stahl would be the last one to throw herself a pity party, she's defi-

nately a student of the School of Hard Knocks. Originally from Connecticut, Stahl lost her house in the 1994 Northridge, Calif., quake and then lost her husband a short time later — a one-two punch that would level her. But with a 5-year-old daughter to provide for, Stahl had no time to feel sorry for herself. "We had no house and a mountain of bills," she says. I had to put one foot in front of the other and just go on." Not only did she press on, but through the challenges she faced, she discovered that she really wanted to be a writer. "I would write early in the morning or when I came home from one job or the other," Stahl recalls. "I would start at 9:30 at night. I got dark circles under my eyes, but I just did it."



Written in a passion-fueled five-month period, Stahl's winning script, *Identifying Marks*, tells the story of a despondent tattoo artist whose life is forever changed when he makes a house call to a dying woman's bedside. The tale grabbed everyone who read it, propelling Stahl to receive a Nicholl fellowship.

PAGE COUNT

The shortest winning script? 85 pages

The longest? 153 pages

Though no hard rules are given for the page count of each entry (they can be "approximately" 90-120 pages), longer scripts don't typically win points with readers.



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When she got the phone call from Beal at the Academy, the pain of the past was washed away in a wave of emotion. "I had just gotten home from work," Stahl recalls. "I was still holding my briefcase, my handbag, my coat and everything. Greg said, 'Well, the committee met this morning and I want to congratulate you because you're a fellow.' All of a sudden, I was taken out of my body. I couldn't feel anything. I was trying to keep talking to Greg and these big tears just started pouring down my cheeks. It meant a huge amount."

NICHOLL WEEK

Every year after the winners are announced, all the finalists are invited to a week-long series of dinners, lunches and seminars designed to welcome the new writers into the Nicholl fold and introduce them to members

NICHOLL TEAMS


Since 2001, when writing teams were first invited to compete in the Nicholl, hundreds have entered (482 in 2010 alone) and from 2003-2009, at least one fellowship per year was awarded to a writing team, with two teams being declared winners in the 2007 competition.

of the Academy. "Nicholl Week was a really crazy emotional roller coaster," Cretton recalls. Some seminars were inspiring, while others were "a needed dose of reality about what a ridiculous game this business can be."

One manager reportedly said, "Drama is dead," which is stark news for a competition that seems to reward mostly dramas. As Krueger pointed out in his Nicholl awards dinner speech, "If drama is dead, then explain the success of *The Town!*" Beal feels the statement was more of a nudge to suggest to the writers that they branch out into other genres. "That doesn't mean that a drama can't function as a writing sample," he says, "which is what most scripts by new writers become."

Of course the highlight of Nicholl Week is the annual awards dinner where the new fellows are introduced by prominent members of the Nicholl committee, an event that Stahl said was "like nothing I had ever experienced in my life and probably will not again." This year's event was extra special given that it was the 25th anniversary of the program and Oscar-winner Michael Arndt (*Little Miss Sunshine*, *Toy Story 3*) delivered an inspiring keynote address to the crowd.

Arndt revealed that he actually made the finals one year but failed to win the fellow-

ship. But Beal wrote a supportive note on Arndt's rejection letter saying, "Some really liked it," with the word "really" underlined three times. And though he didn't win the coveted title of Nicholl Fellow, Arndt saved up \$25,000 on his own (an amount equal to a fellowship at that time) and took a year off to write a few scripts, one of which was *Sunshine*, for which he won an Oscar. Arndt thanked Beal at the dinner and stated that, "Those four words have kept me going over the last 10 years." 

NOTE: See the Academy website

<http://www.oscar.org> for official rules and information on the 2011 Nicholl Fellowships.

ADAPTATIONS

Adaptations have never been allowed, except where writers are adapting their own work, be it a novel, stage play, short story or short script. Destin Daniel Cretton won in 2010 for the adaptation of his Sundance short film winner, *Short Term 12*. Why aren't adaptations allowed? Simply put, the goal of the program is to identify new screenwriting talent, not a writer's ability to adapt another artist's work.

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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 Spec Renaissance

After several flat-out crappy years, is the spec marketplace finally poised for a comeback?

"I BELIEVE THERE IS going to be a spec renaissance. There will always be sequels and remakes, but *Inception* and *Avatar* helped studios remember that an original idea can become a tentpole hit." — Emile Gladstone, ICM.

Wow. A spec renaissance? Really? Is Gladstone saying that the spec market is poised to shake off the past few down years (oh, who are we kidding — they've been *atrocious*) and finally come back with a vengeance? Seems like a damn good question, so we put it to our panel.

UTA feature lit agent Tobin Babst, who reps *Snow White and the Huntsman* writer Evan Daugherty (see "Anatomy of a Spec Sale," page 16, in this issue) feels that, in 2011, the spec market will likely become "a little healthier than it's been the last couple of years," primarily because the studios are spending less on development than before. "It's finally catching up with them a little bit. Not all the studios know what their next movies are going to be, so the slates are a little thin. That's going to create a need for new projects, and some of those are going to come from the spec market."

That's good news, and it helps that original concepts such as those seen in *Inception* and *Avatar* have been rewarded at the box office, while some movies based on comics and graphic novels such as *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, *Jonah Hex* and *Kick-Ass*, all underper-

formed. "I do think that the studios' obsession [with branded material] is starting to lessen at an accelerated pace — thank God for all of us," says manager Mike Goldberg of Roar. "Those projects are becoming much more difficult to set up." Gladstone asserts that Warner Bros. is leading the charge. "Statistically, you can see that they are moving toward a slate populated by originals," although he notes that it will take probably three more years before moviegoers see the benefit of this trend.

FilmEngine's Jake Wagner, who manages Daugherty, picks up on Babst's comment about the studios' cutback in development. What does that mean exactly? "They're not

"The market has squeezed out the under-developed and the under-packaged scripts. It's the responsibility of agents and managers to challenge their clients to rewrite and rewrite and rewrite again."

—Mike Esola, WME

going to buy anything to develop anymore," he explains. "They're only going to buy something they seriously think is a movie they're going to make in the next two to three years." In short, the days of yore, when a script was pronounced "good enough" to go out to the marketplace, are now over. The studios have shifted the responsibility of development onto agents, managers and producers, thus saving themselves a boatload of dough. "In the past, studios have developed many, many screenplays that they didn't make," Babst says. "They don't want to spend money that way so much anymore. They're a lot more careful about it." Because of that, Wagner says the script needs to be "pretty close to ready to shoot, and it has to have some sort of package. Just throwing stuff against the wall to see what sticks, or just trying to sell 'a big idea' with a busted spec with a high concept — that doesn't make it anymore."

Ah, the dreaded monster: "packaging." In other words, now here's the bad news. So while there could possibly be a spec renaissance on the horizon, those scripts are largely going to have to be packaged up — specifically, with a name director, if possible. It used to be that once you got a producer on board, they would take the script into whatever studio(s) they had a relationship with, and that was enough. Not so much anymore. "People are starting to realize the producer no longer



Inception

adds value," Goldberg says. "The producer doesn't mean as much as they meant five or seven years ago. If a studio wants to buy [a project], they'll buy it, and then they'll hand it off to the producer they like the best — any on-lot producer. Or if you're a smaller financier like Relativity, Screen Gems or Lionsgate, for example, any producer whom you're very happy with or you owe a favor to."

Goldberg adds that some producers can actually be a liability in the package. "You have your couple dozen who are tenacious and well-respected. But for every Joe Roth, there are 20 other producers you can point to who used to be awesome and aren't getting it done anymore. Managers and agents are truly acting like producers right now." Oh, and if you do bring a producer aboard, make sure that producer has cred in the same genre as your project. "You need someone branded in a way that's going to support the idea of the script that you're trying to sell," Babst says, "or a director that the studios want to make that kind of movie with or an actor that they really want to make that kind of movie with."

What about "naked" scripts: ones with no packaging at all? Is there a shot that those could ever be made? "There have been some screenplays that have sold this year, some of them for a lot of money, that weren't really packaged movies," Babst says. *Safehouse*, for example — if you read the script, you could tell that there was a movie there that a studio could make. Universal bought that one, and I think that they felt like, 'We understand what this movie is, where it would fit into our slate.' It survived in the sort of flat market and sold." And speaking of the flat market, how about those pronouncements from the stu-

dios that they're closed for business and "not buying anything for the rest of the year"? "I hear it every day from the studios: 'We're not buying. Well, unless you have a great piece of material,'" Goldberg laughs. "Really? So you're buying. Got it."

One factor in favor of a spec renaissance is that the constriction of the industry is about finished. "There have been a lot of companies dissolving and many companies shrinking," Goldberg says. "I feel like that is about to end. And as the economy starts to bounce back, and as the Hollywood economy starts to expand again, I think 2011 is going to be very exciting. If nothing else, it will be a vast improvement over 2010 and 2009. And, by the way, I don't think 2010 was that much worse than 2009. They both sucked." Regardless, he feels that strong scripts will continue to find a home, "whether it moves in the studio market or whether it's with an independent financier."

Spec renaissance or not, there is one fundamental change in the spec marketplace to be aware of: Many representatives are no longer shopping spec scripts in the hope that they will sell. "If we take a spec out, the biggest reason we're doing it is to introduce the writer or writing team to the town," Goldberg says. "If you take a spec out with the hopes of selling it, you're delusional. It's not the game. And when it does happen, it's truly that annoying phrase 'lightning in a bottle.'" Wagner tells his new clients, "Congratulations, you're in the business at the absolute worst time ever. With that in mind, let's try this." He says it's all about the tentpole. "If I read something phenomenal, but it's maybe not necessarily a tentpole movie

— which is all that anybody really seems to want anymore — I'd still send it around to get the writer meetings, and hopefully pair up with a producer and develop a big idea." That's what Wagner did with Daugherty's spec *Shrapnel*. That script didn't sell, but it led to Daugherty being hired to write *Grayskull*, the He-Man reboot, and that led to Daugherty's tentpole idea, *Snow White and the Huntsman*, which sold for seven figures.

So is there really a spec renaissance, yea or nay? "I can only pray that there is one," Goldberg says. "Actually, what's more likely going to happen is yes, studios are going to be more open to original material, but

you have to do it in a strategic way." Concludes William Morris Endeavor feature lit agent Mike Esola, "Good things sell. That has never changed. The market has squeezed out the under-developed and the under-packaged scripts. It's the responsibility of both agents and managers to challenge their clients to rewrite and rewrite and rewrite again. And it is the responsibility of the reps to actually package a script. Every day I'm surprised to find writers and agents who say this but don't actually do it." **CS**

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BY **KARL IGLESIAS**

11 Tips for a More Creative 2011

HAPPY NEW YEAR! You know what this means, right? It's time to reflect on the past 12 months and set new resolutions or get motivated to actually follow through on past ones. How did you do with the ones I offered you last year? I gave you practical tips to break old writing habits and replace them with productive ones — how to find more time to write, how to limit procrastination and how to re-energize so your script gets finished.

But maybe it's not a motivation problem. Maybe it's your ideas that are not inspiring you. You come up with an idea or two, get excited, start developing them into an outline, but as soon as you start writing, you realize they weren't that original.

It all starts with a great idea. What comes after that — character development, plot, outline writing the first draft — are just the details.

Wouldn't it be great if you could just press a key on your keyboard and a great idea would pop up on the screen? Or your creativity would suddenly turn on?

Unfortunately, the more you try to be creative, the more it can elude you. It can't be forced. But there are ways to become more creative. In fact, we're all creative. It's just a matter of accessing your subconscious mind, which is easier when you're relaxed and not thinking about it.

So for this new year, I'd like to offer you some tips on how to be more creative and, hopefully, come up with that original idea

that will excite you enough to develop and write a script or two this year.

You're probably familiar with such techniques as brainstorming, mind-mapping, free-writing using a timer or asking "what if?" questions. Here are 11 more tips for 2011:

1. Develop a morning ritual to get you into the creative zone. Following the theory that performing mindless actions frees your mind to be more creative, if you follow the same routine every morning, it will become such a habit that you'll go on creative auto-pilot much in the same way that you can come up with ideas when you're in the shower, shaving, driving, gardening or cooking. The mind takes a break and is free to roam around your subconscious. As Leo Tolstoy said, "Regularity is the prime condition for work."

2. Do something new. This may seem like the opposite advice, but this is about challenging your brain and developing new connections: Do something you've never done before — take up a new hobby. Go camping. Expose yourself to art beyond movies and television. Listen to new music genres. Read random magazines you never knew existed. Instead of driving to work, take the bus or even bicycle, if possible. Go out to lunch with different people. Go on vacation to someplace new. Learn to play a musical instrument. Change your writing environment. It's all about shaking things up. As

Alan Alda said, "The creative is the place where no one else has ever been. You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. What you'll discover will be wonderful. What you'll discover is yourself."

3. Combine ideas. Based on the theory that creativity is simply the juxtaposition of two concepts thought to be unrelated, try combining old ideas. They don't have to be film ideas, as in X meets Y, or combining film genres or icons, though this technique seems to be in vogue these days — see *Cowboys & Aliens*, *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, etc. It can be combining character types with time periods, locations with plot types or situations with themes. The more disparate the two items seem to be, the better.

4. Define a clear purpose. Before you can create something worthwhile, you need to know what it is. Do you want to come up with an original idea for a film, a TV show, a play, a novel, a short film? If it's a feature film, what genre, sub-genre or type? When Christopher Nolan was developing *Inception*, he knew it would have a lot of exposition. So he had to think up the perfect story type for it. When he thought of the "heist" film type, it set everything in motion. Once you choose a genre and sub-genre or type, make a list of the 10 best films in that genre and think of how you can come up with something unique



Cowboys & Aliens

within the constraints of it. Be careful not to over-qualify your purpose. You need just enough clarity to give yourself a direction but not so much that you put blinders on. The more constraints, the more limiting your options.

5. Replenish your well. This is all about getting more input. Read everything. Listen to everything. Remember the film *Short Circuit*, where the robot, Number Five, goes through all the encyclopedias, magazines, newspapers and television channels, saying, “Input, input, need more input”? Just like Number Five — and all artists — writers are sponges for information, so you need to immerse yourself in the outside world and soak up enough information to not only know what’s been done so you can be different, but to also fill your life with enough raw material that will eventually spill out onto the page. As creative consultant Sark said, “In the midst of our daily lives, we must find the juice to nourish our creative souls.”

6. Take short stimulation breaks. When it comes to creativity, some of you may not want to wait for lightning to strike. You’ll need to be proactive. But you can’t force it or

else your mind will resist. A great way to stimulate your mind is to take “stimulating” breaks at regular intervals. The Pomodoro Technique of focusing on a task for 25 minutes and taking a five-minute break is perfect for this. During these five minutes, you could stretch, do some light pushups or jumping jacks to get your blood pumping, read some inspiring quotes, listen to motivational music, play a short video game or do some brain puzzles, like crosswords or Sudoku.

7. Exercise every day. Move your body, especially before you sit down to be creative. There’s a reason why so many writers like to walk. It increases blood flow to the brain. Exercise doesn’t have to be a sweat-inducing, lung-exploding aerobic activity. Walking is enough. You could also dance, which, along with invigorating music, doubles your chances for creative thoughts.

8. Take naps. What do Leonardo da Vinci, Albert Einstein and Thomas Edison all have in common? They’ve all made creative contributions to the advancement of mankind — and they were all avid nappers. It’s not just for kindergartners. If you want to be at your creative best, take naps. It will recharge your battery and allow your mind to wan-

der when you’re looking for inspiration. Just ask the Coen brothers, who are known for spending most of the writing day napping.

9. Slow down. We tend to live in the fast lane. We eat fast food, we rush from one place to another, constantly on the go, tethered to Blackberries and iPhones, and we value quickness. Most creative insights, however, don’t happen in a rush. They tend to pop up in relaxed times. So make an effort to slow down and appreciate the quiet times through meditation. Take the time to breathe deeply and relax.

10. Start your own Brain Trust. Do what Pixar does and surround yourself with other creative people for group brainstorming sessions. They don’t all have to be writers. In fact, it would be more beneficial if the cre-

atives were from various occupations and art forms, such as musicians, poets, artists or even business executives.

11. Know what’s been done before. I can’t tell you how many pitches I’ve heard from writers who started with, “This is a really original concept; it’s never been done,” only to realize, within seconds, that I could name at least three movies or published novels with the exact same story. It’s the old saying, “You need to know the rules before you can break them.” In order to come up with something that’s never been done before, you have to know what’s been done before. It’s your job to keep up with what sells, what’s in development, what’s in production, what’s being released, what’s being published, etc. So if you come up with that great idea only to discover there are four other projects in development just like it, put it aside and start again. The trick is to keep thinking of new ideas.

I hope these 11 tips will make 2011 your most creative year ever. But remember, don’t just read about them, *do them!* And don’t forget to write down everything. You never know when the muse will whisper that awesome new movie idea to you. **CS**

ANATOMY of a Screenplay



MICHAEL HAUGE (michael@screenplaymastery.com) has been one of Hollywood's top story consultants and lecturers for more than 25 years. He is the author of "Writing Screenplays That Sell" and "Selling Your Story in 60 Seconds," and has consulted on projects starring Will Smith, Julia Roberts, Jennifer Lopez, Kirsten Dunst, Robert Downey, Jr. and Morgan Freeman. For information on private coaching, visit www.ScreenplayMastery.com.

BY **MICHAEL HAUGE**

Clothes Make the Girl

I'M SURE YOU'VE read at the end of my last column, I advised including descriptions of the characters and settings in your screenplay in order to create a vivid movie in the mind of the reader. But there's a second, equally important reason: Your hero's clothing, appearance and surroundings can reveal his background, job, financial situation, personality, protective identity (the false self he presents to the world) and can even illustrate his transformation through the course of your story.

Kevin Wade's brilliant screenplay for *Working Girl* is a perfect illustration of this principle.

I've been recommending *Working Girl* for decades as the archetypal Hollywood romantic comedy. It contains all the standard elements of the genre: a sympathetic hero, desire or longing, a clear and visible outer motivation, deception and imposture to achieve an objective, a romance character intertwined with the hero's other goal, a nemesis who's also a romantic rival, exposure of the hero's lies at the end of act two, the hero overcoming his or her emotional fears in act three, and a happy ending. It's a perfect illustration of how a movie can follow a formula and still be original, romantic, funny, meaningful, emotionally involving and a huge artistic and commercial success.

And, in addition to all the other qualities of his action, description and dialogue, notice how screenwriter Kevin Wade uses wardrobe and setting to deepen our understanding of his characters.

When we first meet Tess McGill (Melanie Griffith), she's the epitome of the Wall Street secretary — big hair, big earrings, off-the-

rack clothes and running shoes. Here's how the screenwriter introduces her:

IN CLOSE ON FEET, one pair of them, padding quickly down a hill in well-worn, rain-soaked running shoes... Her hand reaches down and yanks up a sagging stretch of stocking... She is balancing umbrella and newspaper and bag and practically juggling as she races for... the Staten Island Ferry.

In the film itself, we first meet Tess when she's on the ferry. But in the script, where description must substitute for what an audience will see on the screen, this more detailed description creates empathy with Tess through sympathy (the rain-soaked shoes, the sagging stocking, the rush to catch the ferry), and it uses specific imagery to immediately hint at Tess' impending conflict.

When she arrives at the office, Tess will replace the running shoes with heels — the first of many instances when her Staten Island clothes will be replaced with fashion more suited to Wall Street. This tug-of-war between Staten Island (representing Tess' background and the image she has of herself) and Manhattan (where she wishes she belonged) will echo through the script.

When Wade first introduces Tess' new boss Katharine (Sigourney Weaver), he creates an immediate contrast with Tess' plainness:

[Katharine] is tall and beautiful and impeccably dressed.... She is, in short, everything Tess longs to be. An American in France.

And here is part of Tess and Katharine's first exchange:

KATHARINE

I consider us a team, and as such, we have a uniform. Simple, elegant, impeccable. Dress shabbily, they notice the dress, dress impeccably and they notice the woman. Coco Chanel.

TESS

How do I look?

KATHARINE

Okay. Lose the noisy accessories.

Katharine is all about image and presentation, and initially these traits, as much as her own business skills, are what Tess believes will be her ticket to success.

The detailed description of Katharine's home also vividly contrasts with the Staten Island locales and ferry rides that are so familiar to Tess:

FOLLOWING TESS up the wide, clean sidewalk, past stately, awninged entryways and welcoming lobbies, the soft light of dusk mingling with the street lamps flickering on. New York, just like you picture it.

And inside Katharine's apartment:

Warm carpets and polished brass. Classy.... High ceilings, built-in



Working Girl

bookshelves, fireplace. Elegant.... Oversized leather furniture, oversized potted palms, an oversized oil portrait of Katharine hanging over the mantle. Tess tours, gingerly touching fabric, marble, wood, inspecting books, the bar stock, etc. Someone actually **lives** here.

Notice how Wade's description not only draws us into the scene; it reveals a lot about the person Tess wants to emulate. Like everything else Katharine does or wears or has, her home is designed to impress. This is Katharine's shrine to herself.

Compare the previous passage to the description of the bar where Tess' best friend, Cyn (Joan Cusack), has her engagement party:

The place is jammed with working class COUPLES, the people Tess grew up with, people who've been coming here forever... A couple of couples are dancing in a tight little spot by the jukebox.

While Katharine's high-priced but sterile apartment may be what Tess longs for, the bar is a picture of connection and humanity.

But it's also described in a way that makes it less than inviting. Instead of high ceilings or oversized anything, it's jammed with people "huddled together" in a "tight little spot." It feels small and restrictive, just as clinging to this life is restricting Tess' ability to truly define herself.

These carefully chosen details increase our emotional involvement while also revealing layers of character and theme. Isn't that far superior to simply saying, "a big, ex-

pensive apartment" or "a neighborhood bar"?

When she learns of Katharine's plan to steal her idea, Tess cuts her hair short, takes over Katharine's apartment, her clothes and even her diction. Because deep down, Tess sees herself the way Katharine and everyone else sees her: a Staten Island girl who doesn't really belong in this rarified world of brokers and deal-makers. So instead of standing up for herself and forcing them to pay attention and listen to her ideas, she hides behind this false persona — what I term a character's "identity."

Just before the midpoint of the screenplay, Wade has Jack Trainer (Harrison Ford) — the romantic interest in this romantic comedy — give Tess a gold-lettered briefcase, which is another symbol of Tess' desire for success. But in thematic terms, it's different than the other things Tess wears. Katharine's clothes signify Tess' attempt to achieve success through pretense. But Jack gives her the briefcase because he thinks her ideas are solid, not because of some image she projects. He respects her talent, and the briefcase illustrates the transition Tess is making into her essence — into the person she truly is.

Tess' transformation is put to the test when she returns to Staten Island for her Cyn's party. Tess' estranged boyfriend Mick (Alec Baldwin) doesn't recognize her at first, and to fit in more with the crowd and surroundings, she stows her briefcase behind the bar. But after Tess breaks up with Mick, we see her on the ferry again, leaving Staten Island behind forever. Whatever happens now, she'll never be able to go back to the emotionally safe but unfulfilled life she had before.

At the end of act two, when her imposture is revealed and she loses everything — the

job, the guy and the future she dreamed of — Tess is left with no place to go. At Cyn's wedding, dressed in one of those hideously puffy bridesmaids dresses, she stands apart from everyone else. Tess no longer belongs there and she has nothing left to hang on to.

But she's also attached to nothing. She's not reverting to her past, nor is she clinging to a false image of how she should look and who she should be. As we see her ride the ferry to the Promised Land one last time, she's wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. She's not an image of anything — she's just Tess.

It's in this outfit that Tess confronts Katharine in front of everyone and then explains how she came up with the idea for a radio network purchase, the idea that Katharine stole from her. Tess had combined information from *The Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Post* and the newsletter that her secretarial investment club subscribed to. In other words, she was integrating her Staten Island personality (*Post*) with her business smarts (*The Wall Street Journal*) with her job as a secretary. And only Tess could have done that.

It's in this moment of triumph that Tess finally stands up for who she truly is. And her clothing and appearance are as plain and ordinary as can be because she is now fully in her essence, with no need to project any kind of image at all.

Because the plot of *Working Girl* involves image and imposture, the outfits Tess wears are essential to the story. But the power of vivid, revealing description crosses all genres and story concepts. Every single thing you convey about your characters' appearance and surroundings can help reveal or reinforce another facet of who they are and who they become in the course of your screenplay.

Michael Hauge's MISDEMEANORS

This may not get your screenplay rejected, but you should definitely be punished for it...

#3: YOU'LL FEEL ECSTATIC WHEN YOU

READ THIS: Your job as a writer is to evoke emotion — not announce it — by revealing to the reader ONLY what the audience will see and hear on the screen. Never talk directly to the reader, and don't tell her how the audience will feel watching your movie. No "asides" to provide factual information or character background (e.g. Jan has been a hired assassin for the last 10 years); no telling the reader what a character thinks or feels (e.g. Jan is very torn about shooting the little boy and his dog) and, most of all, no telling the reader what an audience's reaction will be (e.g. The audience will shed tears of joy when Jan rescues the little boy and his dog.). **CS**

Legal BRIEFINGS

BY RUVIN M. SPIVAK

Q Assume I've read another writer's spec script online or in a writers' group, and let's say the setup is good but I come up with a much better execution. At what point are we entering the realm of copyright infringement? How much different does my script have to be?

— Simone Linke, Dresden, Germany

A A general rule of copyrights is that ideas cannot be copyrighted. Thus, it's critical to figure out if the original "setup" is just an idea or whether it is sufficiently infused with creativity to be deserving of copyright protection.

Let's assume the original setup is indeed protected under copyright laws and let's also assume that you draw from and expand on the original setup. Would you be infringing on the original creator's copyright in such an instance?

This is a loaded question and the answer will depend heavily on the facts. To keep things simple, however, the scenario causes concern because (1) there was access to the original work, and (2) it's likely that portions of the original work are **substantially similar** to the new work. (Note: "Substantial similarity" is determined by comparing the two works' plots, themes, dialogue, mood, setting, pace, characters, sequence of events, etc.)

There is no exact formula for how different two works must be to avoid liability, so it's always best to consult an expert who can compare them.

Finally, please note that U.S. copyright law may be significantly different from German copyright law so be mindful of this fact and make sure you seek appropriate advice in your jurisdiction.

Q How is the value of a screenplay determined?

— Warren A. Shuman,
North Miami Beach, Florida

A This is an excellent question and I wish I had a clear answer. The value of a screenplay depends on many different factors. The biggest is the track record of the writer, although the strength and appeal of the idea is a huge factor as well. Is it for indie release or is it supposed to be a blockbuster action movie? Are brand name stars or directors attached? Is the screenplay sought after so much that a bidding war to acquire it occurs? These and similar factors drive the value of a screenplay.

Q How can I prevent my story idea from being stolen?

— Anonymous, Beverly Hills, California

A Please note that a general rule of copyright law is that you cannot copyright an idea. Thus, if you register your material with the U.S. Copyright Office and/or with the WGA, you should write an outline or treatment of the story idea and include as much detail as possible so that your submission becomes more than just an idea.

Additionally, before sharing your story idea with people, you could ask them to sign a non-disclosure agreement. In reality, however, anyone worth sharing your idea with is not only unlikely to sign this but they will also request that you sign *their* Submission Agreement, which is filled with crafty language that protects them and not you.

In short, it's very difficult to prevent theft of an idea unless you never share it. But as mentioned above, you can take certain steps to protect your idea and dissuade theft. Also, it is of utmost importance that you deal with parties who are reputable.

Q If I wanted to use only a sampling of an artist's music in a scene in my script (because I wanted to write my own lyrics to fit the scene), do I still need to contact

whoever has the copyright and/or the lyricist to that particular song?

— Leslie, Houston, Texas

A In most instances, you must seek a license from the owner of the copyright in order to use the sample. It is very rare that you can use a sample from another artist without permission unless the work is in the public domain, which happens once a work is no longer copyright protected. In some rare instances, you can also use the work under a legal doctrine known as "fair use," which typically refers to uses that are newsworthy, satirical or educational. Be careful, though, as it is always tricky to rely on the fair use doctrine because lawyers are good at arguing that it doesn't apply.

Have a legal question?

Submit it for consideration at

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/NGKGKDT>

Ruvín M. Spivak is a California-licensed entertainment attorney based in Hollywood. He represents clients in the film, television, music, online and new media industries. He is also the impresario for a prominent European tenor and a lover of great art. You can follow Mr. Spivak on Twitter (@gRuvínLaw). Comments, questions and challenges are encouraged. Please send your feedback to Contact@RuvínLaw.com.

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I Am Number Four

Screenplay by Alfred Gough & Miles Millar and Marti Noxon
Based on the novel by Pittacus Lore
(a.k.a. James Frey and Jobie Hughes)

ALFRED GOUGH (*Smallville*) still recalls reading the trades with his partner, Miles Millar, in the summer of 2009 and noticing that Dreamworks had bought the rights to an unpublished book called “I Am Number Four,” about a super-powered teenage alien hiding out in a small town on Earth. “I remember thinking, just reading the log line, ‘If somebody doesn’t call us about this I’m going to be very jealous, because I know this is a movie we could write well,’” Gough chuckles. The screenwriters managed to wrangle an advance copy of the book’s manuscript and had only been reading it for a few days when the call came from Dreamworks. “From there it happened very quickly.”

With the book still essentially a first draft, the screenwriters worked back and forth with James Frey (*Kissing a Fool*), one of the book’s co-authors who wrote under the pseudonym Pittacus Lore. Gough and Millar would explain what they wanted to do in the film and Frey

would adjust the book accordingly. The author, in turn, would mention ideas for possible future books to make sure the movie contained the seeds of these ideas and could be turned into a series. “It was an interesting process,” Gough says. “In a way, the novel and the movie had kind of a simultaneous development track. James is a brilliant writer and obviously understands the movie business and could not have been a better collaborator.”

Gough and Millar were drawn to the idea of the teen with a price on his head, one who knows three of his fellow refugees have already been killed. Constantly being on the run was reminiscent of *The Fugitive*, and Gough also found parallels with one of his favorite childhood movies, *Running on Empty*, which is about a boy forced to live in hiding because of his parents’ secret criminal record. Unlike their own show, *Smallville*, here was an alien teen being told not to have relationships or make

lasting connections — even with his own identity. “To load it with that much dramatic possibilities and emotional stakes and, obviously, life-and-death stakes,” Gough says, “is what made it feel like dramatically new and interesting territory we wanted to explore.”

I Am Number Four tells the story of John (Alex Pettyfer), the new kid in town with a big secret. John is one of nine members of a ruling caste hiding on Earth after his planet was conquered. John and his guardian, Henri (Timothy Olyphant), have had a dozen identities before settling in Paradise, Ohio, but now things are different because John’s fallen for a girl, Sarah (Dianna Agron), and found a best friend (Callan McAuliffe). Despite Henri’s warnings, he wants to stay and have a normal life. Alas, the alien hunters chasing after them have already killed three of the other caste members and John’s number is finally up.

One thing Gough and Millar noticed right away were a series of issues in the book that they had also wrestled with when writing *Smallville*. The hardest character to write in these stories, Gough explains, is often the girlfriend, the character the audience needs to relate to and like, but who is always left in the dark. “For us on *Smallville*, Lana Lang was a very hard character because she didn’t know anything about the secret,” he explains. He also points out the challenge of a romantic triangle and making Sarah seem like someone smart and likable even though she’s dating a jerk jock. “It’s looking at all those relationships and being able to defend the positions,” Gough says. “So you understand why she’s dating him. She has reasons, they’re valid reasons. It’s looking at those iconic high school relationships you see in these movies and how are they real, how do you understand them, what’s a little bit of a twist on them so you haven’t seen that version of the relationship before.”

Years of working in television and film have made Millar and Gough disciplined outliners, although these outlines rarely pass 15 pages. “It’s never about taking an outline, adding dialogue and stirring,” Gough says, “because that’s not what writing is. Outlines or treatments are basically a roadmap so you know where you’re going and you understand the big picture. Then, for us, it’s helpful because once you get writing, it allows you to take detours and find things. Because you

know you have the roadmap, you don't have to stay on the highway. You can take those side roads and explore different things. If you put the time and effort into that outline phase, it's actually a much more rewarding writing experience because you can focus on the things that are important when writing — the character and the dialogue and the themes."

The film followed a rapid development and Gough can time the project by the holidays: "We got the sign off on Labor Day," he recalls. "We turned in our first draft at Halloween, we got notes right away, turned in our second draft at Thanksgiving, and that's the draft Spielberg read. We had notes with him right after and then we turned in a draft by Christmas and did some refining."

Regarding the notes from Spielberg, many of them were basic ones about keeping the story grounded and emotional, but he also credits the legendary director-producer with being skilled at interlacing humor with serious moments. "Where do you find those moments that give the audience a breath or a moment of lightness in what would otherwise be a very dark scene? It's a little embarrassing sitting in a meeting with Steven Spielberg," Gough laughs, "and you're referencing his movies when you try to make a point about this film. For me, somebody who came to Hollywood because of Steven Spielberg movies, it's like an out-of-body experience."

The film moved closer to a green light through the early part of 2010 and, in the spring, Dreamworks decided the script could use a polish in the last hour. They turned to Marti Noxon (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), who had just finished the remake of *Fright Night* for them. "Initially, it was just going to be a week of work," she says, "and then it was more than that. Everybody felt there was really solid stuff that had been done thus far." But the catch was that Gough and Millar — and an uncredited screenwriter after them — had created a story that was almost too slick and sophisticated. "The feeling was that we had an incredibly good foundation, but for the genre and the audience they were going for, it needed a more teen tone."

One of the things Noxon was brought in to work on was Sarah's character and the relationship between her and John. "At the point I came [in], she wasn't really popping as someone girls would like. So that was one of the first orders of business — bringing my voice to that. Because God knows," she

chuckles, "I've written a lot of teenage supernatural romance."

Past that, however, was setting a tone that reconciled the massive sci-fi backstory that existed in earlier drafts of the script with the relationships between John, Henri and Sarah. "On the one hand," Noxon explains, "we wanted to deepen the character stuff, find a few more moments of humor and real teen-ness, and at the same time hit that right balance of orienting the audience to this world the book created. There's always, in any of these genre projects, an enormous amount of consideration that goes into how much people need to know to grasp the story — and how much is too much? How much are they going to need to feel grounded, and how much are they going to need to feel that they understand the stakes?" Noxon worked on the script's interplanetary mythology and pared away many of the more fantasy elements.

Noxon is a firm outliner, though she's made a point of moving away from using index cards for anything except action sequences. "I found that sometimes cards made it start to feel too episodic to me," she explains. "You usually know that something's wrong when you can move cards around and it doesn't matter where they go. I found I could get a little too arbitrary with cards." Even her outlines tend to be written more like a story than a list of bullet points. "That tended to lead to a stronger structure for me," Noxon says. "If I'm staying in it as a story that I'm telling to myself, that tended to lead to a better first pass on structure."

She points out that the exhilarating and scary part of working under the pressure of an imminent green light stems from all the voices and feedback coming at the writer. "You're writing as fast as you can and, in a weird way, you just have to trust the process and in the end see what you've got." One of these voices was, again, Spielberg's, who had a few thoughts on the film's main antagonist, the alien commander (Kevin Durand). "I certainly took some of my *Buffy* villain training. He wanted him to be this kind of lusty guy and that was just delightful because it was definitely in the school of Whedon." She laughs and adds, "On the one hand, it was like a dream come true. I was getting notes from Mr. Spielberg. And on the other hand, it's like, 'Jesus, I haven't had any sleep. I don't know if I'm making this worse.'" **CS**



Jim (r) directs Sean Kanan (l) on the set of a feature film.

James P. Mercurio Story Analyst

- Recently signed book deal with Linden Publishing for *The Craft of Scene Writing: 14 Steps to a Better Screenplay*
- Directed 2nd feature film in 2010
- Has A-list clients and ones who have worked with Scorsese, Spielberg and Robert Rodriguez.
- Weekly discounts and deals as well as 12 back issues of free newsletter at his blog: jamespmercurio.blogspot.com
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Rabbit Hole

Screenplay by David Lindsay-Abaire

RABBIT HOLE IS probably the funniest film ever made about two adults trying to deal with the loss of a child, but that doesn't mean it's a comedy. "I don't think there's a joke in the script," says playwright David Lindsay-Abaire, who adapted his own Tony-nominated drama for the screen. "I was trying to create characters who were human. Whenever something horrible happens, at least in my family, there's a very dark streak of humor that makes its way into the situation. More often than not, it's a coping mechanism, but it's also because we are funny people, so humor often comes at inappropriate times and in inappropriate ways," he explains. The play earned Lindsay-Abaire a Pulitzer.

Preserving that tone was one of the most important things to the writer when he agreed to sell the movie rights for *Rabbit Hole* to Blossom Films, Nicole Kidman's production company. As he advises theater directors in the original author's note of his published script, "It's a sad play. Don't make it any sadder than it needs to be." Laughter, he understood, would get audiences through what might otherwise feel like melodrama, and it would also set apart material that had already been covered quite seriously in such films as *Ordinary People* and *In the Bedroom*.

Of course, the surest way for Lindsay-Abaire to see that *Rabbit Hole* was handled correctly on-screen was to do the adaptation himself — an idea that Kidman and her producing partner, Per Saari, readily embraced. "I have the play; I didn't need a bad film version," he says. And though it may sound like the writer was angling for control, he was simply trying to avoid the disappointment that had accompanied his previous Hollywood experiences. "Everything else I've ever worked on has been miserable," sighs Lindsay-Abaire, whose previous screen credits include *Robots* ("A very sweet, cute animated movie that wasn't the movie I signed on to write") and *Inkheart* ("There's more of my work in there, but that movie got so chopped up and rewritten, and had a prologue and epilogue tacked on," he says).

If anything, Lindsay-Abaire brought more flexibility to the work than another writer might have, since he wasn't shy about overhauling aspects of his own play. "I had lived with these characters for five years. I knew them so well, I didn't have to worry about how they would respond in a new situation," he explains.

The play mostly takes place in a home where married couple Becca (played by Kid-

man) and Howie (Aaron Eckhart) frequently discuss grief counseling sessions and their feelings about Jason (Miles Teller), the teenage driver who accidentally killed their son with his car. Thus, the first idea added by Lindsay-Abaire in the film was to present these moments as proper cinematic scenes. "One of the things the play had going for it is that it had a fairly involved off-stage life," Lindsay-Abaire says. "For example, the support group is talked about a lot in the play, Howie's potential affair is hinted at, and then there are things like the supermarket scene, where Becca has an encounter with a woman and her young son. In a film, we can go to that support group and meet those people. And even though I hadn't written those scenes directly, I had already written them in my head."

As Lindsay-Abaire expanded these elements, a play that had only required five actors unfolded to include other characters and a whole world beyond the domestic prison Becca and Howie had created for themselves (on stage, the same house they'd made to raise

their son now serves to remind them of his absence, to the point that they end up deciding to sell it). Howie also became a stronger character, with the idea that he responds to Becca's emotional detachment by seeking attention from another woman developing into a proper subplot — something that had inspired performers to write Lindsay-Abaire in the past, demanding to know whether Howie actually cheats. "In the play, it's really up to the actor to decide how he's going to play those scenes," he says. "If you really want to know what I think, watch the movie."

Without revealing exactly what happens, Howie makes a connection at the support group meetings with another grieving parent named Gaby (Sandra Oh). These scenes contrast nicely with what Becca is going through at the same time — secretly meeting with Jason, the young man who struck down her son. In the play, it's Jason who reaches out to the grieving family by writing a letter in which he asks to meet them, though Lindsay-Abaire moved that subplot out of the house. Now, Becca spots Jason by chance and becomes the one to initiate contact. "That was me putting on my screenwriter's cap, trying to activate Nicole's character more," Lindsay-Abaire explains.

"The structure of parallel affairs really strengthens the story and makes it much more understandable than the play," elaborates director John Cameron Mitchell (*Hedwig and the Angry Inch*). "There's Nicole's powerful platonic affair with this teenager who was involved with the accident, which to me is just the most surprising and powerful part of the story — only he can fully understand the enormity of the situation, and some kind of mutual absolution needs to happen between them. Meanwhile, Aaron's character, who is being pushed away from his wife, finds solace and support with this other woman."

When it comes to favoring formats, Mitchell is unapologetic, "The screenplay I believe is actually better than the play. There are so many scenes that are hinted at in the play that feel like a vital part in the screenplay: Sandra Oh's character, the group therapy scenes, the supermarket scene, the prom scene, showing the house to the couple."

By the time Mitchell boarded the project, Lindsay-Abaire and Saari had been developing the script for some time and settled on a draft they were happy with. According to Lindsay-Abaire, the fact that he was working with familiar characters made his screenwriting a relatively fast process. "I wasn't trying to squeeze stuff that I liked into the movie, but I also wasn't trying to avoid using things from the play," says the writer, who began fresh, even going so far as to conceive an all-new opening scene that tells audiences all they need to know about Becca's character. In the scene, she is gardening — an obsession along with cooking, that helps her maintain a measure of control over her life — and is interrupted when a neighbor comes over and steps on one of her seedlings.

When he found it appropriate to the adaptation, Lindsay-Abaire allowed himself to recycle choice lines or monologues verbatim, as with the near-perfect note on which *Rabbit Hole* ends, now accompanied by images. "We see the tendrils of hope dramatized, instead of just talking about it," he explains.

As for the detail that gave the play its name, Lindsay-Abaire changed "Rabbit Hole" from a poignant short story written by Jason in the play to a comic for the film — a more cinematic option that serves as a visual motif throughout. Another detail that had to be rethought when translating the

two-act play into a three-act film was what to do with the intermission, which disguises a gap of three or four months in the play. "You don't want to feel like we stopped and restarted," says Lindsay-Abaire, who telescoped events to eliminate the interruption.

Since Mitchell comes from the theater, where the tradition is for the writer to have the final word on what ends up on stage, he extended the same courtesy to Lindsay-Abaire. "In film, writers are shunted as quickly as possible to the side," the director says. "But in this case, because it was his baby and because he's a brilliant writer, I wanted him to approve the shooting script, which is pretty unusual for directors, who want to piss all over it." When it came to making revisions, Lindsay-Abaire explains, "It wasn't actually rewriting, it was more stripping away, making the script leaner. It was just John saying, 'Is this what you're trying to get at with these three pages? Because if so, I can do that in a shot.'"

The way Mitchell saw it, "My job was mostly to pare away things, cut some scenes, replace some lines with images, reminding him that we could do a lot with the camera." On-screen, a well-chosen closeup could eliminate the need for an entire monologue, which was exactly the opposite of the process Lindsay-Abaire had faced on another of his assignments, co-writing "Shrek the Musical" for Broadway. "In the movie, they can move in on Shrek's big, huge eyes, and people get it, but in the balcony at the musical, that isn't possible," Lindsay-Abaire says. "So we had to come up with songs that crack open the character's heart and articulate what he's feeling."

For Lindsay-Abaire, the hardest change was cutting back the part of Becca's sister, Izzy (Tammy Blanchard), who originally had a big part in the first act. Though Mitchell believed that giving Izzy her own scenes diverted attention away from *Rabbit Hole*'s true protagonists, Lindsay-Abaire considered Izzy's presence vital to the comedic balance he was trying to maintain. "She had a lot of funny stuff that I had seen kill in front of a Broadway audience," says the writer, who ultimately realized that Mitchell had made the right call when he attended the film's Toronto Film Festival premiere. "The crowd laughed in all the right spots. It didn't occur to me that I had written all this new stuff that kept things from getting too grave or serious." ☐

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The Rite

Screenplay by Michael Petroni

THE WGA STRIKE had just ended when Michael Petroni (*The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys*) was given the outline of a nonfiction book about Gary Thomas, a priest who attended an exorcism course offered by the Vatican. "It's probably my own fault," he jokes. "I do feel like I've been branded the Catholic kid on the block. My upbringing is Catholic and to me there's a lot of rich imagery and stories in the Catholic world that I'm probably still writing out of my system." The project was set up with producers Beau Flynn and Tripp Vinson at Contrafilm, who wanted Petroni to start working on an adaptation before Matt Baglio had even finished writing his book. "So the book was being written in tandem with the script," Petroni explains, "or the screenplay was being written in tandem with the book."

As a result, Petroni benefited from Baglio's research and interviews, as they were happening. The author would send new chapters to Petroni as they were finished. "Then I'd call him up and kind of interview on his interviews," explains the screenwriter. "So he was a great resource for me." Baglio was very open to Petroni's questions and was also willing to give his own opinions about some of the interviews he conducted. Did he believe this person? Did this person seem like a bit of

a kook? "And he'd give me his honest answer," Petroni says, "which was also really helpful in characterizing these clergymen."

It wasn't far into the process, however, when Petroni realized he was just as interested in some of the side interviews as he was in the main story Baglio was telling. "As I was writing it in tandem with Matt's research I was like, 'Gee, I love that story,'" explains the screenwriter. "Then I would discuss it with the producers, and they'd say, 'Yeah, use that.'" What Petroni ultimately decided was to weave the experiences of several priests together into one story that centers on a single character. "As the movie will warn everybody in the very beginning — it's inspired by these true stories, which is why, in the end, we couldn't say it's based on the life of Father such-and-such," Petroni says.

In *The Rite*, Michael Kovak (Colin O'Donoghue) is an American priest who has been selected to attend an instructional course on exorcism held at the Vatican. Kovak is skeptical, to say the least, viewing exorcism as an antiquated ceremony once used to explain mental illness and for political manipulation. But as the course and veteran exorcist Father Lucas (Anthony Hopkins) show him more and more evidence about this ancient ritual, the young priest be-

gins to wonder if there's more to this rite than he initially believed.

"Everyone who loves [this] genre loves to believe in the devil," says the screenwriter. "Evil is one thing, but to actually have the devil as a character, in one sense or another, is tantalizing." It's the idea of dealing with the personality of the devil, in Petroni's opinion, that makes such stories more fascinating than the random creeps and scares usually found in horror films.

As for his writing habits, Petroni is an outliner, especially for thrillers that have numerous subplots, twists and reveals. "It's like I'm playing a very complicated game of chess," he says. *The Rite*, however, was much more straightforward. "It's pretty much a straight drama with a lot of tension," the screenwriter says. "It's all about building the tension in the story. So I just wrote that almost from page one all the way through — which is a very pleasurable experience." In about eight weeks, he had a draft he was happy with. He showed it to the producers, who also liked it, and after a few minor tweaks, the script went to the studio. "It's been a really sweet process," Petroni says. "Everything I've done on *The Rite* — from beginning through production to post-production and up to where we are now — it's been a very smooth ride, which is not my usual experience."

As Petroni explains, the story changed very little as the film moved into production. There were a few minor notes from director Mikael Håfström and the usual small revisions on set, but the central story remained largely unchanged, with the script going through maybe 10 drafts, many of which were minor tweaks to the locked production draft. He also praises Hopkins for suggestions that helped deepen his character. "When you're writing lines you can only imagine Anthony Hopkins saying them and when he is, it's fantastic," Petroni says. "It was just a great experience."

While films and television shows that focus on exorcism are nothing new (including Petroni's own one-season TV wonder, *Miracles*), the writer thinks this movie stands out because of its unique approach to the subject matter. "It's surprisingly realistic," Petroni says. "When you see the film, you won't have that feeling of, 'Oh, I'm watching a horror film.' I'd call it an 'elevated' horror film. I like that, but it sounds kind of boastful." He chuckles and adds, "It's certainly not low brow — let's put it that way." **CS**



No Strings Attached

Screenplay by Elizabeth Meriwether

ELIZABETH MERIWETHER didn't start out wanting to be a screenwriter. "I thought I wanted to be an actor growing up," she recalls. "All throughout middle school, I was adapting books and forcing everyone I knew to be in plays — and losing friends because of it." But Meriwether's creativity was inspired not by a need to perform, but by wanting to live inside the worlds of the books she was reading. As is true of most screenwriters, she had a complete, 360-degree view of each scene. Transitioning from acting to writing was inevitable. She just needed a push in the right direction.

"My sophomore year in college, some guy pissed me off or something," Meriwether laughs. "So I just started writing a play."

She never stopped writing. Since graduating from Yale in 2004, Meriwether has tapped out several plays while tending to an up-and-coming career in film and television. She wrote a pilot for Fox called *Sluts* in 2007, which caught the attention of Ivan Reitman's production company, The Montecito Picture Company. Given the bluntness of her show's title, they thought she might be intrigued by a romantic comedy they were developing called *Fuck Buddies*.

"I said, 'I'm in,'" Meriwether recalls. "I want to write that movie."

The hook of the story is simple: Two close friends (Natalie Portman and Ashton Kutcher) attempt to add a sexual dimension to their otherwise platonic relationship without falling in love. Explains Meriwether, "In *When Harry Met Sally*, it was, 'Can men and women just be friends?' In our movie, it's, 'Can men and women have sex without bringing in relationship *mishegoss*?'"


Meriwether began her first draft prior to the 2007 WGA strike and, because the project was "low priority" at Montecito, wrote with relative freedom for about four or five months. As is customary for Meriwether, the initial draft was funny but, structurally speaking, a complete mess. "This is the first movie I've written, so I don't know exactly what my process is yet," she says. "When I write for the theater, it's all over the place at first. That's just how my mind works. I think I get a lot more excited about writing jokes and characters and whatever pops into my mind than about crafting a perfect story."

Once the strike ended, Meriwether jumped back in with Reitman and restructured the entire screenplay. "We were doing a lot of drafts to get the two leads cast," Meriwether says. This required Meriwether to get into the heads of both of her leads and write fully fleshed out characters who are clear

equals. Splitting the focus can be difficult. "I feel like I do have those feelings where I'll do a pass where I'm really in one character's head and then step back and do another pass and get into another character's head and have to adjust for that character," she says.

Her insight into the male and female leads was true enough to land the bankable duo of Portman and Kutcher — both of whom have produced before (Portman's an executive producer on *No Strings Attached*), and therefore had ideas about how to shape their characters. "[Natalie] is one of the smartest people I've ever met, which doesn't seem fair because she's also I think the most beautiful person I've ever met as well," Meriwether says. "She was incredibly supportive and also incredibly helpful. She was basically, as she should be, defending her character and making sure we didn't compromise her character's story." She also gives Kutcher high marks as a collaborator. "He's incredibly smart about producing," she says. "I feel like I really got lucky. They were both genuinely smart and helpful about the script and making sure we were making the movie they wanted to make."

With the leads in place, Meriwether turned her attention to the supporting characters, who, given all the attention paid to the protagonists, weren't quite "popping" as much as they should. "We realized that these other side characters in the movie weren't developed at all and we realized how important they were," she says. "That was a lot fun going back and reworking the side characters while we were auditioning people and tailoring the characters for those actors. There's a guy in the movie who plays a gay roommate of Natalie's; he definitely wasn't in the first draft of the movie. Ivan had just seen him on *CHELSEA LATELY*. He wasn't even really an actor, but Ivan was like, 'I really want him in the movie,' so I created this character for him."

Meriwether stayed involved in the film through production and learned a great deal while working alongside Reitman. "He really is a legend and I was so honored to work with him," she says. "In the moments where I had the most amount of work or was griping about having to turn something in last minute, he'd be like, 'You don't even know. You're going to miss me.' I think he's right. Even in the hardest times, I knew that this was something really special and a great experience I was having." 



Hall Pass

**Screenplay by Pete Jones, Kevin Barnett,
Peter Farrelly & Bobby Farrelly**
Story by Pete Jones

IF NOTHING ELSE, Pete Jones is unabashedly honest about the inception of *Hall Pass*, a comedy that tackles the question of: What if your wife gave you one week to sleep with anyone you wanted? “I know as a writer, you’re supposed to just write the best story you can,” he laughs. “I wrote the best story I could, but made it a little happier than I originally planned. I have kids and I wanted to make a sale.”

Jones, the inaugural winner of *Project Greenlight*, the short-lived Matt Damon and Ben Affleck-produced reality show that sought out new filmmaking talent, wrote *Pass* on spec and his initial takes on the material ended up a little dark. “I really enjoyed the first draft and showed it to a couple of friends,” he explains. “They said to me, ‘Jackass, you said you were hoping to write a commercial script that would sell! This isn’t it.’” Luckily, Jones’ lighter take turned out to strike the right chord with the industry. Before long there was a bidding war, but Jones wanted his story in the right hands with filmmakers he admired, so he chose Peter and Bobby Farrelly, the writer-director brothers behind *There’s Something About Mary* and *Dumb and Dumber*.

Once the Farrellys took over, they started work on a new draft of the script with their friend, writer Kevin Barnett. Barnett used to work for the brothers as an assistant before they discovered his talent as a writer and brought him on board to co-write their 2007 film, *The Heartbreak Kid*. “Someone had slipped Pete Farrelly one of my scripts,” Barnett recalls. “The next day, he asked if he could start rewriting it with me. They were the reason I went out to Hollywood and really tried to pursue a career in writing in the first place, so I’m still not sure how this all happened.”

For Barnett, working with the Farrellys is the fulfillment of a longtime dream that began when he sent letters about job possibilities to some of his favorite writers and directors working in Hollywood. The only people to respond were the Farrellys, who didn’t have an opening at the time but promised to keep him in mind. Six months later, he was working in their offices. Four years later, he was their co-writer.

Similar to Jones’ original material, the Farrellys and Barnett pushed so far into dark comedic territory that they were no longer sure if audiences would like the main characters enough to buy into the story. “We real-

ized we had to really pull back on some stuff because the priority is getting the characters right,” Barnett says. “For Peter and Bobby, if by page 10 or 15, you’re not on board with the lead character, then the movie is done.”

The Farrellys decided to take a break from writing in the form of a cross-country roadtrip that happened to take them into Moline, Illinois — just a few hours from Pete Jones’ house. The three planned to meet for dinner, where the Farrellys confessed to Jones that they were having trouble cracking his story. “I told them it was already cracked,” laughs Jones, referring to his script. “They said, ‘We really want to go for it, but will you come back and help us?’ After I said yes, they said, ‘It starts tonight.’” The brothers roped Jones into finishing the roadtrip with them all the way to Washington, where the trio worked on new ideas for the story.

“Peter really wanted to go for it,” Jones continues. “He said to me, ‘My problem with this story is when you tell me it’s two guys who get a week off marriage, I know going into the movie that it’s two guys who get a week off marriage. They do funny things and, in the end, they realize they should stay married. I want to rip that apart.’ His big thing is: Don’t give the audience what they’re expecting, but leave them satisfied.” They didn’t quite finish breaking the new story on the drive, but Jones was officially brought on board as a fourth co-writer and intense rewriting sessions took place at Peter Farrelly’s farmhouse in Ojai, California.

All four writers worked in unison in the same room, with Barnett manning the keyboard. The pages they were working on were projected onto a big screen so that the other three could see the same material. Working chronologically from page one, the writers diagnosed what they deemed to be the problem areas from previous drafts and talked them out together. “There’s no set system in place,” Barnett says. “We just rewrite and keep going until we feel good about it.”

The collaboration extended into production of the film, where Barnett and Jones joined the Farrellys every day. After each take, the writers gave their input — something rare in Hollywood these days — and pages would be reworked each night as needed. “We all had the same vision the entire way through,” Barnett explains, “but we all had the freedom to change something up if we felt strongly about it. Things can always get better.” Jones agrees: “I had never written with a team before,” he says, “but with them, the best idea wins.” **CS**



Unknown

Screenplay by Oliver Butcher and Stephen Cornwell

Based on the novel "Out of My Head"

by Didier van Cauwelaert

THOUGH OLIVER BUTCHER and Stephen Cornwell have known each other for 20 years, they didn't start collaborating on screenplays until 2004. In the years before, both men had worked with other writing partners and were familiar with the process. Butcher likens it to two divorcees getting remarried in that both parties are wary and very conscious of trying to accommodate the other. "But, as William S. Burroughs once said, 'When you have two minds working together, it can create a third mind,'" Butcher says. "I think that creative alchemy, when it works, is where the best work is produced."

In late 2006, Butcher and Cornwell were approached by veteran producer Leonard Goldberg with a novel and a proposition. The novel, "Out of My Head" by Didier van Cauwelaert, was an existential tale of memory and identity with traces of a thriller. The proposition was simple: Make it into a film.

Though both men consider outlining to be an essential part of screenwriting, it assumed a different role for them this time around. Obviously, the novel offered up characters and concepts and situations but, more importantly, as Butcher recalls, "It offered up this series of reveals that were quite accessible, but also very original and very cinematic." The scribes knew that if they

could maintain the order and spirit of these reveals, they could create something new in the well-worn conspiracy genre.

Unknown is the story of Dr. Martin Harris (Liam Neeson), a botanist in Berlin, who is to address a convention of scientists. After he forgets his briefcase in a taxi, he leaves his wife, Liz (January Jones), at the hotel to track it down. Things quickly spiral out of control when the car Martin is traveling in ends up in a river, leaving him in a coma. Upon waking and returning to the hotel, he finds that no one recognizes him, not even Liz. And to make matters worse, there's a man who convinces everyone that he is Martin, including Liz. Aided only by a taxi-driving immigrant named Gina (Diane Kruger) and a former Stazi agent named Jurgen (Bruno Ganz), Martin must uncover why he has been replaced in his life — and whether it was even his life in the first place.

Once the pair have outlined the story, they'll work as much separately as they do together building the first draft, which, in the case of *Unknown*, took about three months. One early change Butcher and Cornwell made to the story was its location. The novel is set in Paris, which they felt was too familiar to American audiences. Moving the story to Berlin facilitated a better sense of a stranger in

a strange land and also enabled them to explore their long-held fascination with post-Cold War Germany. As Martin's arc progresses and we learn more about him, the writers felt it was important that there be a character he could relate to in his new context. This necessitated another change, the invention of the character Jurgen: a wounded, wise and world-weary remnant of East Germany's past. "Jurgen became a stealth character, someone you create to play a minor role who ends up stealing the film," Cornwell laughs. "We really had to work to maintain the balance, as this is still Martin's story."

Another important element they created, given the later revelations about Martin's life, was the science plot. Martin has been working with Dr. Bressler (Sebastian Koch) on a new strain of corn that is resistant to insects and environmental concerns and could grow in some parts of the world where it couldn't before. As Martin discovers, a group called Section 15 has been tasked with making sure this new strain never becomes a reality. Though Section 15 appears in the book, there isn't much written about them, so Butcher and Cornwell had to develop their story. Thus, Section 15 became a nod to the rather ridiculous genre conceit that these organizations are able to plan chaos down to the smallest detail. "Jurgen has two lines, the one about how these groups are good, but they're not God — and the one about their exhaustive research and planning. We absolutely wanted to wink at the audience about the sort of things we're expected to accept in these stories, but also have something that, upon close review, is actually true," Butcher says. "Kind of a tightrope to walk." As Cornwell elaborates, a conspiracy isn't a reveal with modern audiences — it's expected. "A bank is expected to be corrupt, politicians are expected to be on the take. Suspension of disbelief is no longer just for movies; it's the way the world works. We wanted to make something that spoke to a sophisticated audience, one who finds the implied more interesting than the explained."

The key to screenwriting, both writers agree, is being mindful of your exposition. "It's a matter of minimalism," Cornwell explains. "Once you get into production, you find that casting and production design tell so much that you can scale back what is actually said. You just have to remain mindful of the visceral experience. If you can couch your information in terms of emotion, the audience will be much more receptive and you can go to some really interesting places once you have them on your side." **CS**



Incendies

Screenplay by Denis Villeneuve (also directs)

FOR BETTER OR WORSE, stage-to-screen adaptations tend to be protective of the original language of their source material. Not so with director Denis Villeneuve's *Incendies*, an image-driven adaptation of an incredibly dense, dialogue-heavy play by celebrated Lebanese-Canadian writer Wajdi Mouawad.

"For three and a half hours, it's a nonstop machine gun of words," says Villeneuve of the original show. His film — which earned rave reviews at the Venice, Telluride and Toronto film festivals and has since been submitted as Canada's official Oscar foreign language entry — is the exact opposite. In place of a series of long, one- and two-page monologues, the words are sparse and minimal; meanwhile, on-screen, the near-empty space of the stage opens up to a sequence of arresting, unforgettable images.

"I was not looking for an adaptation," says Villeneuve, who first saw the play in a small theater in Montreal, "but I was just totally astonished by the story and how powerful it was." Moved by the play, Villeneuve met Mouawad for coffee the following day and proposed making "*Incendies*" (aka "*Scorched*") into a film, but the playwright was skeptical, having personally directed a film version of "*Littoral*," the first installment in his politically charged trilogy.

A continuation of that show's themes — namely, issues of memory and guilt passed on

to those who were a generation removed from the horrors of Lebanese history — *Incendies* tells the story of Nawal, a Middle Eastern woman whose peculiar will triggers an investigation into her past. According to her final wishes, Nawal asks to be buried in an unmarked grave until her grown daughter and son are able to erase her shame by each delivering a letter to their father and brother.

"He thought it was painful to do cinema," says Villeneuve, who listened patiently as Mouawad spelled out the obstacles ahead: *Incendies* was too big to put on screen, the playwright explained and, besides, it was set in an imaginary land (based on Lebanon, but reimagined for artistic effect), which would be difficult to translate to film.

Instead of giving up, Villeneuve went off and wrote roughly 40 pages of small scenes suggested by the play and sent them to Mouawad. "It was a total brainstorm," Villeneuve remembers. "I pitched him an orgy of images inspired by different scenes and ideas from the play, like the opening scene where the kids are being shaved by military men — that's not in the play, but he loved it."

Convinced, Mouawad gave the director permission to make the film his own, so long as he understood that it would be a lonely and difficult journey. According to Villeneuve, Mouawad told him, "I suffered a lot writing '*Incendies*,' and you're going to suffer, too."

With that, Mouawad wished him luck and left for Paris to work on his next play.

Sure enough, the process was far more difficult than Villeneuve had imagined, being a Canadian with no personal ties to the Middle East. "I had been saying to myself, 'When I get the rights, it will take me three months,' but the truth is it took me six months before I put one word to paper," says Villeneuve, who used research and meditation to find the right angle.

In time, he realized that the family dimension of *Incendies* was the most universal entry point. Villeneuve kept four key characters and started rebuilding the story around that idea. "I had to modify it a lot in order that it became cinema," says the director, who claims he hates flashbacks in films. "What I liked about the structure of the play is how it captures the feeling of two present times." Where another director might have chosen separate looks for these sequences, Villeneuve invited a measure of confusion as the story moves back and forth. "It's written like this in the screenplay, as a game of space and time," he says. "It's like there are ghosts or echoes, which creates a kind of dialogue between the characters."

By design, much of that conversation is done through visuals rather than dialogue. According to Villeneuve, his goal was to make a totally silent movie, though it was ultimately easier for the characters to describe things he couldn't afford to show because of budget constraints.

"In the play, they are shouting all the time and expressing all their anger. The characters in the movie are 10,000 times more contained," says Villeneuve, who found that by taking a line here and there from Mouawad's "beautiful poems," then translating the rest into images, he could elicit the emotional response he wanted — almost like a form of visual haiku.

"It was very important to me that there would be silence, which has an equilibrium with the images you are putting on the screen," Villeneuve says. Rather than staging the most violent scenes (described in graphic detail in the play), the director decided to show just enough to suggest their horror, preferring to feature silent, introspective moments in which the characters digest what they've experienced (such as the bus massacre Nawal narrowly survives) — a strategy accounted for in advance at the screenplay level. "Cinema for me is about images. It's always beautiful when it can be done without dialogue," he says. "It's a link with poetry." **CS**



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Red Riding Hood

Screenplay by David Leslie Johnson

EVERYTHING OLD is new again for David Leslie Johnson. The scribe saw his first produced script hit screens last year with *Orphan*, a new and daring take on the classic evil-child genre. For his followup, *Red Riding Hood*, Johnson tackled one of the most famous stories in the world, a fairy tale originally passed on through oral tradition that dates back more than 700 years. Of course, his version comes to theaters courtesy of *Twilight* director Catherine Hardwicke and a sexy young cast led by Amanda Seyfried in the title role, so one can expect some changes. There's a love triangle involving Seyfried's Valerie and her childhood friend Peter (Shiloh Fernandez) and the man she's promised to marry, Henri Lazar (Max Irons). The fresh take also re-creates the invalid grandmother into a sly Bohemian, played by Julie Christie, and adds other mysteries and dark family secrets.

Johnson, who got his start as an assistant to Frank Darabont, landed the *Red Riding Hood* gig as a result of his work on *Orphan* with Appian Way, Leonardo DiCaprio's production company. "Appian Way and I had a great experience working

together and, once *Orphan* was shooting, we started to put our brains together to figure out something else we could work on," Johnson recalls. He says it was Appian who had the idea of revisiting the classic fairy tale. "It was sort of nebulous at the beginning; there were lots of different ways of tackling it," he recalls. "What interested us both was going back and revisiting the actual fairy tale, not a modernization."

In his research, Johnson learned there were countless versions of the tale all over the world, many of them graphically gory. "There's an early version called 'The Grandmother's Tale,' which winds up with the wolf pulling the grandmother's intestines through her mouth," Johnson notes. "And a version in China where the grandmother is a tiger." Originally, Johnson was intrigued with the idea of making it a dark horror film, but things changed when Hardwicke came on board, around the time of the second draft. "We worked very closely together, taking the story into more of her wheelhouse," he admits. "I was always interested in doing a love triangle and telling a coming-of-age story about a young girl. Catherine is so

tapped into that youth energy and found a great voice for these characters."

During the five or six drafts Johnson went through, other changes included aging the characters up a bit for practical reasons, although Johnson had originally envisioned them as a younger, *Stand By Me* age. He also removed some early backstory about Valerie and her grandmother. "It was sort of taking too long and we wanted to get to things much quicker," he notes. But perhaps the biggest change was the grandmother herself. "I had written her as this mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi character and she came across very matronly," he says. "It was Catherine who said, 'I want her to be this hip, cool grandmother out there in the woods.'"

Johnson wasn't on the Vancouver set for rewrites, since he had already gone to work on *Clash of the Titans 2* with Dan Mazeau, but he was present for a table read and says he made small tweaks based on that. "Once the actors began playing the parts, the things that really came out of the read were places where the exposition was bogging us down," he says. "Or there were little things that weren't made clear in the script that came to light."

Johnson says his writing has become more disciplined since he and his wife had a child. "I've had to move to doing more of a 9-to-5 day to revolve around his schedule," he says. He also says he used to be big on outlining, but that has also changed. "I've been writing so much faster; I'll be on the outline and realize how far behind I'm getting by doing this detailed outline and just have to jump in," he notes. "I'm realizing I don't need as much as I used to think I did." He also says he can't go back and read a script while he's writing it. "I have to go ahead or I'll get bogged down," he admits. "It can be to my disadvantage because I can forget something I've written in before and end up rewriting similar scenes, but it's better for me to just write straight through and get it over with and then go back and see where I screwed up."

In terms of advice for aspiring scribes, Johnson says it may sound cliché but he's only recently come to realize how important it is to write every day. "It's like anything else: It's a muscle you exercise and the more you exercise, the stronger it gets," he says. "It's a skill you have to learn and you have to sit down and practice every day." **CS**



Barney's Version

Screenplay Michael Konyves

MONTREAL NATIVE Michael Konyves' writing career began more than a decade ago while he worked as an assistant to Canadian filmmaker Christian Duguay (*Hitler: The Rise of Evil*). One of his duties entailed reading through the myriad screenplays sent to the director by his agency. It was in these pages that Konyves gradually realized he might have the stuff to be a professional screenwriter. "I read a lot of bad scripts," he recalls. "I thought, 'These are getting bought by somebody. I can certainly write a script this bad. And if I could get paid for it, that would be great!'"

Konyves' epiphany brought him to Los Angeles, where he found an agent and sold the first script he wrote to Summit Entertainment. "I could quit my job and pay the rent for my studio apartment for a year," Konyves says. Keeping a roof over his head beyond that first year, however, would require Konyves to write the kinds of screenplays that inspired his move to Hollywood. His earlier titles included *Solar Attack* and *Earthstorm*, which were written quickly, made on the cheap in Canada (Konyves' citizenship helped land him these gigs) and aired on SyFy from time to time. They are not distinguished pieces of filmmaking, but plugging away kept the lights on in Konyves' apartment.

But writers can only submit to the B-movie grind for so long before it wears them out or, worse, diminishes the quality of their writing. "It's kind of fun to be like, 'Holy shit, I wrote a script in two weeks!'" Konyves says. "You don't think it's actually possible until you do it. But then there's also the danger of when you do it too much, it's like, 'This is actually making me a worse writer at a certain point.' So you've got to put the breaks on that and say, 'OK, let me try to be fantastic again.'"

Konyves saw a chance to be fantastic again in *Barney's Version*, an adaptation of Mordecai Richler's celebrated novel about a curmudgeonly TV producer moved to recount his turbulent, womanizing life when a tragic event from his past is dug up in the form of a true crime novel. The central mystery revolves around Barney's involvement in the shooting death of his friend Boogie, but the scope of the narrative is much broader than that — it's a sprawling yarn about a man attempting to make sense of his misspent time on the planet and figure out how he lost the one person he loved more than anything.

"I actively sought out *Barney's Version*," Konyves says. "It wasn't brought to me. I read the book and found out who had the

rights." The rights belonged to Robert Lantos, a friend of Richler's who had produced the 1985 big-screen version of the author's *Joshua Then and Now*. Recalls Konyves, "I knew someone who knew him and said, 'Can you get me five minutes with him?'" Konyves got his five minutes and soon realized that the project meant a great deal to Lantos, who'd been struggling to get it into production for 12 years. Konyves impressed Lantos enough to be granted a shot at giving notes on the current draft of the screenplay.

Konyves seized this opportunity to work up a 30-page set of incredibly detailed notes that illustrated how he'd pull together the book's sprawling narrative (told by an unreliable narrator) and divergent subplots. "The book is very, very dense: It's long, it's first-person, it's written as a memoir, and it's just really a man's mind poured out on paper — with tangents everywhere and every person he's ever met from the time he was 20 until he dies. And he has Alzheimer's so he's losing his memory as he's writing."

Lantos liked Konyves' take, so he let the writer take a crack at the screenplay, which proved to be a struggle. "I was very excited about getting the job because I really loved the book," Konyves says. "And then when I got the job, I completely crumbled. I didn't write a word for the first month. I knew I had three months to hand it in and for the first month I was completely paralyzed. I was like, 'I figured out how to do the structure, but I don't know what happens in between anything!' Then, little by little, I started writing. I wrote the first draft in three months. And until we got a draft that we went with to the actors was a year. It was basically two years from the time I was bought on to the time we were shooting."

Konyves involvement did not stop once director Richard J. Lewis put the film before cameras. "I was around for the entire preproduction, on set every day, and was even around for the postproduction — which is rare and will probably never happen to me again. So I knew to take advantage of it."

Now that he's got his name on a film festival hit, people wonder if he'll disown his earlier SyFy efforts? "People tell me, 'You might want to take them down,'" Konyves says. "Fuck that! I am very proud of paying the rent writing. There is absolutely no shame. Not everyone comes out of the gate winning Oscars or writing masterpieces." **CS**



Another Year

Screenplay by Mike Leigh

IN MOST CASES, when someone wants to work with a particular actress, they send her a script, which she can then read before deciding whether to commit. With Mike Leigh, the star gets a phone call invitation to become part of a creative adventure that begins with only the vaguest notion of where the result might take everyone. “For me, the journey of making the film is the journey of discovering what the film actually is,” Leigh says. “In the end, the real discovery as to what the film is happens as a result of shooting it.”

Leigh is famously enigmatic about his process, guarding the particulars of a project like the secret formula for Coca-Cola. Things are no different when he discusses *Another Year*, though the writer-director does reveal enough for one to get a basic idea of how his mysterious methods work. One thing Leigh knew going in was that he wanted the project to spotlight Lesley Manville, an actress who had appeared in eight of his previous works, both on stage and screen, over the last two decades.

Coming off of *Happy-Go-Lucky*, in which most of the characters were in their early thirties, for his next project, the 67-year-old film-

maker wanted to assemble a cast closer to his age and to make a more contemplative work. “I had a very strong sense that Lesley would be able to create something that sat with the general feeling I had of exploring [the ideas of] life passing, looking back to the past and looking forward to our old age and all those things,” he says.

Although *Another Year* may seem to be about little more than a year in the life of a group of aging Londoners, Leigh actually juggles an ambitious mix of themes and ideas in his film, so much so that it’s nearly impossible to reduce the project to a neat summary. “I don’t force myself to contort whatever is in my head into a digestible pitch or to talk the simplistic, infantile idea of a plot premise or whatever,” he says with a playful surliness. And while there was no specific kernel at the outset, over time, the decision to focus on a year — rather than a week or a few days, which is his preferred timeframe — resulted from the collision of three separate considerations.

“On one level, I wanted the film to be about visitations from Mary,” he says, referring to the scatterbrained divorcée Manville

plays and the way she’s always dropping in on her married friends Tom and Gerri (played by Leigh regulars Jim Broadbent and Ruth Sheen). “I don’t think they could tolerate frequent visitations, certainly not in the short space of a week or a month, so it would have to be a longer timespan.”

Second, Leigh wanted to dramatize the earth-nurturing, horticultural aspect of Tom and Gerri’s personality. Though Leigh wanted to show the characters gardening together at their allotment, he says, “If we were there once, it would be boring,” which again indicated to him that he would need more time.

And third, when director of photography Dick Pope ran a series of tests to determine the look of the film, he returned with four different options. After looking at it, Leigh remembers, “I suddenly had this clairvoyant flash. I thought, ‘I know what this is: It’s four seasons.’ When the lights came up, he said, ‘Well, which way are we going to go?’ and I said, ‘All ways! We’re going to have four seasons,’ and that sort of opened up the whole film.”

Leigh elaborates, “The point of the four seasons connected with the theme that was driving the whole film anyway, which is about the cyclical nature of life and the inevitability of it all. And also, from a structural point of view, it became very exciting that with each of the seasons, you could start from another angle. It could be told in a way as four separate stories.”

Though many directors say that the most important part of their job is casting, it is never more true than on a Mike Leigh movie, where the actors have a hand in creating their characters. Leigh always begins with a vague idea of the fictional relationships between his performers: fathers and sons, husbands and wives and so on. Once he’s selected his ensemble, Leigh gives himself several months (five, in the case of *Another Year*) to work out the particulars with his cast that will become the film, which is then shot quite economically in a matter of weeks (just 12 in this case).

In shaping the individuals, he asks the actors to think about specific people from the outside world, instructing them to borrow details from their relatives and acquaintances. “This is not the kind of work where you sit in a hermetically sealed environment dis-

cussing," Leigh says. "We don't sit talking about Lesley's own feelings or Lesley's own experiences. In that sense, it's not in the tradition of certain interpretations of method acting. It's not about Viola Spolin's 'Improvisation for the Theater' exercises. We draw from real people out there in the real world — real social contexts — and that's the key to where it comes from."

Leigh collaborates closely with each actor, individually at first, before bringing them together to interact. "At the beginning, there's no character," he explains. "Gradually, relationships and histories start to develop and form, and a whole world starts to happen, out of which, eventually, my job is to distill and construct the film."

For Manville, working with Leigh is unlike working with any other director. "Because of the way we create the character, it's not something you have to arrive at quickly," she says. "It's a very slow-cooked thing, and it gets modified and changed and shifted. Over time, as this 'Person X' is emerging, they're becoming clearer each day, so whatever the source or sources might be, they very quickly become their own person."

Because the actors have done extensive background work on their characters, they've learned how to play that person in any situation, meaning they can be introduced into real-time interactions with other cast members. "You reach a stage when improvisations can happen, where whole situations are explored," Leigh says. "But then out of that, we have a very complex and elaborate rehearsal procedure, so that we can arrive at what was shot, which is always extremely precise and very tightly scripted."

However, unless someone wants to transcribe the film after the fact, no written document with the film's dialogue and behavior exists. "The process where somebody writes something down and then the actors go off and learn it doesn't come into it," the director insists. "I never go away and write a script and bring it back and hand it out." The closest thing to a conventional script Leigh prepares is a continuity guide for himself and the crew. "Before I start shooting, I will write out the structure of the film. You have to have some sense of how this scene relates to the one that comes before or after."

Still, the exact words are uncovered during rehearsal, then refined by Leigh before shooting. "Because I've developed with

each of these characters, I am able to be on the same wavelength and suggest appropriately what they might say," explains Leigh, who insists, "Writing is not just about dialogue. That's a tiny sliver of what writing really is. Writing is about conception, construction, dramatic juxtapositions, dramatic storytelling." Though his process is rooted in improv, Leigh bristles at the suggestion that his films are "naturalistic," taking great care to present a sort of heightened realism. "I would hope to be recognized as a writer of dialogue," he says. "It's pretty good dialogue, by any standards, even kind of poetic."

Though most of the film is locked in during rehearsal, the process still continues to evolve even as the film is being shot. "There is nothing to stop me, on occasion, from introducing things on the spot," Leigh says. "That's the most famous thing that's different about my films: People are always on the case. They're not in their trailers wanking. We're constantly saying, 'OK, let's go and run it a few times,' and while we're running it, I can say, 'Hold on a minute. Let's just change this. I've got another idea.'"

On *Another Year*, when Mary comes around to visit and is surprised to find an unexpected character, although her basic reactions had been worked out and rehearsed long before, Leigh settled on the particulars of her speech — a catalog of disasters that involved her new car — shortly before shooting. "Out comes this long saga about how she broke down and how the tow-truck guy tried to take advantage of her," Leigh says. "That was invented on the hoof and brought to performance pitch and shot in less than a day."

Even then, the director does not thrust actors into a situation unprepared. "You can't — and we wouldn't — improvise on-camera because it would be a shambles," Manville confesses.

As Leigh puts it, "All art is a synthesis of improvisation and order. Whether you paint or sculpt, you do an improvisation and then you work from that. But there's a point at which an actor needs to be able to just get on top and remember it," he says, "The important thing is to be creative, and not to be lazy and say, 'Well, OK. That'll do.' That's fatal. You've got to keep on digging and investigating and challenging yourself until you get there. That must be the experience of all art." **CS**

Letter From the Editor

continued from page 6

loved your logline. And congrats on getting optioned.

Having said that, the advice not to open a screenplay with voiceover is generally excellent advice. You're wrong about "so many awesome scripts that start off with a VO. There are actually very few. *American Beauty* and *Sunset Blvd.* stand out in memory. Here's something great that William Martell wrote about VO:

<http://www.englishforums.com/English/ScriptVoiceNarration/hhvmn/post.htm>

Another telling point is this: If your script is made, will the director keep your opening voiceover or find a better way to do that piece of exposition?

"I feel that my script, which scored an 86, is certainly worthy enough to be placed on your online system for producers and agents to view. It's a meager four-point difference of a judge having a good day or a bad day. It's very close to that 90-point margin. Can you make an exception?"

Regretfully, no. The threshold for scripts being made available to producers was semifinalist status: a score of 91.5. I made the decision to reduce the threshold to 90 because it involved adding only a few more scripts and a score of 90 is generally associated with an "A" grade, a rough equivalent of "Recommend." Reducing the threshold to 86 would add 120+ scripts to the pile — significantly more scripts than are already there. My impression of producers is that they don't want to hear, "Hey, we have 200 scripts for you to read." They want the (perceived) cream of the crop.

To the writer of the 678-word commentary about the judging of your Little League script:

The fact that a judge in another contest liked your script while our judge did not is a mirror of what happens when your script circulates: The vast majority of readers don't recommend most scripts. We cautioned you about taking the word of one contest judge as the only, final word. Also, your rant convinced me that you feel passionately about your story. Good for you! And if it made you feel better to tell us off, also good for you. Write on and market on!

It may help to think of marketing yourself and your work as being like direct mail, email or telemarketing (because it actually includes all three). When 98 people out of 100 throw away a direct mail promotion and only two of them buy it, a wise marketer generally considers the campaign a success. So maybe you need another try. I'm sending you a coupon for \$45 off the entry fee in the current AAA Screenplay Contest.

Bill Donovan

Editor and Publisher

127 Hours

FORGET ALL THE STORIES about people passing out in theaters due to a graphic scene — the real story behind *127 Hours* is about how co-writers Simon Beaufoy and Danny Boyle (the director's first writing credit) managed to expertly adapt a nearly unadaptable book and toss in an unforgettable ending to boot. Although Beaufoy and Boyle discussed their process of adapting Aron Ralston's true adventure, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place," in the November/December 2010 issue of *Creative Screenwriting*, what wasn't discussed was how they saved the ending — and also the film.

Interestingly, this Golden Globe-nominated script had a completely different ending than what was seen in the finished film. A look into the 101-page "Revision: Buff Pages" version of the shooting draft, dated April 10, 2010, contains a full 20 pages of material after Aron (James Franco) frees himself from the rock on page 81.

What's so brilliant about *127 Hours* is that after the climax of Aron freeing himself, there's a musically rich and rushed denouement that seems as though Aron is on the last legs of this incredible race that we've been rooting for him to finish all along. Sure he scales down a wall and drinks some water, but from that moment forward his rescue is a fully immersive and emotionally poignant blur concluded by a brief credit sequence that shows what Aron has done since this event. It's a fantastic conclusion because it escapes the more predictable and traditional resolution in which Aron apologizes to friends and family and makes good on some of his canyon promises. While the film's ending smartly skips all those expected beats, sadly the script didn't.

In the scene immediately following the rescue, Eric, one of Aron's rescuers, has a quarter-page monologue recounting how he rescued Aron, which he details on a TV show. This completely interrupts the flow of the rescue, which is flashed back to, and was one of many good cuts made as momentum begins fading on the page in this section.

The real trouble begins on page 88 when Aron's mom shows up. Up until this point, the script and film have been a raw man-versus-nature-versus-himself type of tale, but here it slides into melodrama.

MOM

Aron Ralston, you ever do that to me again and I swear I'll break both your legs.

He looks down at the clean bandages, the place where his hand should be, realises for the first time that a new life starts here. Suddenly scared, his eyes fill with tears.

ARON

Oh, Mom, what am I gonna do?

MOM

You're my son. You're alive. That's all that matters for now.

By this point the audience has already seen Aron at his most vulnerable, during which time he resolves to treat his family better, so there's too much pressure for a short scene like this to accomplish all that's

mentions feeling bad for missing (if he dies) on the video message he made in the canyon. Again, the script wears its heart on its sleeve as Aron's father makes a schmaltzy speech.

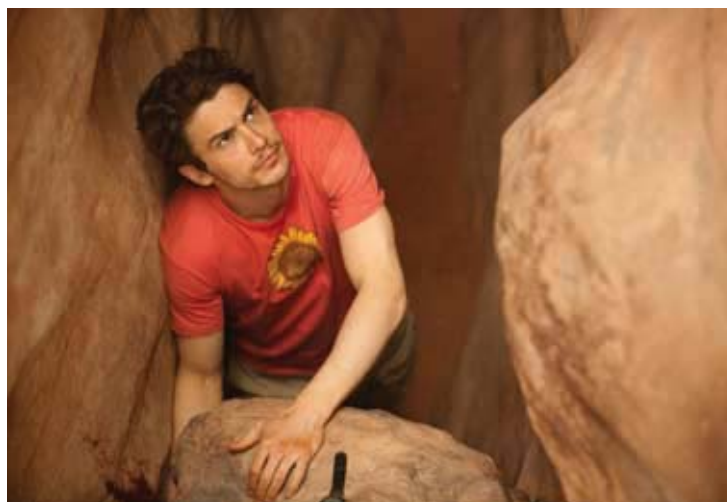
The wedding continues and Sonja pulls Aron away to a piano she's found and they play it together — just as he promised. The scene runs nearly a page and, again, doesn't top any of the energy or emotion from the canyon.

Finally, Aron visits Rana, the girlfriend seen in the film. In their nearly three-page scene, he explains how there's still another hike he wants to finish ("the fourteeners") and tells her of the vision he had of his unborn child, which helped fuel his painful escape. After a silence he asks, "But it's not going to be you, is it?" She replies, "No, Aron, it's not," and then chides him for planning to return to the wilderness by saying, "Everyone who cares for you, a little bit of them dies each time you go back out there." The script then finishes with titles similar to those seen in the final film.

As Boyle and Beaufoy recently told me in my *127 Hours* podcast, they shot this material, showed it to a small group of friends, one of whom commented that he was surprised to see such a conventional ending to such an unconventional film. This was all Boyle needed to hear to motivate a jump back into the editing room and a bold refusal to be precious about his and Beaufoy's writing. Ultimately, he re-cut the ending into something that matches the heart pounding nature of the film, an ending that would better resonate with audiences.

It's a solid lesson about being able to accept a note.

As Boyle and Beaufoy proved, even in this late stage of the game (after their film was shot), there's often riches to be found by remaining open to smart notes, particularly ones that necessitate big, but important changes. If this Oscar-winning team is versatile enough to know when to take a smart note — you should be, too! **CS**



already been accomplished. To this end, it had to go. At the conclusion of this scene in the original script, a title flashes up that reads, "1,000 Hours Later."

On the pages that followed, we see Aron spaced out at a press conference and then attending his sister Sonja's wedding — which he

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Mattie, discomfited by his look, turns hastily forward and pushes open the door. A jingling sound prompts one more glance to the side.

The man's face is now hidden by his hat. Just before Mattie's point of view, now a lateral track, starts to lose him behind the door jamb, he raises a spurred boot to push against the porch rail and tip his chair back. He raises his other foot, spur jingling, and drapes it over the first.

INSIDE

We are pushing in on the landlady.

Landlady
Isn't your mother expecting you home, dear? I did not think to see you this evening.

Mattie
My business is not yet finished. Mrs. Floyd, have any rooms opened up? Grandma Turner. . . the bed is quite narrow.

Landlady
The second-floor back did open up but the gentleman on the porch has just taken it. But don't worry yourself, dear—you are not disturbing Grandma Turner.

DARK BEDROOM

As before, unseen Grandma Turner snores loudly as wind whistles and Mattie shivers.

Fade to black.

Very quiet.

In the quiet, a faint crackle-crackle of flame. It is followed by a lip-pop and a deep inhale.

Mattie opens her eyes. She is beaded with sweat. She looks blearily up.

The room is dim. A man sits facing her in a straghtback chair, faintly backlit by the daylight leaking through the curtained window behind him. He exhales pipesmoke.

Cowboy
You are sleeping the day away.

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Mattie
I am not well.

The man rises and, spurs jingling, crosses to the window, and throws open the curtain.

Mattie squints at him against the daylight:

The man has a cowlick and barndoor ears and is once again well-accoutered for riding. He steps away from the window and reseats himself.

Cowboy
You do not look well. My name is LeBoeuf. I have just come from Yell County.

Mattie
We have no rodeo clowns in Yell County.

LeBoeuf
A saucy line will not get you far with me. I saw your mother yesterday morning. She says for you to come right on home.

Mattie
Hm. What was your business there?

LeBoeuf takes a small photograph from his coat.

LeBoeuf
This is a man I think you know.

Mattie looks at the picture through red-rimmed eyes.

. . . You called him Tom Chaney, I believe. . .

Mattie declines to contradict. LeBoeuf continues:

. . . though in the months I have been tracking him he has used the names Theron Chelmsford, John Todd Andersen, and others. He dallied in Monroe, Louisiana, and Pine Bluff, Arkansas before turning up at your father's place.

Mattie
Why did you not catch him in Monroe, Louisiana or Pine Bluff, Arkansas?

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LeBoeuf
He is a crafty one.

Mattie
I thought him slow-witted myself.

LeBoeuf
That was his act.

Mattie
It was a good one. Are you some kind of law?

LeBoeuf tips back in his chair and draws back his coat to display a star. A smug look.

LeBoeuf
That's right. I am a Texas Ranger.

Mattie
That may make you a big noise in that state; in Arkansas you should mind that your Texas trappings and title do not make you an object of fun. Why have you been ineffectually pursuing Chaney?

LeBoeuf's smile stays in place with effort.

LeBoeuf
He shot and killed a state senator named Bibbs down in Waco, Texas. The Bibbs family have put out a reward.

Mattie
How came Chaney to shoot a state senator?

LeBoeuf
My understanding is there was an argument about a dog. Do you know anything about where Chaney has gone?

Mattie
He is in the Territory, and I hold out little hope for you earning your bounty.

LeBoeuf
Why is that?

Mattie
My man will beat you to it. I have hired a deputy marshal,

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the toughest one they have, and he is familiar with the Lucky Ned Pepper gang that they say Chaney has tied up with.

LeBoeuf
Well, I will throw in with you and your marshal.

Mattie
No. Marshal Cogburn and I are fine.

LeBoeuf
It'll be to our mutual advantage. Your marshal I presume knows the Territory; I know Chaney. It is at least a two-man job taking him alive.

Mattie
When Chaney is taken he is coming back to Fort Smith to hang. I am not having him go to Texas to hang for shooting some senator.

LeBoeuf
Haw-haw! It is not important where he hangs, is it?

Mattie
It is to me. Is it to you?

LeBoeuf
It means a great deal of money to me. It's been many months' work.

Mattie
I'm sorry that you are paid piecework not on wages, and that you have been eluded the winter long by a halfwit. Marshal Cogburn and I are fine.

LeBoeuf stands.

LeBoeuf
You give out very little sugar with your pronouncements. While I sat there watching you I gave some thought to stealing a kiss, though you are very young and sick and unattractive to boot, but now I have a mind to give you five or six good licks with my belt.

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2010 Contest winner Tripper Clancy (*Henry the Second*) signed with SP industry contact FilmEngine in August.