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Still Old School: Larry Cohen Talks CELLULAR

Interview [By Chris Wehner]



Chris Evans in a © 2004 New Line Cinema Productions

Larry Cohen started his career in New York writing television for NBC. He created the 1960s sci-fi show *The Invaders*. Cohen then moved into Hollywood production, writing scripts for such films as *Return of the Magnificent Seven* (1966) and *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting* (1969). The writer soon was writing and directing low-budget blaxploitation flicks *Black Caesar* and *Hell Up in Harlem* (both in 1973), and cheap exploitation horror films.

As a B filmmaker, Cohen then turned out what is still considered a classic, *It's Alive* (1974), a ghastly but undeniably effective yarn about a killer baby (with music by Bernard Herrmann). Never slick or expensive, Cohen's films always maintained interest by falling back on the bazaar or unexpected.

In the 1990s Cohen was unable to generate the kind of budgets he needed to go beyond his B movie label, so he focused on his screenwriting and


Jason Statham in New Line Cinema's CELLULAR

sought to get Hollywood's attention the only way he knew how — with his writing.

At the age of 64, Cohen became an A-List screenwriter by reinventing himself from a B movie and exploitation filmmaker into a high concept screenwriter who has done more than anyone in recent memory to conjure up Hitchcockian premises. Films such as *Phone Booth* and the soon to be released *Cellular* are constructed with setups that Hitchcock would have loved.

When Cohen ran into Steven Spielberg at the Oscars recently, the famed director told Cohen, "If Hitchcock were alive he would have wanted to direct *Phone Booth*."

Cohen most recently sold his spec script *Captivity*, his fifth thriller spec in the last five years. *Phone Booth* (2002) was sold in December 1998 for a mid-six figures, *Cast of Characters* for $350,000 and *Cellular* (2004) for $750,000, both sold in 1999. *Man Alive* was snatched up in August 2002 for a mid-six figures.

In this exclusive interview Cohen discusses how he beat ageism in Hollywood, what makes for good suspense, what's wrong with Hollywood movies today and how he has been able to be old school and still succeed.

How did you come up with the concept for *Cellular*?

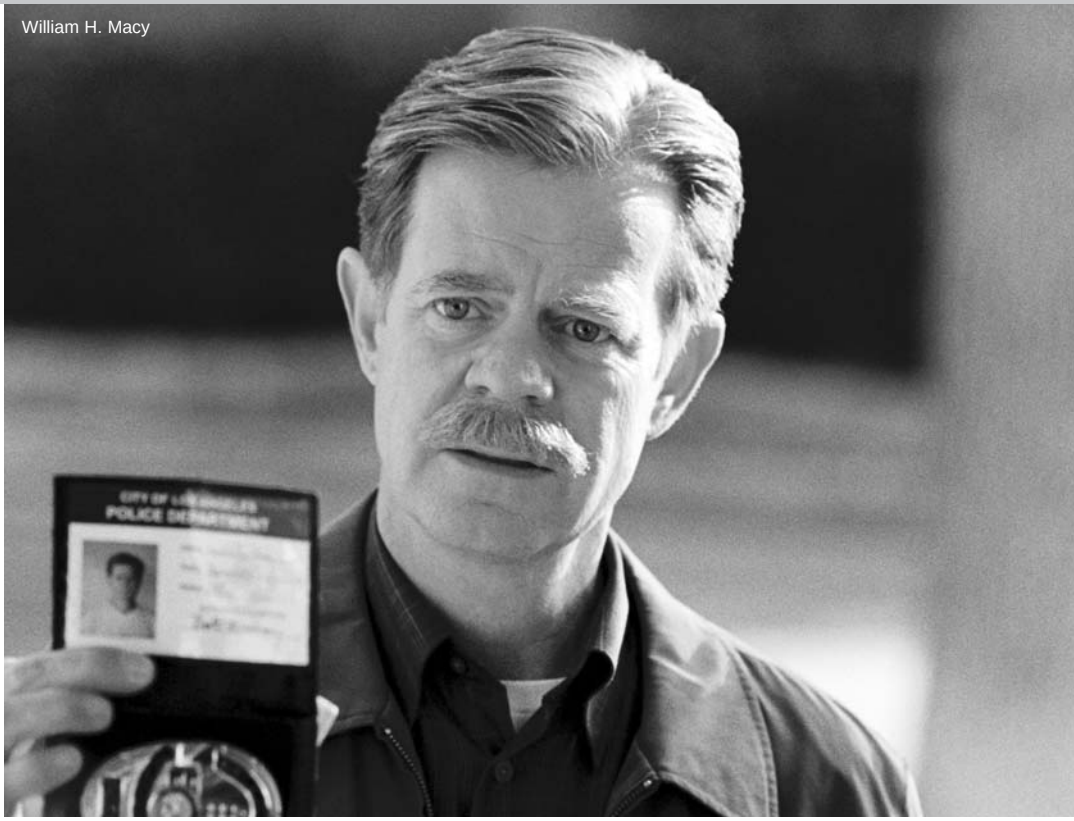
After I wrote *Phone Booth* I wanted to do something else in the same genre. Everyone has a cellular phone now. In their cars, at restaurants — it's on epidemic proportions really. I don't carry one, but everyone else does. It's something intrinsic in our lifestyle today as a society, so I thought maybe I could turn it into an element of a suspense movie that would be the antithesis of *Phone Booth*, where someone was trapped inside a phone booth for the whole movie. In *Cellular* the protagonist is able to maneuver through the city, constantly in motion, can't stop moving and driven by the ticking clock. His battery is not going to last for very long. It's life and death; the kidnapped woman in an undisclosed location needs his help. He can't hang up or disconnect. It's a continual race against time and connectivity. Very rarely does anyone have a long cell phone call that doesn't have interference or disconnection. So I thought this is great suspense. That was the basic jumping off point.

In *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting* (1969) you had some extensive sequences where the kidnapper harasses the victim. Now it's phone booths and cell phones.

Yeah, I'm sure I've used the phone a lot. It's such a big part of our lifestyle.


Kim Basinger

Still Old School: Larry Cohen Talks CELLULAR


William H. Macy

Your use of phones as narrative devices on your last two pictures struck me as interesting. Why do phones bug you so much?
[Laughs] I don't have a cell phone. But I did it that way because I wanted to do a double feature. I have a third one called *Message Deleted*, which is a thriller centered on an answering machine.

What in your opinion makes for good suspense?
The first key element is audience identification with the protagonist. You immediately identify and relate to the character. You want the audience to project themselves in the character so they feel the same emotional responses. That's essential. Second, a unique twist, something that is somewhat unique as nothing is ever truly original. With *Phone Booth*, they did something similar in radio some fifty years before called "Sorry Wrong Number" with Agnes Moorehead, probably the most famous radio show ever done as far as dramatic programs go, written by Lucille Fletcher, who was the wife of my dear friend Bernard Herrmann the composer, who wrote the score for my film *It's Alive*. That was the premiere show of its kind, constantly repeated on radio, in which a woman confined to her bed hears a murder being planned on a crossed line. As the show continues she realizes she's the intended victim. It was made into a film starring Barbara Stanwyck [1948]. I always wanted to do a telephone thriller. Now I've done two.

How do you approach writing a suspense thriller?
I think you have to have the audience see everything through the eyes of one main character. You have to be careful to focus the audience's point of view through that character, and once you capture the audience they'll be in a better position to identify with the character. The problem with a lot of movies today is that you can predict what's going to happen. You see the setups and know the payoffs. It's always by the book. A lot of young writers and directors seem to copy what's been done before or what's been taught in a class. The setups and payoffs are so very clear anyone can guess what's going to happen next. There's no suspense with most movies today, no time taken to build up anything. Today, movies are just one big explosion or CGI effect after another. They just keep throwing on more and more production value. No buildup and no suspense — that's the problem. Time has to be taken to build up the suspense.

If you look at a picture like *North By Northwest*, the famous crop dusting scene everyone talks about. Well, it starts way before that. There's this big buildup to that chase through the cornfield. Cary Grant gets off the bus and waits. Cars go by; a bus goes by; people go by. Hitchcock really takes his time building up the suspense. You would never see that patience today with most filmmakers. The crop dusting plane just tops off the scene. You've got to give your audience time to get into the scene. Today, you'd have the guy get off the bus, and immediately, the plane would show up and chase him into the field. They'd probably have dozens of special effects shots, and the sequence wouldn't play nearly as well emotionally with an audience.

Do you think that if Hitchcock had the technology available today he would have changed how we shot that scene in some dramatic way?
He would have still developed it the same way because he understood how to develop suspense. His payoffs I'm sure would have been technically much better because he would have wanted to use that technology. He was a very technically inclined director. He would have a better shot of the plane crashing into the gas truck, I'm sure. But that's the final payoff of the scene, and the fun is what happens before that, the buildup. He would have maintained the same pace to the scene. I have no doubt. Special effects today are so big the audience isn't even impressed by them, and they continually have to find ways to outdo themselves. After a while the audience is really numb to it. Instead of better it's just bigger and louder. I don't mean to be old fashioned about it. [laughs]

No, actually, I completely agree with you.
I know a lot special effects movies do really well. Everybody needs to follow what they think is effective. But there are also a lot of special effects movies that don't do really well. You've got to have characters with personality, and you've got to have a story.

Since his passing, some writers and directors have tried to emulate Hitchcock. You're one who really does seem to pull it off.
I don't think about what anyone else is doing. I think about what I'm doing and what kind of movies I want to see.

***Cellular* sold to Centropolis.**
Devlin and Emmerich [founders] split and went their separate ways right about that time as well. Devlin took the project with him and took it to New Line.

Unlike *Phone Booth*, *Cellular* was extensively rewritten. Why did they take it in a different direction?
There are some changes, yes. Most of the suspense in the story is still mine. The protagonist of the story, the leading man, Ryan — they changed him from an adult to basically a kid. It's more of a teen picture now. Both he and his girlfriend are young and talk about completely different things. I didn't write any of that stuff. Once the phone call comes in, it's still my stuff.

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Your original screenplay had some twists that are now gone.
Yes, the original script had him do all this stuff, and partially it was a scam to manipulate him. It was a nice twist, but that's a different picture. I think the people who see the movie will know what elements are mine. The other writer, Chris Morgan, is a very nice young man and was on set every day doing rewrites, which is something I'd never do. He deserves credit, and he did a nice job. It's not the picture I intended, but I think it's still a good picture. It holds together well, and what I contributed to it provides the glue that holds the story together. The fun of these things is the twist though, taking the audience down this road and then taking the thing in another direction. Like with *Phone Booth*, people wondered how long you can keep that guy in the booth. Well, you have to keep coming up with new twists to keep it interesting.

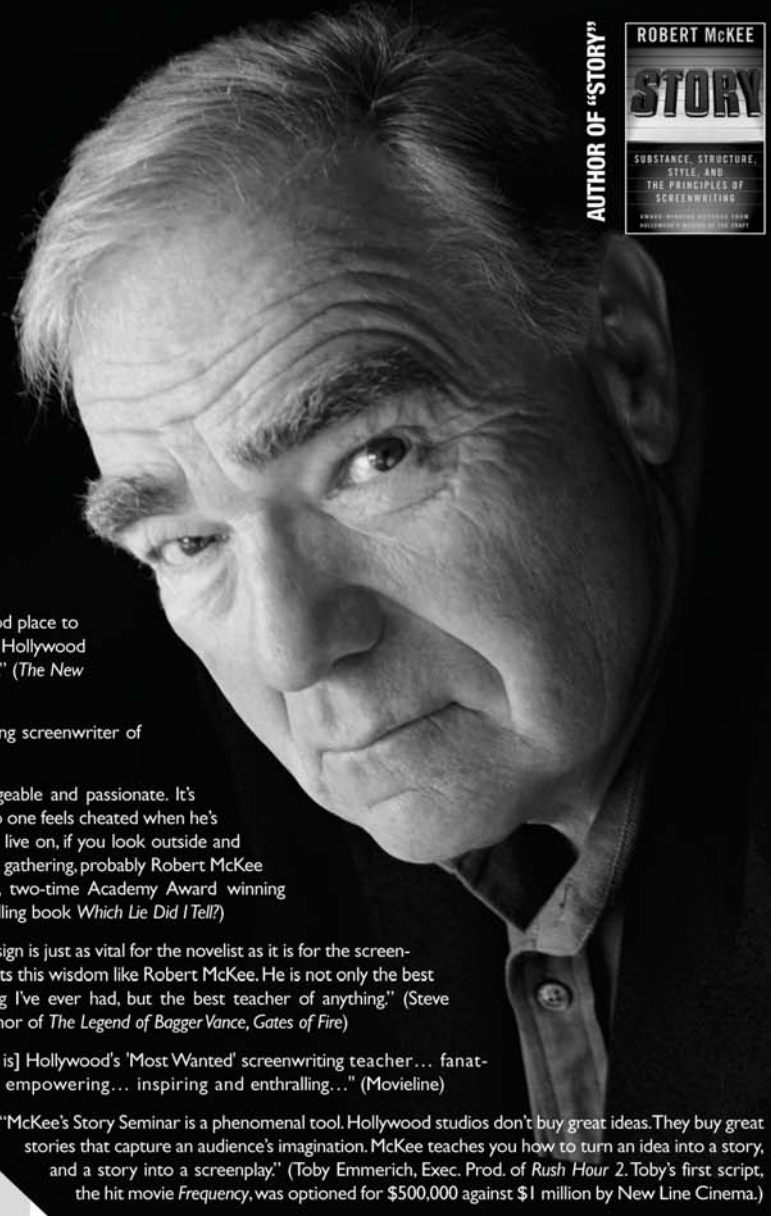
If you could give a young, up-and-coming screenwriter some advice or some words of wisdom, what would you tell them?
I'd tell them to keep writing. Like anything else, if you want to do it, do it all the time. Keep moving

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agenda

DAY 1

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

DAY 2

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

DAY 3

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

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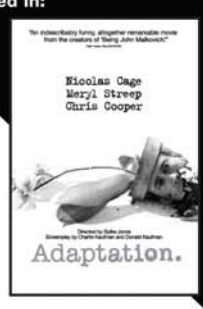
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on to the next script regardless of what does or doesn't happen with the last one. Sometimes it takes years to sell.

What's a screenwriter's job?
I think the screenwriter's job is originality, at least striving for it. I don't care to see remakes like *The Manchurian Candidate*. I don't understand why the studios have to be so void of imagination that we have to start reaching back to these pictures we've made before, sometimes brilliantly like *The Manchurian Candidate*. You can't duplicate that. A couple of years ago they remade *Charade*. How can you do that? There's no reason for that. How can you do better than Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn? What's the point of that? There are plenty of new writers out there with terrific scripts. Instead of seeking the scripts out, they're constantly looking around to see what they can remake, make the quick buck.

No one wants to take a risk on an unproven writer, not even the directors. It's a private party, and no one else is invited.
And then they'll put one writer after another on a script. No matter how good the script is, they'll put someone on it to polish it, and then the actors come along and have their own screenwriters; then the director brings in his ace writer. The result is usually a good script turned bad. Someone finds a script and gets everyone excited about it. They buy the script. They put into development. Then the downward spiral begins, and a few months later it's not such a great script anymore. They've only read it about forty-two times, so they get the bright idea of improving it and hire another writer. The script keeps getting changed, and pretty soon nobody knows why the hell they bought it in the first place, and the project is put into turnaround. I always liken a script to a piece of fruit. You bring it home; it's juicy and delicious, and everyone is happy with it. Then it sits there on the table for a few days, and there are a couple spots on it. Pretty soon it's ugly and mushy. No one wants it.

"I always liken a script to a piece of fruit. You bring it home; it's juicy and delicious, and everyone is happy with it. Then it sits there on the table for a few days, and there are a couple spots on it. Pretty soon it's ugly and mushy. No one wants it."

That's a product of the corporate studio system today.
Sure, used to be you dealt with only three people. Not it's thirty. Too many executives with no understanding of what it takes to tell a good story.

Any plans to direct again?
Sure, I'd love to. I haven't directed a picture in over five years. Writing is great too, and it's my first love. I've had to do low budget movies because I want complete control.

You've got *Captivity*, which is in pre-production.
We're trying to cast it.

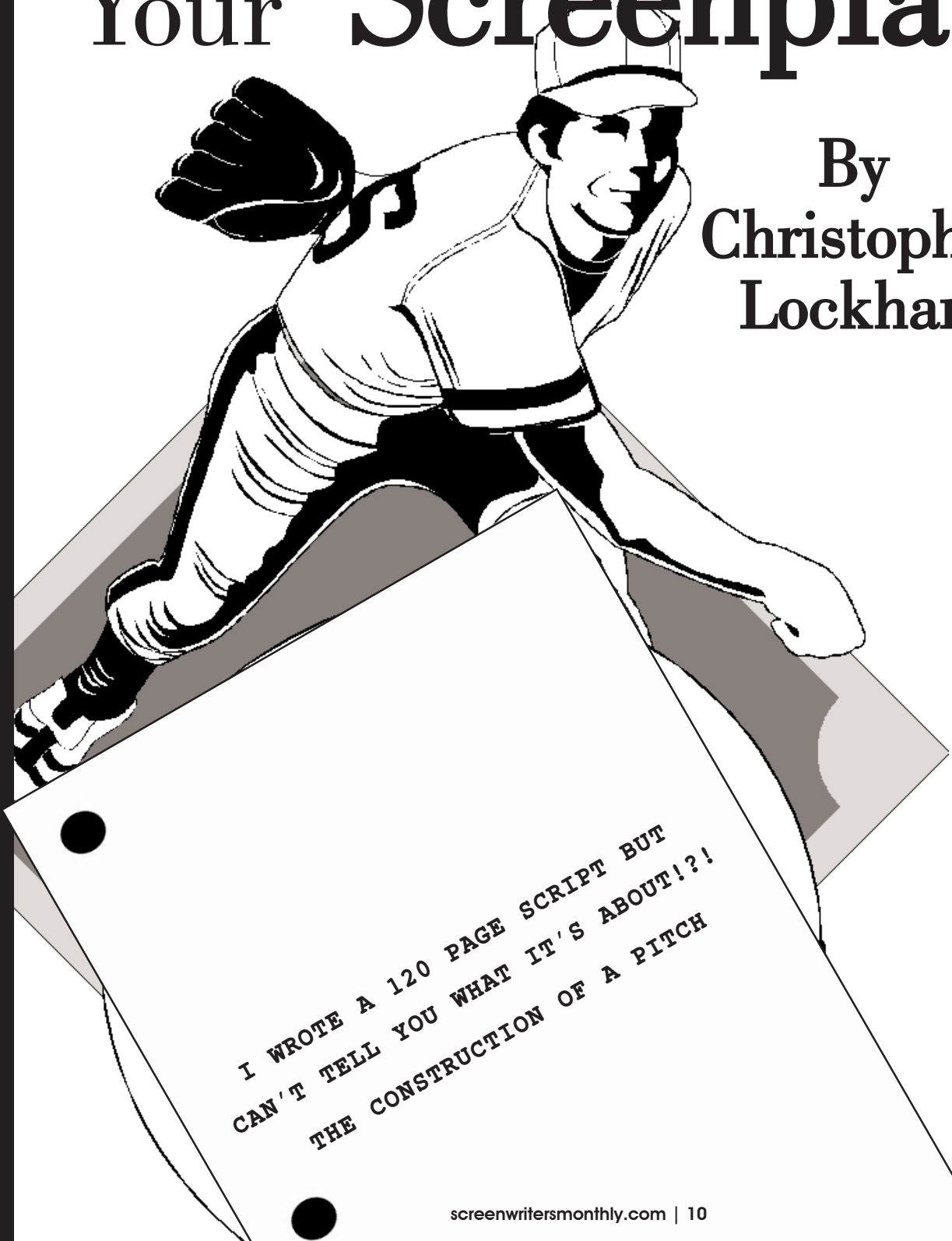
What about your *It's Alive* remake?
My 1972 film was number one at the box office. Because of the changes in gene development and cloning, I thought *It's Alive* could be updated very easily. It seemed like a remake worth doing, so I got the rights back from Warner Bros. We're going make that picture very soon.

What else are you doing?
I'm writing a screenplay for Warner Bros. called *Bad Deeds*.

You're proof that ageism in Hollywood is not as active as some think.
There's nothing that ever stops anyone from getting a job. I don't believe in that ageism stuff. Nobody cares. If the script is good people will want to make the picture. If older writers want to sit around and bemoan not getting assignments, that's their problem, I guess. There's nothing stopping any writer from writing a spec script and putting it out on the market. I've written spec scripts all along. Nobody cares how old you are. It's self-serving to a lot of people to blame their age for why they're not working. I won't do that. They're not working because they've got nothing to say anymore with their writing. It's OK to get old; it's OK to get tired of the system, and it's OK to quit, but don't blame everybody else. **- CW**

The Art of PITCHING Your Screenplay

By Christopher Lockhart



The Art of Pitching Your Screenplay

It seems a cruel irony that, after months and months of carefully plotting story and creating vivid characters and structuring 120 pages in such a way for maximum dramatic impact, screenwriters must become orators if they are to convince anyone to read their screenplay. But with hundreds of thousands of scripts, books and ideas floating around Hollywood, dreaming of making it to the screen, there is little time for executives to consider every project. So the agent or producer must be influenced into reading the screenplay. The purest way to achieve this is with a "pitch," a carefully planned seduction that will convince the executive to clear two hours of calendar time and commit to a read.

"Pitching" is the art of presenting the story in a truncated and intriguing manner that piques the listener's curiosity, resulting in the solicitation of the screenplay. This can be done via a query letter but is most effective when done as a verbal presentation. However, this often terrifies screenwriters because the notion of telling their story is intimidating. Odd, since screenwriters are storytellers. But comfort should be found in the fact that pitching does not require the skills of a raconteur.

With the popularity of film festivals, screenwriting expos, conferences and "pitch marts," aspiring writers are finding unprecedented access to Hollywood executives, wherein they are able to pitch their wares. But there are no minor leagues in Hollywood screenwriting, and struggling scribes go toe-to-toe with Oscar winners as pitches are thrown. Whether feared or despised, pitching is part of the journey of turning a screenplay into a movie, and the screenwriter must be able to effectively pitch or risk losing the vital opportunity of a Hollywood read.

To set the record straight, professional scribes are not in the habit of writing for free and would prefer to pitch their concept to a studio or producer and be paid to develop the script. Aspiring screenwriters, on the other hand, are rarely given this opportunity and must build a professional résumé before landing a development deal. During the struggle to WGA status, an aspirant will write a "spec" script for free (on the speculation that it will sell) and, afterward, pitch the screenplay to executives, producers and agents in order to attract potential readers.

There are many methods in which to pitch, and writers should explore and invent various techniques that prove to be comfortable and successful. In the end, a successful pitch is defined as one that results in a solicitation (or purchase) of the screenplay. There is lots of Hollywood folklore regarding studio pitch sessions. For example, producer Robert Kosberg allegedly sold a pitch with something like this: "*Do you remember the Hardy boys? Well, it's 20 years later, and they're THE HARDY MEN*." It can be that simple. Another writer or producer may have to tell the entire story (if there is no written script yet) in a pitch that could take 40 minutes. But, in the end, it all comes down to the same thing — regardless of who does the talking (and whether it's done in the executive's office, over the phone, at a party or in line at the supermarket) — a good pitch is the successful communication of an idea, concept or story.

A pitch begins with the performance. Although it doesn't have to be delivered with the dramatics of Sir Lawrence Olivier, it does need to demonstrate passion for the project. Many pitches are delivered monotone or with a professorial slant or, worst of all, with diffidence or apathy. If the pitch is not delivered with passion, it will not be received with enthusiasm. Zeal and confidence are essential elements of the pitch. The scribe must also exhibit control, which prevents the pitch from getting unwieldy and demands strict intuition with the listener. If the pitch is drowning, the writer must know how to salvage it or must effortlessly move onto another pitch altogether.

The bigger picture must also be considered. Perhaps, an executive has already read the script and wants to meet with the writer, who arrives prepared with a new story. There is a possibility that the executive will not like the pitch; however, he may conclude that the writer fits a project currently in development. The executive is not simply listening to a pitch; he is summing up the screenwriter. Is this a writer the executive would like to work with? Are the personalities a good match? A pitch session is also a job interview, and the basic skills of interviewing apply here.

The Art of Pitching Your Screenplay

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

"The most important element in effectively pitching a screenplay is organization. Think of the entire story as a big box. Within that big box is a smaller box that represents a less complicated version of the story. And inside of that box is an even smaller box, representing an even more uncomplicated version of the story and so on."

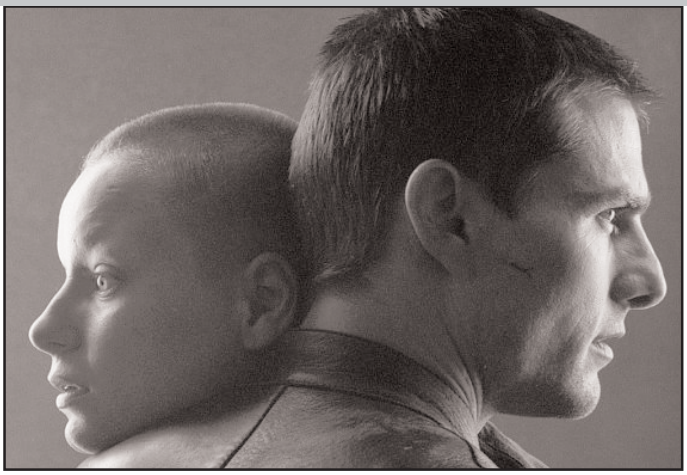
The first order of business is to present the genre. This is often forgotten. The genre is crucial if the listener is to interpret the story correctly. Many ideas can be developed in different directions. For instance, the notion of planet Earth meeting its demise by a comet/meteor was explored as melodrama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

Pitches often begin with a question to create an initial desire in the listener. As an example, a question for a romantic comedy about unrequited love might go, "Have you ever yearned for someone who clearly wasn't interested?" This is a possible way to personalize the pitch and engage the listener. Of course, like an attorney, a question should never be asked without knowing the answer in advance. Since the executive could answer with a response other than anticipated, the pitch must be prepared with a retort for the unexpected. Regardless of the executive's answer, the pitch must use it as a seamless segue. Avoid questions that get too personal, could embarrass the listener, make him uncomfortable or cause indifference. To avoid the possible pitfalls of question/answer, a pitch can simply ask a rhetorical question or make a statement that will produce similar effects. Using *Liar, Liar* as an example, a pitch could state, "Imagine a conniving lawyer who is compelled to tell the truth for 24 hours." This could be considered the smallest of the boxes.

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

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

This brief question and log line present a rather complicated story in its most simplistic form. The pitch can now move on to opening a bigger box.



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

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

For instance, an exec asks, "What's at stake?" The unprepared writer answers, "Well, see, our guy went out one night and got drunk. He drinks Wild Turkey, and his dad was a bootlegger. Anyway, he got drunk, and he drove off, which he shouldn't have done. He careens down the street and plows through a beautifully manicured lawn and falls asleep. The house belongs to the sheriff. When our guy wakes up in the morning, he finds himself facing a long jail term. So if he doesn't do as he's told, he's going to jail." At this point, there is a possibility the executive has lost his place in the story. Avoid diversions by keeping answers simple. Boil it down. Reduce and reduce the answer until it's at its lowest common denominator. A more concise answer to the executive's question would be, "Our guy faces a jail term." (An obvious piece of advice that is ignored most of the time.)

After revealing the basic elements of the story (including the protagonist) the pitch can move on and present a more detailed account of the story throughline, using the log line as a road map. This is a bigger box. The pitch must boil the narrative down to the most important beats and present the story in a crisp and fluid manner by hitting upon the major bullet points of the story. The pitch could sound like this: "Our farm girl, Dorothy, dreams of going over the rainbow, and through a freak cyclone, she and her farmhouse are transported to Munchkinland. There, she learns the only way back to Kansas is to meet the Wizard of Oz, who has the power to get her home. So she sets off on a dangerous journey. Along the way she meets a scarecrow, a tin woodsman and a lion. They all travel with her. However, Dorothy has made an enemy of a Wicked Witch, and she and her three friends…"

The pitch must proceed along a simplistic route, covering the major narrative conflicts and taking the story to its conclusion. If the screenplay has a "twist" ending, it may be best to reveal it. If it has a truly inspired climax, it will only whet the executive's appetite even more. Trying to playfully bait the executive with, "You'll have to read the rest," is not an effective way to deal with a person who already has a stack of screenplays on his desk.

The Art of Pitching Your Screenplay

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

"One important element to remember is that verbal storytelling is different from a screenplay, and a pitch cannot necessarily be presented in the same manner in which the story unfolds on the page."

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

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

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

Some pitches use visual aids to provide greater comprehension to the listener. For instance, pitches can use photos to represent the various characters that may be introduced in the course of the presentation. In order to pitch something like *The Matrix*, the presentation may include sketches to enable clear visualization of the very unique world. If pitching

Pollack, the presentation could provide copies of the artist's paintings. In the late '80s, *The Ticking Man* (an unproduced spec) was introduced across town when the agent sent out alarm clocks to executives with a banner saying, "The Ticking Man is coming." In an offbeat pitch about a writer's true-life struggle of dealing with her husband's untimely death, the presentation included laptop video of the man's corpse. Any aid or device can be used if it enables the pitch to go as smoothly and memorably as possible.

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

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

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

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

Christopher Lockhart is the Executive Story Editor at International Creative Management (ICM). Working exclusively with co-president and agent extraordinaire Ed Limato, Chris looks for potential projects for a client list that includes Mel Gibson, Denzel Washington, Steve Martin, and Richard Gere. Chris also works as a story consultant to producer Julie Richardson (COLLATERAL) and recently helped develop A RHINESTONE ALIBI, which was set-up at Paramount.

Working in Back Story

Craft Column [By David Landau]



There is something humorously referred to in dramatic writing as the dreaded "Dead Puppy Scene." It's the scene, usually added in a rewrite, where the character's dramatic back story is revealed. It's dreaded because often it comes out of left field and seems forced or out of place. It doesn't have to be. The best way to avoid the dead puppy scene is to sprinkle in the back story.

The USA TV series "Monk" was created by screenwriter Andy Breckman, who is the head writer and story editor. I've gotten to know Andy over the years as an off and on acquaintance. Recently, I had the opportunity to pitch an episode idea to him for Monk. I don't think he found my pitch that great, but it did renew our acquaintance. He was generous enough to give me a copy of the first draft and then the final draft of one episode to use in my screenwriting II class as an example of rewriting and working in back story.

"Mr. Monk Goes Back to School," written by Andy's brother David Breckman, was the season two opener. The story centers around a science teacher at a prep school who murders the female English teacher he was having an affair with. Of course, the killer has an iron clad alibi at the time of the death; he was giving an exam when his girlfriend fell from the clock tower. We know he did it, and right away so does Monk. The question is how.

There are some major and minor differences between the first draft and the fifth final draft. In the first draft, Monk and his assistant Sherona are playing a very funny game of chess. If you haven't seen the show — and you should; it's well written — Monk has OCD, so he is constantly centering all the pieces in each square. When Sherona opens her Queen, Monk gets ready to take it, but Sherona licks it. Now he can't bear touching it and claims she's cheated. She claims he's been molesting all the pieces throughout the entire game. This scene expertly sets up their unique relationship and quickly demonstrates Monk's character flaws (a sprinkle of back story). The game is interrupted by a phone call from the principal from the prep school.

In draft one, the principal comes to Monk's apartment. She remembers Monk and his deceased wife, Trudy, from when they attended the school. Monk agrees to look into the apparent suicide as a favor to the principal, who doesn't believe the female teacher would have killed herself. By the end of the scene, the principal notices the chess game and asks why Monk didn't take Sherona's queen. He responds, "I'm waiting for it to dry." A great set-up and pay-off.

In the rewrite, Monk and Sherona go to the principal's office instead of her coming to see him. Now, the principal and Trudy were "like sisters" while attending this prep school. Many of my students were disappointed in the change, as it lost the great punchline about the queen. But I felt that Andy, as story editor, made the right call in asking for the change. First, two scenes following each other in the same location is visually boring, but more importantly, having Monk and Sherona visit the principal's office gave Monk the opportunity to point out a picture of Trudy in an old school photo on the wall. Another change for the better was making the principal a schoolmate of Monk's dead wife, rather than an old teacher. This opened the opportunity for the principal to reveal more memories about Trudy, which also helped reveal how much Monk misses her.

This is all back story and subplot and not the main mystery plot, but it is the back story and subplots that often need the most rewriting as we as writers tend to focus more on the central plot in our first drafts. The central story in draft one and draft five barely changes at all. It is all the subtle extras that changed and made the story all the more interesting and charming.

In draft one, Monk remembers the big oak tree that he and Trudy used to sit under. At the closer, Monk touches a carved "Monk & Trudy" in the tree's bark. In the rewrite, Monk never attended the school. The principal tells him that Trudy would always sit under that tree and write poetry by herself, great poetry that no one read. She asks Monk if he ever read any. He replies, "I read them every night" (p.10). In the closer for the finale draft, the principal is looking around for Monk to thank him. Sherona replies, "He's with her" (p.51).

Monk is 30 feet away, standing near Trudy's oak tree. He's holding a HIGH SCHOOL YEARBOOK. It's open to a photograph.

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CLOSE-UP- YEARBOOK PAGE- PHOTO
B&W photo of a young TRUDY, age 16, reading under
the oak tree.
RESUME
Monk reaches out and touches the tree. Touches his
late wife. (p.52)
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So much more powerful than the cliché of carved names in tree bark. This is what working in back story does, whether in TV or in films; it allows us as writers to reach out and touch something deeper - in our characters and in our audience - and perhaps in ourselves. **- DL**

David Landau is a published, award winning playwright whose work has been produced nationwide. He has written industrial videos and penned numerous screenplays - a few having been optioned, a few finalists in competitions. He teaches screenwriting and electronic filmmaking at Fairleigh Dickenson University and is a member of the Dramatists Guild, Mystery Writers of America.

Scott Frank

Walk Among the Tombstones, A (2004)
Revelation (2005)
Six Shooters (2005)
Interpreter, The (2005)
Flight of the Phoenix, The (2004)
"Karen Sisco" (2003) TV Series
Minority Report (2002)
Out of Sight (1998)
Heaven's Prisoners (1996)
Get Shorty (1995)
"Fallen Angels" (1993)
Malice (1993)
Walter Ego, The (1991)
Little Man Tate (1991)
Dead Again (1991)
Plain Clothes (1988)
"Wonder Years, The" (1988) TV Series

Born in Fort Walton Beach, Florida (c. 1960), but raised in Los Gatos, California, Scott Frank graduated from college with a degree in film studies (1982). The screenwriter got started in the industry doing research for documentaries. His first writing efforts found their way to the screen in impressively short order. His teen comedy Plain Clothes (1988) was made into a modest feature helmed by Martha College. By contrast, Kenneth Branagh's Dead Again (1991), a more ambitious and sophisticated effort, was an imaginative and highly romantic thriller with past life complications. Frank, moving into the big leagues, next sold a very different screenplay, one he had written in college, for Jodie Foster's directorial debut, Little Man Tate (1991). Despite his genre-hopping, Frank's study of a child prodigy suggested ongoing interest in precocious (if sometimes scheming) types and intriguing plot twists. These later manifested themselves in his work on the standardized thriller fare of Malice (1993) and his well-regarded adaptation of Elmore Leonard's tangy, satirical novel about Hollywood, Get Shorty (1995). A few years later, Frank took a second crack at Elmore Leonard when he adapted Out Of Sight for Steven Soderbergh, garnering him an Academy Award nomination. Shortly thereafter, he teamed with Steven Spielberg and co-wrote Minority Report.
Milestones:

1982 - Moved to Los Angeles after college graduation; worked for the Landsburg Company as a researcher on documentary films (date approximate).
1988 - First produced screenplay, Plain Clothes (directed by Martha Coolidge).
1991 - Signed with Columbia to make debut as director with The Big Wow.
1991 - Scripted Dead Again, directed by and starring Kenneth Branagh.
1995 - Adapted Elmore Leonard's novel Get Shorty as a feature.
Reportedly did uncredited script polish on Saving Private Ryan
1998 - Wrote second film adaptation of a Leonard novel Out of Sight; received Oscar nomination for Best Adapted. Screenplay.
2000 - Co-wrote Minority Report for Steven Spielberg to direct and starring Tom Cruise.

Awards:

1998 - Boston Society of Film Critics Award Best Screenplay Out of Sight.
1998 - National Society of Film Critics Award Best Screenplay Out of Sight.
1998 - Online Film Critics Society Award Best Adapted Screenplay Out of Sight.
1999 - Writers Guild of America Award Best Screenplay Based on Material Previously Published or Produced Out of Sight.