

SCREENwriter's (MONTHLY)

it all begins with a screenplay.....

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SCREENwriter's (MONTHLY)

IN ALL MAGAZES WITH A SUBSCRIPTION

TROY

DAVID BENIOFF'S
 Epic adaptation of war, duty,
 honor, love & revenge

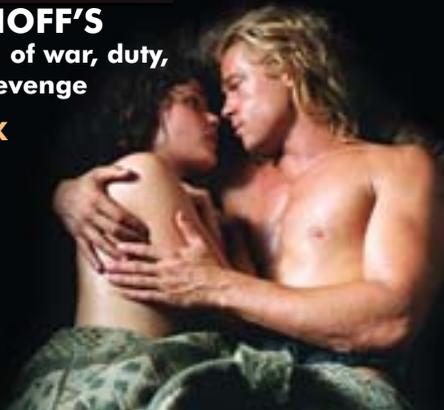
THE NOTEBOOK
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INTERVIEWS

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- by Daniel Robert Epstein

David Benioff has only two screenwriting credits. He first adapted his own novel, *25th Hour*, which was directed by Spike Lee and critically acclaimed. With his second effort, *Troy*, he's turned Homer's *Iliad* into a \$200 million dollar epic starring one of the most popular actors today, Brad Pitt.



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- by Fred Topel

Mikko Alanne has already accomplished a lot. He's worked with his idol, Oliver Stone, who became his mentor.



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- by Chris Wehner

Jeremy Leven isn't your typical Hollywood screenwriter, he's worked in the Neurosciences field, he's intelligent, which is refreshing considering how some young screenwriters almost seem to boast of their lack of education.



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STAFF/CONTRIBUTORS

Publishers

Chris Wehner
 Phil Melfi (phil@melfi.com)

Editor-in-Chief

Chris Wehner
 (editor@screenwritersutopia.com)

West Coast Editor

Fred Topel

News Editor

James Vejvoda

Associate/Copy Editor

Chris Newton

Art Director

Chas Weygant

Interviews

Fred Topel
 Daniel Robert Epstein
 Chris Wehner

Contributors

Philippa Burgess
 David Landau
 Harry Caul
 James Vejvoda
 Craig TenBroeck

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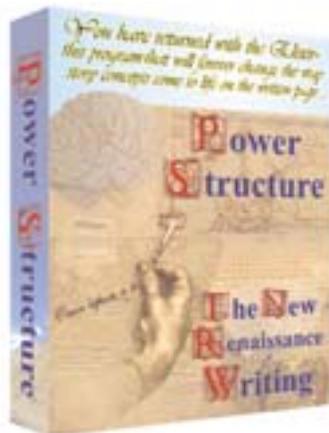
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DAVID BENIOFF'S

EPIC ADAPTATION



INTERVIEW

BY

DANIEL ROBERT EPSTEIN

I couldn't imagine the daunting task of adapting a work like *The Iliad* to the movie screen, but at the age of 34, David Benioff has already adapted Homer's *The Iliad* and is now working on the screenplay for Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. It's a good thing all those writers are dead. Otherwise, Benioff might feel some pressure.

Benioff's work first hit theatres when Spike Lee had him adapt his own novel, *The 25th Hour*, for him to film. The film received wide critical praise. But already, Benioff was in the weeds with writing his multiple drafts of *Troy*. It's unusual for a \$200 million production to only use one writer, but Benioff worked closely with director/producer Wolfgang Peterson and even worked with Brad Pitt on making his character of Achilles more human.



CREDITS: (Starting from top) Eric Bana as Hector (top and bottom), Orlando Bloom as Paris, in a 2004 Warner Bros. Production

Besides *The Iliad* what sources did you draw on?

Of course there are more source texts than just *The Iliad*. I mean *The Iliad* was the pivotal one in the telling of the Trojan War, but it starts from the ninth year of the war and ends in the ninth year of the war. We wanted to tell the entire story from before the beginning when Paris seduces Helen and triggers the entire war through to the fall of Troy, and you don't get all of that in *The Iliad*, so some of it comes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and some of it comes from the *Odyssey*, actually. There are little bits from *Eneid*. There are bits of things from Bulfinch's *Mythology*, and some of it was just imagined.

Was there a tendency not to write too contemporary?

Yeah, that's one of the big challenges in screenplays. You don't want the characters to sound contemporary. You don't want them to sound like California boys in 2004, but at the same time it won't work effectively if they sound exactly as they do in Homer because Homer is not really dialogue. It's more of these dueling monologues, which are beautiful, but they are at least ten minutes long.

Agamemnon will launch into this long speech, and Achilles will respond with his very articulate rebuttal, and it just goes on. I don't really want to sit there watching one character make a speech for 15 minutes and then have the next one do the same. It's trying to find some kind of happy medium between contemporary lingo and the Homeric, ultra-exalted dialogue.

How many writers had their fingers in the screenplay?

I was the only writer the whole time. It started with the pitch that I made, and I was lucky enough to not be replaced, which I'm incredibly happy about; I would've been heartbroken, and it happens most of the time. So it's partly luck and I think partly because [director] Wolfgang [Peterson] and I work well together.

When I started the screenplay, I had no idea it was going to be a \$200 million movie. I think that would've been incredibly intimidating because this was only the second script I wrote. I

was kind of dumb about the whole thing. I mean I didn't really get nervous until after I had written it. I didn't really understand how intimidating it was until I actually went on set and saw the size of these sets and saw the thousands of extras running around. It was a massive undertaking.

How do you pitch a faithful retelling?

Well, I didn't pitch a faithful retelling. I pitched kind of a ruthless retelling where I really wanted to concentrate on the human story. For me, what I've always loved about *The Iliad* is the story of Hector, Achilles, Paris and Helen but particularly Hector and Achilles.

These are the two great heroes on either side, and inevitably, they are going to fight, but it's not a good-guys-and-bad-guys story. It's not the epic battle of good versus evil. It's not humans versus orcs. It's humans fighting humans, and that's why I think it's the great tragic war story. Every time you see a soldier fall, it's not some villain falling. It's a human. It's some mother's son, and that's what's brilliant about Homer's telling of the story. Each time, he always gives you one moment with that character, even very minor characters you've never met before, at the moment of their death. It's a very humanistic way of telling a war story.

When you sat down to write this story, did you have the talent in mind?

I did not, and actually I'm glad of that because it would be

hard for me. It is harder for me to write knowing the face in some ways because then you tend to write for the actor, and I really wanted to just let the characters exist in my imagination or the characters from the original text. I'm not writing lines for Peter O'Toole or for Brad Pitt or Eric Bana but for Priam, Achilles and Hector.

Why did you change the way Agamemnon died?

The ruthlessness is there. In the myths, Agamemnon can't get the right winds to get to Troy, so he sacrifices his daughter, and this irritates his wife. So at the end of the war, when he sails home, his wife ends up killing him. We didn't have time to tell all the different stories. My first draft of the script came in at 180 pages, which is a monster script, and there still wasn't a way to tell all the different strands. Eventually, it was cut to 140 pages, and there was a certain ruthlessness involved. We had to pick the stories that we could follow all the way through. If we weren't going to have the whole story of Agamemnon and his daughter and his wife, we had to figure out a way we could allude to his death the way that it's depicted in the myth. He was knifed by a woman, so that was the way it was handled there, but there were certain changes made, sometimes for efficiency and sometimes because I had to choose what I thought was best for the movie. As for being absolutely faithful to the source material, I'm always going to pick the project.

Were there any other endings?

Yeah, from the original pitch, it was meant to be the story of Achilles and Hector, these two great heroes. Hector is killed 25 or 30 minutes before the end, and then Achilles is killed. Once your two main guys are dead, there's not much more story to tell there. I think we could have an eight-hour miniseries that goes through all the different phases of the characters, but if you're going to try to do it as a feature, you really have to cut many different things. The ending we have now was pretty much always the ending, and we are lucky in that we have Sean Bean doing that final voiceover with his magnificent voice. This is a tragic story in many ways, and I love the image of the ending with the smoke rising to the skies. I don't know if that was originally in the script or if it was Wolfgang's idea.

Was it a coincidence that Brian Cox was in two films you wrote, *The 25th Hour* and now *Troy*?

Total coincidence. I mean, when they were looking for



Brad Pitt as Achilles

Agamemnon, I remember talking to Wolfgang about what a marvelous actor I thought he was, and Wolfgang was already aware of him. It ended up being a happy coincidence for me because I just thought he was terrific and loved him as James Bragan in *The 25th Hour*.

What was it like working with Wolfgang?

He's got this remarkable stamina, which he absolutely needed to direct this movie because it's such a massive undertaking. There were constantly crises going on. It was not the easiest shoot, and he's up everyday. He gets up and goes to work to oversee this giant enterprise. When we met, we probably spent 80 hours in his office going over the script, and by the end he knew that script better than I did. He could say, "This line is a problem on page 82," without having the script in front of him, and I would have no idea what he was talking about. I would flip to page 82, and there's the line. We spent an incredibly large amount of time together, and he was very fatherly. He was very warm, and again, I've been lucky that I've been able to work with some really wonderful directors though they're all very different in their own ways. This is the man who did *Das Boot*, which is one of my favorite war movies, so it was great to have him doing this one.

How many changes were made from the actual script?

I went through maybe 30 different drafts. I think the first draft was turned in January of 2002, and they started shooting in April of 2003. On my computer I've got the Troy folder with literally 32 different drafts, and it's kind of funny because you'll see the first draft and the second draft are very different. Then, maybe by the 10th draft, it's kind of closer to the first again.

Was it mind numbing?

I don't think I ever got numbed from it, but it is a danger because, when you read the same pages so many times, sometimes you need to have a different opinion. Sometimes it's actually helpful getting an actor in who's playing the part to see it in a different light. Some screenwriters dread getting notes from actors, and maybe at some point I will also dread it, but right now it's actually interesting to get their opinions.

Why is the Troy legend still popular?

The story is 3,000 years old, and it's constantly relevant. There is always a war going on somewhere in the world, and I don't think there's ever been a better war story told.

Do you think it's particularly relevant now considering what's going on with Iraq?

This could be relevant if it came out 20 years ago. I think it is eerie though when you see the shots of Achilles dragging Hector behind his chariot in light of what happened in Fallujah. But I wrote the script way before the Iraq war, and I was never consciously trying to map on current events to this story.

You are doing an adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. What's the difference between that and doing *Troy*?

Luckily, those writers are both dead, so I don't have to deal with that. I've also just adapted a living writer who I'm actually friendly with named George Pelicano. In some ways that's more pressure because Pelicano can email me if he's unhappy with the script, and those guys can't. I think one big challenge with the Hemingway is that it's set in Spain and the book is written in English, but we're supposed to understand that they're speaking Spanish. So when a Spaniard says, "Oh your English is so good," it's a little confusing. I'm getting confused just talking about it, but one thing that is interesting about the two is that they're both war stories and both writers take care to show that it's not good versus evil.

Is it a greenlit script?

I don't know if anything's really greenlit until they start. Chris Nolan is attached to direct it, but he's in the middle of *Batman Begins*.

What are the most telling pieces of dialogue in *Troy*?

For me my favorite scene is the scene between Priam and Achilles with Peter O'Toole and Brad Pitt. It's the last scene in the *Iliad*, and it's one of the most heartbreaking scenes in literature. It's kind of great because writing lines and having them spoken by Peter O'Toole is an amazing thrill for any film fan. I mean the man was starring in epics before I was born.

How does adapting other people's novels compare to adapting your own novel, like you did with *The 25th Hour*?

I'm adapting better works. In some ways it's harder to adapt myself because my book is not as good, so it's kind of thrilling getting to work with some of the great characters in the history



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of literature. That's a lot of fun. These are some of my favorite books, and I'm excited to see them onscreen.

How important was the absence of the Greek gods in *Troy*?

It's very important. It was part of the pitch from the get go. I really wanted to concentrate on the human aspect of the story. When Paris fights Menelaus in the book, it's fairly similar to the way it is in the movie except at the end, when Paris is about to get killed, Aphrodite magically teleports him from the battlefield to Helen's chamber in the palace. I just didn't want it that way. I didn't want to see the gods coming in and using magic to change the course of events. I really didn't want to see an actor in a toga throwing CGI thunderbolts from the top of a CGI Mount Olympus because it becomes a much different movie. It really becomes much more about the effects and a magic kind of fantasy. I think the truly tragic truly human element to this story is without the gods.

Was there a more development to the story of Paris and Helen that we didn't see onscreen?

Yes, there was, but it's hard to tell this massive story. There's not that much time, and inevitably, you're going to lose some of the quiet time between characters. In the original myths, there's much less, actually. Paris has to choose between three goddesses who are the most beautiful, and if he chooses Hera, she'll make him the richest man in the world. I think if he chooses Athena, she'll make him the wisest man in the world, and if he chooses

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Aphrodite, she'll give him the most beautiful woman in the world. So Paris, being a man after my own heart, chooses Aphrodite, so Helen kind of magically falls in love with him, and I didn't want to do it that way.

Now it's this woman trapped in a loveless marriage. I mean she was forced to marry Menelaus. It was an arranged marriage as most royal weddings have been for thousands of years, and at 16 years of age, she's forced into this marriage with this brutal warrior who she never really had any affection for. So in some ways it's almost a fantasy of a love affair. Paris is rescuing her from what seems to be a loveless and sexless marriage. She tells him that she was ghost before he came to her.

Even though as a writer you always want to see all your scenes in the final movie, I think the movie works more powerfully at 2 hours 44 than at 3 and a half hours, which is what it would've been if everything had been shot. So on one hand I'm kind of like, "Oh, I really miss that scene," but at the same time, looking at the larger picture, I think the movie works better without them.

What were some of the scenes that were cut out?

There was the scene where you first meet Odysseus. It's kind of a Magnificent Seven type of thing where they go to round up the kings, and there are scenes where they first meet Ajax, and they recruit him to come fight.

Was it tough to create suspense during the very famous Trojan horse scene?

That was a tricky thing to do because it's the one thing you know isn't going to surprise anyone. Everybody sees that horse coming, and virtually everyone knows you're going to see Greeks come out of there, so we didn't want to insult the audience and make it a big mystery.

It is a very important part of the story, but we didn't want to spend too much time on it because it's really not a whole lot of suspense there. But funny thing — the best gift I've ever gotten was a bronze replica of that horse.

But there was no suspense to that whole story anyway.

You'd be surprised how few people really know the whole story. I'm kind of constantly shocked when I talk to people who really have no idea that Hector and Achilles aren't going to survive through it. People are shocked when they see Brad Pitt die.

-DRE

Daniel Robert Epstein lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in New York City. He is a contributor to such websites as Gadflyonline.com, SlushFactory.com, 3ammagazine.com, Hybridmagazine.com, Itanboy.com and DavidFincher.net, and UGO.com. He is also a former producer for MetroTV, where he worked on such shows as The Daily Beat, Studio Y and New York Eats, and has worked on such feature films as Tromeo & Juliet by the Troma studios and Dinner and Driving. He loves referring to himself in the third person.



Daily Variety May 30, 2002:
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DREAM!



Point of Entry

by *Philippa Burgess*

REWRITING – FOR FREE OR FEE?

A-List screenwriters frequently get paid mid-six figures to rewrite a script for the studios. In the journey from where you are now as a screenwriter to getting paid top dollar, some writers aren't sure where the line is drawn between rewriting for free or fee. The best test to qualify if a writer should take notes from an industry professional for free or fee is to determine if the notes you are being asked to implement are "writer notes" or "producer notes." It doesn't matter who is giving the notes, but rather, the distinction is determined by the quality and content therein.

Writers are excited to get their scripts out there and read. They want to get their scripts in the hands of agents, managers and producers who can represent them, sell them to the studios and get their picture made. There can be a long process from generating the concept to getting the script written. It is important to really work on the script so that it is properly developed before it is seen. And when you send it out, everyone you know who reads your script is happy to offer you notes. Obviously, some people's opinions are far more qualified than others.

All scripts are in the process from the moment the idea is committed to paper until the day, if it finds its way successfully, that they finish shooting it. A script can go through numerous drafts, find itself on the shelf, find a home with a production company or just be a sample that proves your ability to write. But writers also know that great writing is in rewriting. Every professional they meet

who has read their script can offer gems of wisdom about how the script can be further developed. The biggest challenge is that at some point there will be professionals who want to see another draft or two before they will champion it in the marketplace on your behalf.

The question, then, is whether or not the notes really light up the writer. If they do, they can be referred to as "writer notes." Writer notes are the ideas that make a writer really think about all the untapped potential in their script. They can see how strengthening the plot, fleshing out the characters more, punching up the humor or reworking the ending can make it a better script. The notes part of an active dialogue the writer can have with the representative or producer where the writer's opinions of his own work are highly valued. This is a conversation about realizing the writer's vision while at the same time often working to maximize its commercial value. The writer and professional are working as a team; all of their thoughts are in sync, and even when they argue about a point, the ultimate decision lies with the writer.

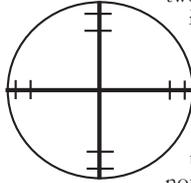
Most professionals who want to go through a draft with a writer do so because they are passionate about the material. Typically, they are not writing the checks themselves but know that, in order to impress the next line of defense, they need to have a superior product. They are willing to invest the time and energy that it takes read it conscientiously, put together well thought out notes, get into in-depth discussions about the material and read the revisions from the writer in a timely manner. Given the number of years that they have spent as a professional in the business, this feedback is gold. So even though the writer is working for free, it is during this process that a writer is helped to grow in their craft and hone their tools. If at the end of the day, there is no other result from working with each other than just a significantly improved script, know that they have done well for you. "Writer notes" don't require monetary compensation because they are setting you up for long-term success.

On the other side of the coin are "producer notes," which are not necessarily given by a producer, but rather by anyone who is imposing their own will upon the script. Some of the notes may be writer friendly notes while others are strongly pushing a particular agenda that doesn't match with the writer's initial intent for the script. If a writer feels that

these are notes that are taking it in an entirely different direction than he would like to see the story go, then they are getting "producer notes." These are the type of notes that no one ever likes to get, but these are best taken if there is a fee involved. That way a writer knows that they are writing someone else's movie, so hopefully, the money can soften the blow. If these notes are to be done on speculation, then the writer needs to consider if the opportunity is right for him.

When a project is officially set up with a production company, the rewriting steps are paid. At this time the project is likely to have a few producers on it. A writer must aim carefully to integrate the ideas that are being presented. It is great if the writer can benefit from friendly "writer notes," but the project now belongs to the producer. As a writer it is your job to fulfill their vision of the project. One trick to the process, if you don't like a particular note that offers a "fix," is to look at the underlying problem that they are referring to and see if you can offer a better suggestion. Regardless, a writer will be more adept if they have already been through the process of rewriting alongside professionals at least one before.

There is always an exchange happening in the notes process, and as long as the exchange is equitable, it can work for everyone. If a writer is grateful for the insights and feels a shared passion about their vision, he should be privileged to work alongside those professionals, and the opportunity alone for improving the script can be of tremendous benefit. If a writer doesn't like the direction they are being taken and there is no monetary compensation, they may very well want to hold out for a better offer. As a writer gets more established, he will better know how to assess what they are willing to do for fee or for free. In the meantime, understanding the distinction between "writer notes" and "producer notes" can be a good yardstick for measuring the real value of an opportunity. And while learning to craft a script is part of what you need to break into the business, your ability to take and implement notes is key to getting you on the A List. - **PB**

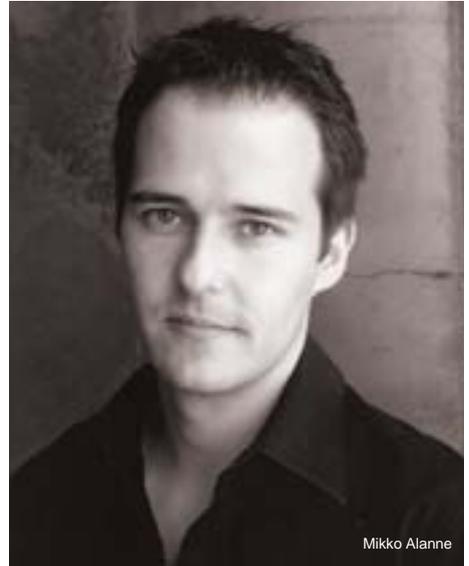


Philippa Burgess of Mason/Burgess/Lifschultz is a literary manager in Los Angeles who represents screenwriters working in Hollywood.

Featured Writer of the Month

An Interview with

Mikko Alanne



Mikko Alanne

by
Fred Topel

“The idea that you don’t know where money is coming from is very frightening. I think nothing kills creativity like financial stress. I will say the film industry is the hardest business.” - Mikko Alanne

Even though you haven’t heard a lot about Mikko Alanne yet, he’s already accomplished what most aspiring screenwriters only dream of. He’s worked with his idol, Oliver Stone, who became his mentor. He’s written scripts for Stone — *Empire*, about the decision to drop atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and another project about the Vietnam War. Alanne has also produced documentaries for television and written supernatural horror scripts for Revolution Studios.

Roman Ritual is a supernatural mystery, and *Blood of Saints* is a story about a forensic serologist (a blood expert) investigating murders in Puerto Rico. She discovers that there is an entity moving from body to body. When it enters you, you begin to die as the entity uses up your blood. What we call possession is really this entity taking over your body, and it turns out to be the legendary Chupacabra. Now Alanne is developing his own projects.

Alanne went to Ithaca College, where he produced a documentary on Robert Kennedy’s assassination for his senior project, and co-produced a fiction film about Holocaust-era Germany with another student. He sent the RFK documentary to Stone’s company and got a job as a researcher. After years working as a researcher at Stone’s company, Alanne now writes full time.

What did you study at Ithaca?

My major was Cinema and Photography with a concentration in film production, and I was a minor in sociology, so it was kind of a combination of things — production classes, film theory — but I always loved sociology. I loved the fact that I was in a liberal arts college because it was hard sometimes to go from studying things like family violence and social inequality to film class and wonder why Eisenstein chose to make this kind of montage. I always felt since seeing Oliver’s *JFK* that that to me became what filmmaking should be all about. It changed my thinking about how a film should be

made, why a film should be made. I took a lot of stuff I learned in sociology and tried to apply it into student films that I made. So I always think of them as the same even though they were in different parts of Ithaca College. They were both essential parts of the education.

How did the teachers help you hone your craft?

I guess it was mostly through studying great films of the past like *Chinatown* and things like that. I do think that Ithaca College was a very challenging school to go to, but there was a lot of freedom in terms of what you could do. [My teacher] always joked that I had my own agenda and I was making whatever movies I wanted to make and trying to make them fit the assignments that they gave out because I was always doing something political even though that was not the assignment. I think they do offer a lot of creative freedom, which is good.

Would you recommend film school to aspiring screenwriters?

I would only because I think that one of the most important things that you learn is discipline. A lot of people have great ideas, and I think one of the things to me that they need is a very disciplined structure of making sure that they write. Because writing a feature script takes a lot of time, it takes a lot of discipline to be able to sit down and write the five pages a day. I think that's the most useful thing about a writing class, whether it's film school or otherwise, that you do the work. I don't know if you can teach writing perse. You can make good writers better. I certainly believe that. But I think it's like everything else; you either have the natural talents for something or you don't. But I would never trade what I had at Ithaca College.

Should a new screenwriter play with format to distinguish himself?

No, absolutely not. I think one of the things that you learn very quickly is that you have some leeway. One of the

things I remember from film school was a cover page should look exactly like this, and you never do anything to distinguish it, or people will pick you out as an amateur. It's very funny when you actually go into development in Hollywood — the cover pages never look like that. Everyone always does something fancy with the cover page to distinguish himself. But absolutely, in terms of the formatting of the script itself, you absolutely have to adhere to the guidelines. Also, I think the people who try to break structure in their first scripts say, "No, I'm not going to write a three act movie." That's a mistake. The first couple pieces need to adhere very strictly to guidelines and industry standards.

But I read produced scripts where things as simple as the margins are wrong. At what point do screenwriters get away with it?

That's a good question. I read a script called *Get Her*, which was a great script, but it was a completely different font; margins and everything were completely off. So I don't know. I'd like to think that good writing gets seen no matter what, but the thing is I hear of so many gatekeepers who only look at the superficial things, and I think readers get very irritated when you don't follow formatting. I have a friend who's a reader for HBO, and whenever she sees a script that's longer than 124 pages, she gets really irritated, and you have already stacked the deck against yourself because then the reader is like, "This better be damn impressive to justify this page count." That's another thing to keep in mind. You really need to have a lot of things to say if you're going to submit a very lengthy script.

How did you submit your student film to Oliver Stone?

I sent it to him actually via U.S. Postal Service along with a letter and said that I was a huge fan of his work, that *JFK* was the reason I went to film school and that this is the film I made. "Do

you have a job for me?" And thankfully, he did. The frustrating thing for Hollywood for a lot of people — and no one wants to hear this — but so much of it is a function of luck, not just luck of meeting people but timing and that there is an opportunity at the right place or the right time. But I think one of the most important qualities is persistence. Oliver always used to say when people would bitch to him about how difficult it was that he drove a cab for 10 years writing scripts that no one wanted to read. And until you have done that, you shouldn't talk to him about how things are difficult.

As a researcher, what projects did you participate in?

When I worked for Oliver, I was in charge of most of the historical projects that he did. We were developing a TV series with ABC called *Declassified*, which was supposed to be a big exposé uncovering new facts. Oliver wanted it to be a very contemporary thing talking about present day arms dealing, scandals in government, stuff like that. ABC wanted it to be a more historical piece, so we kind of came up with a compromise of doing very high profile cover ups. First, I was the executive in charge of the whole research team for it and then was slated to write some of the episode. Unfortunately, ABC pulled the plug on the whole show after controversy surrounding one of the early episodes, which involved the crash of TWA 800. I could go into a whole off topic beat, the controversy between ABC News and ABC Entertainment, but anyway... At the time I was there, we were developing a biopic about Martin Luther King, a film about the 1934 coup attempt against President Roosevelt and a film about the murder of Pope John Paul I. There were a bunch of things. *The Day Reagan Was Shot* actually came in right as I was making my transition to writing. We also developed an RFK biopic with a couple of different writers, but it never ended up getting off the ground.

Were you writing scripts on your off hours?

Until I decided that I wanted to write, I was literally working 16-hour days already, so I didn't have time. That's why I really think that development is one of the hardest jobs to work if you want to be a writer because your hours are so crazy and you're reading scripts all the time. It's a great learning experience — how to be a writer, how the industry works — but it's very hard to make that transition. It depends on where you work, I guess.

Were you ever able to talk to Oliver about his movies you didn't like?

I stayed away from that. What was the most surreal experience for me about that was very early when I'd just come there and I interned for a couple of months before I was officially hired. During my second week there, Oliver sort of blew into the office, grabbed me and took me to Todd AO Studios where *U-Turn* was in post at the time. He sat me down with all these people like Jon Voight and Angelina Jolie, screened one of the first rough cuts of the movie, and then said, "What did you think? What didn't work?" I'd just met him; I was still afraid of him, and he was asking me to critique his film, so that was very trippy.

What did you say?

I was trying to think of something that I could offer as a criticism because I didn't really know what to say, so I said, "I wasn't really sure about the images of the Native American still photographs in the end." And Oliver just barked at me something like, "That's obviously a parable for the Native American genocide," and I was like, "Oh, OK."

Once you left, what was your writing schedule?

I would write pretty much every morning from about 10 to 3, taking an hour-and-a-half break in the middle. I really think it's very important to have a specific schedule because even if you don't get a lot done. Now, there's something that I don't believe in — when people say that you should write something every day. I'm not here to reinvent the wheel or anything, but I do think that if you have writer's block or a bad writing day, you should let it go because writing is already one of those things that you can't do every day. When you have a great writing day, you feel great. When you have a bad writing day, you feel like crap. And if you force yourself to write when you're writing badly, you'll just want to jump off the balcony. I had that sensation sometimes and thought, "Well, today is not the day." You just allow yourself that. If you get the panicky feeling that your writing is going nowhere, just take the day off. I don't think you can force ideas. I think the best ideas, solutions to all things that were not working with my stories, are ones I've gotten in my car on the 405 doing anything but writing. That's when I actually first bought a dictaphone because I was endangering traffic by trying to scribble notes, holding up pieces of paper in my steering wheel.

How did Stone become your mentor?

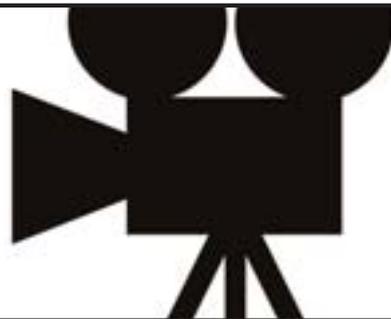
I think that Oliver has always been one of the few people in the industry who accept unsolicited submissions and has them covered and reads them and really gives serious consideration to people who haven't made their mark yet. I think he's very eager to find young talent and help them become successful. I learned a lot about writing from him and other writers that I met while I was working for Oliver, like Sharon Y. Cobb, who taught me more about writing than I ever learned in film school. I think I learned a lot in film school, but there are certain things that you only can learn from fellow writers through discussion and working with them on projects. I think Oliver is a very challenging teacher. I'm sure you've heard these stories about how he screams at people on set. It's not that he screams, but he really tells you, when you go to a script with him — he says, "This scene is great, wonderful. I love the arc here," and the very next page, he's like, "This is shit. This is shit. You fucked up this scene, and you really could do this so much better." That really challenges you to try to find whatever it is. He is extremely well read, knows filmmaking and the craft of writing better than anyone else, and he has such fantastic ideas, but he always loves to say, "I could tell you how to fix this, but I won't. But this is what's wrong." He kind of forces you to find solutions. He's a very generous person, and he took a big chance by giving me, a first time writer, a big assignment and then hiring me again.

What did Sharon teach you?

She was the first person who read *Empire*, the first script that I wrote for Oliver. I gave it to her for her thoughts. She was the first person who told me that you should always write from an outline. Oliver doesn't believe in outlines. He says that it's hubris to write an outline for a movie because you don't know where it's going to go. Sharon was the first person who said you should not only write an outline; you should write a beat-by-beat outline. Take the time to do a 60-page outline because all the problems that you'll bang your head against the wall with and go crazy for, you'll have solved already. That was literally the most helpful piece of advice I ever got because you've already mapped out the movie; you know what works; you can instantly see, OK, I need to preface this in this scene. When I wrote *Blood of Saints* for Revolution, it was so easy working from a beat-by-beat outline. You avoid so much work you have to do later on changing things. You really are able to see the whole movie. That in itself though is probably as daunting as the task of writing a script itself. So a lot of people who never end up writing a script write a first act, a second act, because it can be a very brutal process. But the outline really helps because you take a scene and say, "This is my assignment for today. I will write this scene. If it takes me two hours, I'm done. Great, that's my work for the day. If it takes me eight hours, that's my work for the day, and I won't give up until the scene is done." I think people who aren't writers never understand how it can possi-

continues on page 26

Script Deals



For May/June we logged 94 sales and they broke down as follows*: Comedy (35), Drama (27), Thriller (11), Horror (9), Biopics (6), Action/Adventure (4), Fantasy (4), Sci-fi (3), and Western (1). Comedy and drama typically rule the market. The last few years have seen a spike in fantasy sales due to *The Lord of the Rings* success. The Western is still a down and out genre. Most Western script deals are a hybrid such as Romantic/Western or even Sci-Fi/Western.

Breaking the Box – (written by Dan Cutler) This heist/drama is a spec sale about four women who by day are flight attendants and by night moonlight as jewel thieves until they are blackmailed into pulling off the biggest heist of their lives. Evolution Entertainment's Oren Koules and Ralph Winter Productions will produce. Dave Meyers will direct.
Agent: Alex Ankeles (Mosaic Media Group)
Buyer: 20th Century Fox
Price: Low six figures

Frozen in Time – (written by Roger Aylward) Sci-fi/romance based on an original idea by Chelle Wax (who will produce) and centers on a woman diagnosed with cancer and placed in a cryogenic freeze by her scientist husband. She is revived 40 years later to find he has died, but unknown to her, has been cloned.
Agent: Maura Teitelbaum (Abrams Artist Agency)
Buyer: N/A
Price: N/A

Ghosts of 21 – (written by Blake McCormick) This comedy is a spec sale by a first timer. The story centers on a 30-year-old who on the eve of marriage has his world turned upside down when

his old college buddies hold him to a promise he made not to get hitched. Davis Entertainment will produce.
Agent: Jon Huddle (ICM)
Buyer: Twentieth Century Fox
Price: Low against mid six figures

Step in the Name of Love – (written by Carl Seaton and Kenny Young) First spec sale by writing duo. Set in the world of steppin', the story centers on a Chicago-bred derivative of swing dancing. Stephanie Allain and Michael Jenkins will produce. Urban Entertainment's Nichelle Proto will co-produce.
Agent: Jeremiah Hahn (Brant Rose Agency)
Buyer: MGM
Price: N/A

Under – (written by Brandon Camp and Mike Thompson) Supernatural thriller based on an idea by Davis Entertainment's Wyck Godfrey and sold as a pitch. When a first-year resident starts hearing and seeing odd occurrences at the hospital he works, he realizes it is haunted. Davis Entertainment's John Davis will produce.
Agent: Emile Gladstone (BWCS)
Buyer: 20th Century Fox
Price: High six against low seven figures

Whole New You – (written by Jeremy Drysdal) A Romantic comedy pitch. The world's most famous actress needs a break from stardom and moves to a small Mid-Western town. Realizing she is unrecognized for the first time in her life, she enters her own look-alike contest. Craven/Maddalena Films' Wes Craven and Marianne Maddalena will produce.
Agent: Becsey Wisdom Kalajian
Buyer: Craven/Maddalena Films
Price: Low six figures

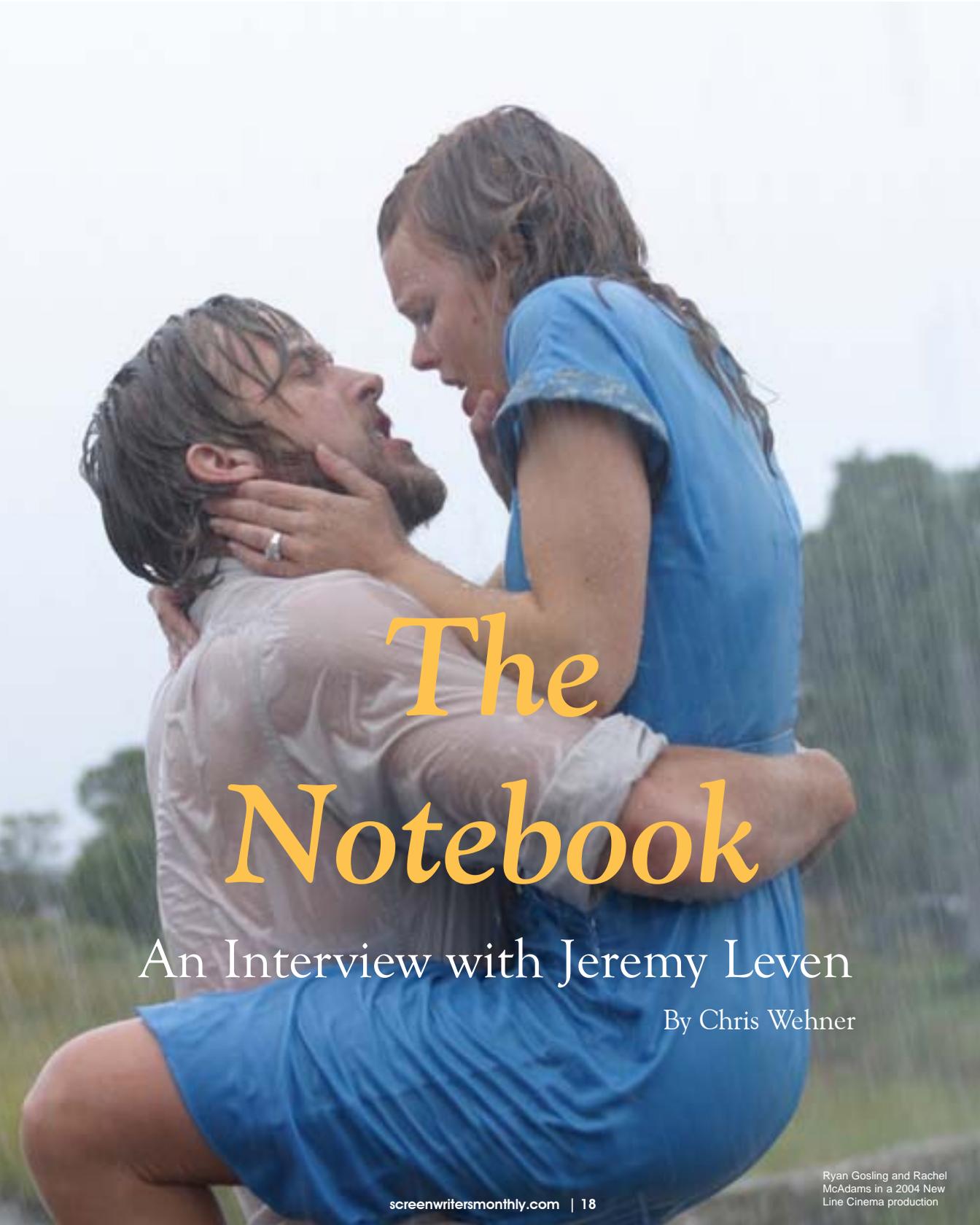
Wassup Rockers – (written by Larry

Clark) This drama centers on a group of Hispanic teenagers living in the rough and tumble world of South Central L.A. and who just so happen to ride skateboards and listen to punk rock. Daily activities for the group include trips to Beverly Hills to skate and meet rich girls, which leads to trouble with parents, police and boyfriends. Clark will also direct. Palm Pictures Chris Blackwell and Richard Brown will produce.
Agent: Shaun Redick (ICM)
Buyer: Palm Pictures
Price: N/A

SCRIPT DEAL OF THE MONTH

Fade Out – (written by Michael Cristofer) This thriller focuses on a screenwriter with schizophrenia who lives with his wife in a lonely New England coastal town. As he writes his screenplay that mirrors his everyday life, the lines blur between fiction and reality. Michael Cristofer will direct. Geyer Kosinski and GreeneStreet's John Penotti and Fisher Stevens will produce. Billy Bob Thornton and Kate Beckinsale to possibly star. Filming could begin this year.
Agent: CAA and firm Industry Entertainment
Buyer: GreeneStreet Films
Price: N/A

* Please note, this is not a scientific or official breakdown of script sales for the industry. This information is provided on an "as is" basis and any or all warranties of any kind or character whatsoever, whether express or implied, including, without limitation, any warranty of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose, are hereby expressly disclaimed.



The Notebook

An Interview with Jeremy Leven

By Chris Wehner



James Garner and Gena Rowlands

Jeremy Leven isn't your typical Hollywood screenwriter, not even sure it's appropriate to call him a "Hollywood" screenwriter as he doesn't live there. The one time he did he only lasted six months, and during our interview I got the feeling that though he loves to write movies, he's not a Hollywood guy. He doesn't try to fake it and there's no hint of pretentiousness. As a matter of fact, he splits his time between Paris and Connecticut with his wife, Roberta, who is a successful psychotherapist.

After attending St. John's University, Leven received his graduate degree from Harvard. So no, he's not the typical Hollywood screenwriter, many of whom seem to boast about their lack of education. After graduating from Harvard, Leven spent time as a psychologist, mental health director, and finally settling into the Neurosciences. During this time he was also a writer, playwright, and novelist. His first screenwriting experience was adapting his own novel, *Creator*. He has since written *Playing For Keeps*, *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, *Crazy As Hell*, and *Alex and Emma*. His latest is an adaptation of Nicholas Sparks' novel, *The Notebook*.

I read in your bio that you were a child psychologist, which is interesting. How did you make the change to professional screenwriting?

Well, I'd been writing since I was eight, published when I was eight, so I've always been writing. I wrote plays in high school. Then after college I ended up going to work for WBC-TV in Boston as a producer/director trainee type of thing. But I didn't like it and didn't feel comfortable enough trying to make a living doing it. I then went into neuropsychiatry, first child psychology and then medical school. I had children, and



Ryan Gosling

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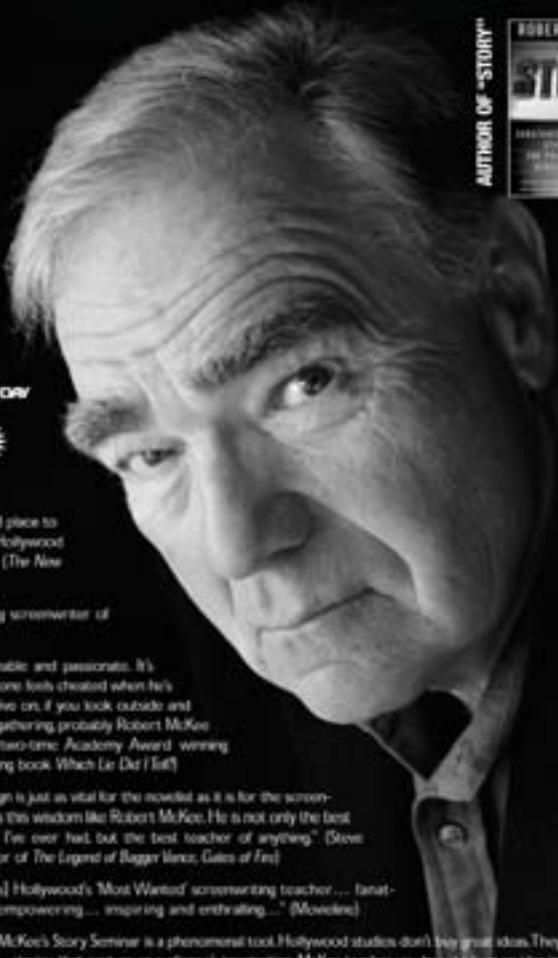
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AUTHOR OF "STORY"



agenda

ENDORSEMENTS

"McKee's course is almost universally acclaimed - not only as a good place to start, but also for some to return again and again... About the only Hollywood notable not to have taken the Story Seminar is Steven Spielberg." (The New York Times)

"Insightful... concise..." (Alice Goldstone, Oscar-winning screenwriter of *A Beautiful Mind*)

"Robert McKee's a tireless speaker, knowledgeable and passionate. It's three full days over a single weekend and no one feels cheated when he's done... No matter what continent you live on, if you look outside and see a group of writers or movie nuts gathering probably Robert McKee is in town." (William Goldstone, two-time Academy Award winning screenwriter, from his best selling book *Which Lie Did I Tell?*)

"Knowledge of story design is just as vital for the novelist as it is for the screenwriter. No one imparts this wisdom like Robert McKee. He is not only the best teacher of writing I've ever had, but the best teacher of anything." (Steve Prosser, Author of *The Legend of Bagger Vance, Gates of Fire*)

"[McKee is] Hollywood's Most Wanted' screenwriting teacher... fanatically empowering... inspiring and enthralling..." (Mowled)

"McKee's Story Seminar is a phenomenal tool. Hollywood studios don't buy great ideas. They buy great stories that capture an audience's imagination. McKee teaches you how to turn an idea into a story and a story into a screenplay." (Toby Emmerich, Exec. Prod. of *Rush Hour 2*, Toby's first script, the hit movie *Frequency*, was optioned for \$500,000 against \$1 million by New Line Cinema.)

DAY 1

- The writer and the art of story
- The decline of story in contemporary film, TV, 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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in order to support myself, I wrote a novel. I was hired to write a screenplay for my novel *Creator*, and then I wrote another book and another screenplay. I was on leave and was at Yale at that point and just continued to write screenplays.

Do you consider yourself a novelist who writes screenplays or a screenwriter who writes novels?

I didn't differentiate. I am a writer and enjoy all mediums of the craft.

Let me rephrase, screenwriting is such a different form—

Yes, very different. I knew nothing about writing a screenplay. When I was first asked, they gave me a script to look over — I think it was Harold Pinter's script, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981). His script was on legal size paper with eight-point type, two-hundred and twenty pages. So I gave them back a 200-page script on legal paper with eight-point type. [Laughs] They sent me another script that was 120 pages and in standard screenplay format.

Was it hard for you then to make the transition to screenwriting and the economy of words the craft demands?

I'd been doing a lot of theater and was a devout lover of films since I was very young. There was a little theater where I grew up called "The Pix", which showed mainly foreign, which I loved and really got. When I was at Cambridge, there was a theater called "The Brattle" and all the New Wave films — Godard, Bergman and all kinds of stuff like that. I grew up with films and always had a sensibility for it. I related to a lot of what I was watching.

I noticed in your bio you were a co-writer on *Playing For Keeps*, the Weinsteins (Miramax), Harvey and Bob.

The only thing they ever directed.

What was that experience like?

They were just starting out with their company [Miramax]. They had a small two-three room office in New York. They had just released their first film; they were distributors, not producers yet. They had some money, and I had just finished doing *Creator*, which was the first film I was involved with from start to finish. From casting, I was also on set every day, post. I vowed I would never work on another film for as long as I lived. I had literally walked into the kitchen in our home in Connecticut, from L.A., and the phone rang. It was Harvey Weinstein, who I'd never heard of at the time. He said he had just read my script for *Creator* and wanted me to do this project. They had this idea about a rock-n-roll hotel. I said, "No, don't want to." I was never going to do another film. It's funny; do you remember the story Woody Allen told about being offered the Smirnoff vodka print ads? There are these ads where he's standing next to a white horse holding a bottle of Smirnoff. He was asked, "How did you end up doing that commercial?" and he recalls how the phone rang, and it was a guy from Smirnoff. He wanted Woody to do these print ads. Allen tells him, "I'm an artist; I don't lend my name for commercial products. I certainly wouldn't do alcohol, and besides, I don't drink Smirnoff." And the Smirnoff guy says, "That's a shame. We were gonna offer you four-hundred thousand dollars." And Woody said, "Oh, well let me get Mr. Allen." [Laughs] So Harvey said he'd pay me more than I made on *Creator*, and I said "Let me get Mr. Leven."

Were you doing rewrites then?

No, I started from scratch. They came up with all these ideas, and I told them I would work it out. I told them I'd do a first

interview continues on page 28

IN DEVELOPMENT

SHREK 3? Of Course, it's Already in the Works...

Considering how well the SHREK series has done, and we hate to admit it, but they have done a fabulous job. The writing on SHREK 2 was just as good as the first, maybe better. So, according to reports (*Variety*), writing duo Peter Seaman and Jeffrey Price have been hired to start formulating a storyline for SHREK 3 for DreamWorks. The studio has reportedly said that it wants the third adventure out in time for a holiday 2006 release. Jon Zack (he wrote THE PERFECT SCORE which comes out later this year) will apparently work on SHREK 3 in a consultant capacity. According to Cinescape.com, rumors surrounding the storyline for the third picture centered on Shrek meeting with King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. We'll have to see if writers Seaman and Price take up this premise or not.

Mamet to Write/Direct JOAN OF BARK: THE DOG THAT SAVED FRANCE!?!

Here's one to scratch your head over. According to *Variety*, David Mamet (SPARTAN) will write and direct JOAN OF BARK: THE DOG THAT SAVED FRANCE for Will Ferrell to star for Columbia Pictures. John Calley to produce. Mamet will apparently make the story a contemporary satire about pop culture.

M. Night Shyamalan Re-shooting Ending For THE VILLAGE?

According to an article in the *Philadelphia Daily News* recently, M. Night Shyamalan and crew were in Pennsylvania last month to shoot additional footage for his movie, THE VILLAGE. According to the report, Sigourney Weaver, William Hurt, Joaquin Phoenix, and Bryce Howard were present for the three-day shoot. According to Internet rumors, they were there to film a new ending. A spokeswoman for the filmmaker told the newspaper that the shooting did not involve a new ending.

Paddy Chayefsky's ALTERED STATES Up Next for a Remake...

According to *Variety*, Warner Bros. has hired screenwriter Fernley Phillips to write a remake of ALTERED STATES, the 1980 Ken Russell-directed psychedelic sci-fi thriller. The origi-

nal film centered on a psychologist (William Hurt) who uses a sensory deprivation tank to alter his mind, with unplanned and terrible results. Paddy Chayefsky adapted the story from his own novel, but by the film's release, the three-time Oscar-winning scribe denounced the director's vision and removed his name from the credits and replaced it with "Sidney Aaron" (his first and middle names).

HELLBOY 2

Though the film was mediocre, director Guillermo del Toro and producers Lawrence Gordon, Mike Richardson and Lloyd Levin are all back on board for HELLBOY 2. Mike Mignola will reportedly develop the new story with del Toro. However, del Toro's next film will be the Spanish-lingo picture THE PAN'S LABYRINTH, a thriller set in 1942 Spain to be produced by Jorge Vergara and Alfonso Cuarón's Anheho Prods.

New Line Cinema Likes WALTER THE FARTING DOG

From *The Hollywood Reporter*, New Line Cinema has apparently optioned the best-selling children's book "Walter the Farting Dog" and has hired Eric Champnella (MR. 3000) to adapt. The picture book is written by William Kotzwinkle and Glenn Murray with illustrations by Audrey Colman. The storyline centers on one consistently gassed up pooch, Walter, who is adopted from the pound by a family, whose father eventually can't take the gas-passing dog and is ready to return him back to the pound. That night two robbers break into the home, and Walter unleashes a fart sending the robbers away and saving the family. The book was a New York Times best-seller (children's picture category) and has a sequel, "Walter the Farting Dog: Trouble at the Yard Sale." A third book is in the planning stages.

FIGHT CLUB Director to Adapt Fitzgerald?

David Fincher (FIGHT CLUB) appears ready to direct the long-awaited big screen adaptation (Eric Roth screenwriter) of F. Scott Fitzgerald's short story "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button." According to reports (*Hollywood Reporter*), Fincher has signed a three-month deal to shoot the project. The storyline centers on a 50-year-old man who begins ageing backwards, eventually falling in love with a woman 20 years his junior. **-SM**

THE ART OF STORY

ONLINE

with

Margaret South



Bette Midler, Margaret South, Bonnie Bruckheimer on Oscar Night

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Script ~to~ Screen

TROY

by James Vejvoda

One of this summer's most eagerly awaited tentpole releases is Warner Brothers' *Troy*, which Wolfgang Petersen directed from a screenplay by David Benioff. This retelling of the Trojan War, loosely based on Homer's ancient classic *The Iliad*, stars Brad Pitt, Eric Bana, Orlando Bloom, Diane Kruger, Brian Cox, Brendan Gleeson, Sean Bean, Julie Christie, Saffron Burrows and Peter O'Toole. The \$200 million epic opened May 14.

David Benioff's adaptation demystifies Homer's tale, excising all of its mythological elements in favor of a more realistic, historically based approach while remaining relatively faithful to its plot. Trojan prince Paris (Orlando Bloom) falls in love with Helen (Diane Kruger), the queen of Sparta and wife of king Menelaus (Brendan Gleeson). He "steals" her away to Troy, much to the chagrin of his noble elder brother Hector (Eric Bana) and his father, king Priam (Peter O'Toole).

Hector demands that Paris return Helen to Sparta, but he refuses, understanding that Menelaus will punish her severely. This illicit love affair is what ignites the Trojan War. Benioff condenses what is a decade-long war in *The Iliad* into a campaign that seems to take weeks rather than years to transpire.

Various Greek heroes are called upon by Menelaus and his power-hungry brother Agamemnon (Brian Cox), king of the Mycenaeans, to lead a war for vengeance, including Odysseus of Ithaca (Sean Bean), Ajax of Salamis (Tyler Mane), and the greatest warrior of them all, Achilles (Brad Pitt) of the Myrmidons.



Although he harbors no true allegiance to Agamemnon, Achilles agrees to fight this war merely for the glory of it. It was foretold that Achilles will die young, and he sees this war as the means by which he can achieve his legacy. Accompanying Achilles on this campaign is his dear teenage cousin Patroclus (Garrett Hedlund).

The combined armies of Greece lay siege to the walled city of Troy. Thanks to Hector's valiant leadership, the Trojans surprise their foes on the battlefield. The Greeks conclude that if they can eliminate Hector, whose tragic flaws are his unswerving loyalty to family and his sense of duty, then the Trojans will quickly crumble. They guess right.

Although Agamemnon had previously tried persuading him to challenge Hector to a duel, Achilles only agrees to it after his beloved Patroclus is killed. The final confrontation between Achilles and Hector, the tale's two finest combatants,



ends with Hector's death in a war that he never sought, and it signals the downfall of Troy.

The Greeks finally trick their way inside of Troy with an offering of a giant wooden horse, hidden inside of which are a contingent of soldiers led by Achilles. This war ultimately claims the lives of many of the story's protagonists, including Achilles, and brings about the end of a kingdom — and all over a forbidden love.

Benioff portrays almost all of *Troy's* main characters with equal complexity and sympathy. For example, both the impetuous Paris and the boorish Menelaus covet Helen for different reasons, and each puts personal desire above what is best for their nations, yet their motivations for doing so seem understandable. Even Achilles, the saga's most arrogant participant, is sympathetic because he lives with the knowledge that he will not survive.

Helen is written with enough ambiguity to make us wonder whether she is a vixen or a victim. Although she truly loves Paris, the tragic consequences of this relationship nevertheless riddles her with guilt, especially once it costs Hector his life.

The themes of duty, loyalty, glory, sacrifice and desire are the stuff of many great epics and *Troy*

explores all of them to poetic effect. Both the Greeks and the Trojans have their respective heroes and villains, their brave souls and their selfish cowards. The humanization of both sides in this grand struggle is a commendable achievement, something that this past April's *The Alamo*, another costly historical epic, also tried (but failed) to accomplish.

David Benioff's screenplay for *Troy* managed to be both emotionally intimate and epic in scale. He did a fine job in conveying the narrative complexities of *The Iliad* without falling back on exposition and simplistic characterizations. While it excelled at realizing the elements of spectacle that filmgoers expect from the sword and sandal genre, *Troy* succeeded because of its characters and their very human motivations and frailties. - **JV**

James Vejvoda is a graduate of the University of Southern California's Filmic Writing Program, where he received both the prestigious Jack Nicholson Award for Excellence in Screenwriting and the Abraham Polonsky Award. He has also won The Writers Network Fiction and Screenplay Contest and was a quarter-finalist in the Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting. He can be reached at jamevj@usn.com.

bly take a whole day to write five pages, but I think the old saying, “Writing is rewriting,” is very true. You revise everything constantly. That’s the other thing I would say to young writers: “The enemy of a writer is trying to write it too perfectly the first time.” That’s something that I was taught in film school, but you never believe until you have a deadline and you need to produce pages and you realize how true it is. Just like anything, when you first come up with a story idea, you can’t write a whole movie in a day. I think that’s nonsense. You can’t even write a whole outline in a day because ideas need to marinate. You come up with better ideas as time goes along. That’s why you should never try to write the perfect scene all at once. You should return to it the next day or at the end of the week because you suddenly see problems that you didn’t see before, or you see solutions that you never saw before.

How do you go from the historical to the supernatural?

It’s interesting to explain to people when I meet with them. I kind of do two things. I love horror, and I love history. By horror, I mean ‘70s-style horror like *The Omen*, *Amityville Horror*.

Do you do research for the horror films?

I actually do obsessive research about everything. I love research as much as I love writing, so for *Roman Ritual*, for example, I did an enormous amount of research on forensic psychology on this concept of screen memory, the idea that children often in talking about traumatic events mask what really happened in the language of the supernatural. With *Blood of Saints*, which is a forensic thriller that turns into a demonic possession movie, I did an enormous amount of research on forensic serology, bite mark analysis, what happens to blood after we die, the study of blood splatter patterns and also DNA analysis. One of the things I became fascinated by was how much evidence can be found about damage on a cellular level and how that can be used, that DNA has become damaged by possession and each victim carries traces of the previous victim’s DNA in them. All those things came from just doing research on how much we can tell from DNA and patterns of DNA that are identical. I wanted to create this narrative where it was about demonic possession as a kind of parasitic organism, that what we come to talk about in supernatural terms is actually a very real, physical, scientific phenomenon. Also, the whole film is steeped in Puerto Rican legend, and that whole mythology took a long time to research. One of the things I wanted to do in the end, since they wanted this to be kind of like an *Exorcist*, I wanted to do something completely different in terms of the exorcism because you cannot top that exorcism. You can only emulate it in different films. I wanted to do something completely different, so we decided to do a Santeria exorcism. So I studied the dif-

ferent traditions of exorcism in Santeria, which there are, but none of them are really exciting enough. So we kind of did a synthesis of all these things combined with a darker side of Santeria called Brujeria. What witchcraft is to Christianity, supposedly Brujeria is to Santaria. They have a lot more interesting rituals, so they have to consult a black witch to get this demon out of her. I do think research is the writer’s best friend. Some people call it procrastination. I certainly call it that too, but I, for example, did ridiculous research for the Vietnam project. I was stuck with this one scene that was a House hearing. I decided I really needed to know which room of the house the meeting was in, and I managed to spend half a day figuring it out, and I knew I was really just avoiding writing the scene. But the thing is, sometimes when you research something, an idea will occur to you very unexpectedly. It’s kind of like giving yourself a break, and it makes you feel good because you’re still working on the project.

When you research, how is the story forming itself in your head?

It’s a very reciprocal process. On the one hand, you have your story outline. I think whenever you’re writing a historical movie, it’s very important to do research from multiple angles. When I wrote *Empire*, before I started doing the outline, I read about 35 to 40 books about the subject matter and all the biographies of the people involved. There’s nothing as fabulous as real life. Real life doesn’t fit into three act structures; it doesn’t fit into scenes. I never understood why Oliver was always raked over coals over what they called his fictionalization of fact. The truth is, you have to. You have to condense; you have to make composite characters. Four meetings over the course of two years become one. Those are all allowed dramatic liberties that you take as long as you’re faithful to the essence of what’s true. When you do research, you start with an idea of what you want the story to be, but the reading and research inform your thought. Sometimes you find things that become gems of scenes in footnotes of research that you do.

How do you find the story line in your documentary work?

It’s very different because documentaries — and this is probably more just a function of television itself — they make you follow a very different act structure. Like documentaries are five act stories, seven act stories, and you have to play for the commercial break. You have to do a very short seven-minute act. Each act sort of recaps the beginning of the other one, and then you have to end with a crescendo. That’s a completely different animal.

How did you get *Blood of Saints*?

I was approached by Revolution, who had developed a script about the Chupacabra, which was kind of like *Y Tu Mama*

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The BIG SHOW

"...Most things fail. Most books, most albums, most films, most television shows, and even some really good ideas. Don't lose sight of your hopeful result, but don't focus on it. Remember that."

- Fred de Cordova

We stand in the middle of the lobby at ABC Entertainment.

"You know I had one of my most tactless moments in business with one of the gentlemen we're about to meet. Many years ago, when he was an Executive at NBC..."

And with that, Fred tells one of those I-knew-the-dirt-that-happened-to-him-before-he-did-and-told-him stories about this guy I'm meeting for the first time.

Lovely.

"I hope," Fred concludes, "He's forgiven me by now."

Enter Anxiety.

An assistant asks us to follow her. Walking down that hallway, every office from floor to ceiling is smoked glass, and Fred casually strolls, nodding and saying hello.

Yeah, I'm with him.

The first one I see is Mark Zakarin with a look on his face that seems to say, "If you can get Fred de Cordova anywhere outside of NBC by eleven o'clock, I think you'll be able to pull this whole show off."

"It is a real pleasure to meet you Mr. de Cordova, c'mon and meet an old friend of yours."

Mark Zakarin smiles, shakes Fred's hand and pats me on the back excitedly.

(I feel just a thousand dollars shy of a million bucks at this point.)

We enter an office to meet John Hamlin who greets Fred with a big hug commenting on how much of a mentor Fred has been.

"Just as John has been a mentor to me," Mark interjects.

"It must be contagious," I say.

A laugh, and the meeting begins.

Forty-five minutes later, John Hamlin states while massaging his forehead, "Fascinating idea. There needs to be

some retooling..."

I can't say I'm particularly fond of that word.

"Of course," Fred validates.

"We can work it out," said a grinning-from-ear-to-ear Mark Zakarin.

"Mark," John Hamlin looks directly into my eyes, "We don't know you, and we don't know what you know, but whatever you don't know, we're here to show you."

Quick, let's end the meeting before they end it.

With the grace of a ballet dancer and a beautifully executed concluding statement: Fred de Cordova closed my folder filled with paperwork I had planned to disperse, I quietly and discreetly inserted it into my briefcase; we stood up, we shook hands and got the Hell out of there while the feeling was still very positive. Back at the car on our way to NBC, not much was said.

"Next week I'll pitch this thing at Fox just to make sure we've covered all the bases," I break the silence.

"Good, let me know how that goes."

"...A Network that's not nervous is not in this country."

- Fred de Cordova

Fox is an immediate "no."

ABC's Mark Zakarin calls and wants to retool it for the '96-'97 season.

I call Fred who wants "holding money." I tell him we should try and hold off bringing that up.

An agent from the illustrious Creative Artists Agency calls with the immortal words, "What can we do for you." I had him follow up at CBS and ABC.

I ask Fred to have a conversation with Billy Campbell at CBS, "I am really proud at how you are handling all this," my teacher tells me.

ABC asks me to book a meeting next Thursday and "...make sure it's a half hour."

Fred calls, "I'd be happy to make another call to Billy Campbell (at CBS) but I will only do so on your word."

Why does that somehow sound backwards?

At the conclusion of ABC's meeting, Mark Zakarin confides, "You're almost there. The show is almost ready. The Talent is great. Music choices are great. Minimal adjustments and it will be ready to buy."

That evening Fred reflects, "We've been through a lot together, you and me."

(It's a good thing God only lets us see one day at a time.)

After said "adjustments," I am back at ABC on a cloudy day in October on the 16th. Mark Zakarin and I are here to talk about final terms before he proceeds for a full Creative signoff.

Upon showing Mark the revisions, he says, "I am proud. I'm really impressed. You have done a phenomenal job. Now, ABC will issue a licensing fee to Nightingale Productions. It will be between seven hundred fifty and nine hundred thousand dollars."

"Sounds doable."

"You are pre-approved as Executive Producer and Fred will be Co-Executive Producer."

"No 'Co,' get rid of the 'Co.'"

"Alright," Mark smiles and makes a note with the pencil in his hand.

"Something tells me you should change *my* title to 'That Guy.'"

The ABC Executive winks and then, "Oh and I assume you want to own the show?"

"Sure."

(You know, one can be a part of so many projects over the years, but it is rare to hear those words and with a simple stroke of a *pencil*; the only word I could muster was, "Sure.")

"Alright then, I'll take this up the flagpole and let's see if we can't get this going. Anything else?"

"Uh, yeah."

"What's that," My fearless leader gets up from his chair.

"Will the check clear?"

And with a laugh, a hug, and a kiss on his assistant's hand, I head towards the lobby. As I enter, I see Dick Clark walking in. He sees me, does his trademark salute and goes on his way.

To be continued next month

draft in like six weeks and then a rewrite for two weeks, and then I had to go camping with my kids. The camping day came, and they showed up in the driveway, big limo of course, and they're following me around while I packed up everything. I actually shot baskets with Harvey to see whether I would do any more work on the script, and he beat me.

I can imagine your child psychology background might have been helpful when dealing with movie executives like the Weinstens.

Not at all, people ask me all the time if my training helps me, and I say, "No, because I'm as crazy as they are." [Laughs]

You're becoming an adaptation expert it seems. How many have you done?

Let's see, I did *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, *The Alchemist*, *Creator*, *The Notebook*. *Alex and Emma* was based on a Dostoevsky novella called "The Gambler." I did *The Double* with Roman Pollanski, which got thwarted the day before we started shooting. I adapted a few others. Obviously, a number of these didn't get produced. I am also adapting a book right now, *The Time Traveler's Wife*.

When you sit down to adapt, what is your approach?

The first thing I do is ask the question, "What is it about this book that attracted the studio to it?" There's something about it that appealed to them, and I'll talk to the producers about it. I want to get to the heart of their attraction. Whether they loved the characters, they laughed or they cried, what's the soul of it that did it for them? Like in *The Notebook* what was it that really grabbed everyone? Was it the story? Characters? What was it that made it really work for them? And I'll make sure that I preserve that. I don't want to lose what it is about the book that they loved. That's the key thing. Let me describe the process on *Time Traveler*, which is what I'm doing now. I had a book of about 650 pages — a significant amount of material to adapt. I then figured out what I could lose in the book and still have the movie that everyone wants. I once wrote something called the "The Screenwriter's 13 Commandments" [see sidebar]. One of them spoke of the importance of structure. If you are against three-act structure within no more than 120 pages, then don't become a screenwriter because that's what you must have to make a movie, and within that you can have all the freedom you want. So with this novel I cut out everything I thought I could cut out and then structured the story: what scenes I wanted to keep, what I didn't, how I'd build it, the act breaks, and primarily what drives it, what's going to produce tension and keep the audience involved. Then I went to work. I'll just write for that first draft and not care about pages, and unfortunately, when I finished this it was 290 pages. So I'd written three screenplays. Then I go through and try to cut scenes down by half. I distilled it down to 215 pages, still twice as

long as it needed to be. I then realized at that point that the story in that book could not be told in 120 pages. So then I had to decide how to change the story and preserve the heart and soul of it. I had to figure out how to change the story and still keep that. I eventually ended up with 139 pages.

With *The Notebook* you had a book with 224 pages. Does that then translate into an easier adaptation?

Yes and no because there are things you can do in a book that you can't in a screenplay. For example, I think in the book there is just one sentence that refers to Allie and Noah's summer romance. Well, that's one sentence, and I ended up creating a whole first act dealing with their summer romance. I had to create that whole summer for the movie. There were two or three that were in the book. So sometimes a shorter book can cause you more problems. You may not have enough character development and too much internalized character development (what they're thinking) with a shorter book, which can be a problem. You may have to create a tremendous amount of new material and still keep it consistent with the story and the characters. You're kind of having to place yourself in the role of the novelist and create these scenes and be consistent with the rest.

Does the book dictate the structure you'll use?

No, it has the characters, great scenes, great dialogue, but sometimes it will be missing enough character development or missing tension or plot stuff that you need for the movie.

Sam Shepard in the press materials said that he thought the making of this film was a courageous act due to the simplicity.

Well, I would never contradict Sam Shepard. He's one of the great playwrights working today.

I think what he's trying to say — he's making a statement about Hollywood films today and maybe even audiences today.

I think audiences love a great love story. If you can do a great love story just tell it and keep the audience engaged — Great characters will make up for a lot of what you might be missing in terms of plot and special effects. If the audience can get locked into wanting to know what happens to these characters, then you've succeeded. So great love stories can be attractive in their own right. If you look at some of the great love stories like *An Affair to Remember*, there's not a lot of plot. I love simple love stories that resonate.

What has to happen for the story to resonate? Isn't that where theme comes in?

The themes resonate afterwards when you walk out of the theater and reflect on the movie. But it's all visceral inside the movie theater, and that's where the resonance comes from. If

you can tap into that, then it's great. That kind of stuff comes from rehearsal and the director working with the cast. It's on the page, but it's the actor or actress going beyond the words. That's their job. Studios hate to hear me say that what I write is really a blueprint, because they expect when they put their money on the line that every scene and every line will come out as they read it and agreed to fund it. But in reality you don't want that; you want the actors to make the characters that.

After you were done writing, were you involved with the production at all? Were you on set?

No, I was not. It depends on the director. European directors will have the screenwriter with them through the entire production usually if it's not them. American directors tend to less like that, not that they do not value the screenwriter. The screenwriter is not usually involved with production.

Jan Sardi is credited on the imdb.com database as having done some work on the screenplay for *The Notebook*.

Jan Sardi wrote the first script on it and, therefore, received an adaptation credit, a credit I never understood. I was never given his script. His script used a lot of the elements from the book, and that entitled him to an adaptation credit for that, and I received the actual screenwriting credit for writing what was used for the film. Both of us obviously are going to have numerous similar elements in our scripts since we used the same book.

I'd like to finish up the interview by hearing your 13 Commandments for screenwriters if you don't mind.

Sure, I'd love to share. [See sidebar]

Well said, thank you for sharing.

My pleasure.

-CW

Chris Wehner is a film critic for the Movie Review & Screenplay Database (www.iscriptdb.com), editor-in-chief (and publisher) of Screenwriters Monthly, author of Screenwriting on the Internet: Researching, Writing, & Selling Your Script on the Web (2000) and Who Wrote That Move? Screenwriting in Review: 2000-2002 (2003), script reviewer, and founder of ScreenwritersUtopia.com. He is also Vice President of Development for MoviePartners, Inc. He is currently developing (and writing) several projects for various companies. He has been involved with screenwriting for nearly 10 years and in many different capacities.

JEREMY LEVEN'S 13 COMMANDMENTS FOR SCREENWRITERS

1. Working with a studio or a producer is an educational, not a military, problem.
2. The only time you will be told by a studio or producer to remember that filmmaking is a collaborative process is when they want you to do it their way. Some hills are worth dying on, most are not.
3. The audience is smart sonsabitches. They can not be fooled. They know what you're doing and why, six steps ahead of you. They want to be entertained not educated, moved not manipulated, to laugh and cry. Make it resonate.
4. Plot comes from the character. It really does.
5. Character comes from the heart, so go for the heart.
6. All writing is rewriting.
7. You need to know the ending only if you want to know where you're going.
8. Nothing beats a great story. Tell it and try not to get in the way.
9. Great characters will compensate for the lack of a great story. Almost always.
10. All big third-act problems are usually big first-act problems. All big second-act problems come from having a first/or third act, but no movie.
11. It's called "Show Business", not "Show Art." Movies take money to get made, more than you have. The guys with the money want it back, plus some.
12. None of the above matters, if you write a heartfelt, elegant and beautiful screenplay. Eventually, it will get made.
13. Don't give up.

The Rewrite is Always Better

by David Landau

I recently spent over an hour on the phone with a management firm that wants to help me pitch one of my screenplays. I won a contest they held, and they think it stands a good chance of selling — if I rewrite it. Why does everyone want rewrites? Well, everyone has his or her own ideas, and that was obvious from these managers' notes. But also, everything can stand getting better from a rewrite. I know from experience. We playwrights are notorious for sitting in the back during rehearsals and making changes to the script. Sometimes it's something that doesn't sound right; sometimes it's a great adlib a cast member threw in, and sometimes it's a whole new scene.

Sometimes we make changes after the first audience sees it. But is a rewrite always better?

I love the movie *The Producers*. It has long been one of my all-time favorites. The characters are wonderful and hilarious; the concept, pure genius, and the acting, superb. I thought it was a perfect movie — until the musical on Broadway came out. Now they're making the musical into a movie. Why? Because the rewrite is almost always better. Brooks and Meehan proved that by improving on what already seemed to be unimprovable. So while I usually utilize a screenplay to illustrate a screenwriting craft, in this column I'm going to use a play that was a rewrite of a screenplay and is being rewritten back into a screenplay as we speak.

Most of the musical "The Producers" is basically the same as the movie — with a few hilarious songs thrown in. But these songs serve as rewrites as they reveal more back story than the movie. "The King of Broadway" reveals Max's fall from success while in the movie it appears that Max was always a failure. "I Want to be a Producer" reveals Leo's boring life as an accountant and his dream of change while in the movie this is left to be assumed due to his meek childishness. These revelations are major character improvements.

Likewise, the writers have greatly expanded the character of Ulla. In the original screenplay, Ulla is nothing more than what Max says he was going out to get - a toy. In the rewrite, Ulla has become an essential minor character as the love interest of Leo who tempts him away from Max when the police arrive, thus providing the "act 3" plot point. Leo then changes from a shy nobody to a love struck somebody to a person who abandons his only friend and then comes to his senses and attempts to come back to rescue him. With the old Ulla, Leo only experiences a smaller character arc that is in fact unsatisfying; he becomes a crook who goes to jail. Ulla herself is merely a passing and ultimately wasted character. In the

rewrite, due to expanding Ulla into a major character, Leo becomes a man who tastes greed but comes back to help his friend and in the end, because of his conscience, ends up a winner; he gets the girl and a Broadway hit ("Prisoners of Love"). Now that's a character arc.

Besides Leo and Ulla falling in love (not in the movie), the rewrite has Hans forced to go on in the lead part, playing his alter ego, Adolph Hitler. While I loved the hippy playing Hitler - and it provided some conflict for Hans - this rewrite allows Hans to reach his goal only to have it dashed when he breaks his leg, and Roger De Bris, the gay director, must go on as Hitler instead. Having him get so close and then lose it and then having the world laugh strikes him deeper and gives him even more motivation for his attempt at killing Leo and Max.

Another great change was allowing the audience to see more of "Spring Time for Hitler." In the film and the play, Roger De Bris, the terrible director, says he'll only direct the play if he can change the ending to a happy one where Hitler wins. But the movie never delivers. The play does as in the play within the play Hitler wins the war, and it's hilarious. It's a loose end in the film that in the rewrite is tied up.

The ending is another rewrite improvement. In the film, Max and Leo do the same thing that got them into prison - they produce a terrible show and oversell the shares in the profits. Aristotle would call this a tragic ending. The characters haven't grown or changed but are destined to remain in the lowest place they've managed to find themselves in. In the rewrite, the play, Leo and Max don't oversell "Prisoners of Love." They just put on a show for the love of it. Once they lose their greed, they are rewarded with a reprieve from prison and a successful show. They've reached their goals - Max to become a success again and find a true friend and Leo to become a somebody, have a friend and get the girl. So in the rewrite, Brooks and Meehan have changed the story from an Aristotle tragedy to an Aristotle comedy by giving it a happy ending.

So am I going to rewrite my screenplay? You betcha! We talked out our different ideas, and although I rejected some suggestions that I felt would have turned my story into a conventional Hollywood movie, their comments and concerns did force me to come up with even better ideas that will help smooth over the rough spots they pointed out. Almost everything can benefit from a rewrite. When we rewrite, we can devote more time and thought to things such as minor characters, subplots and back story. And if the 1968 Academy Award winner for Best Screenplay can benefit from it (the rewrite won 12 Tony Awards, more than any show ever, and became the biggest Broadway hit in history), certainly my stuff can stand a little rewriting too. - 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.



Script Notes

News and information concerning screenwriters and their craft

Peter Jackson Talks *King Kong*

Entertainment Weekly recently interviewed *The Lord of the Rings* director Peter Jackson, who talked about his upcoming adaptation of *King Kong*. He told *EW* he's not looking to reinvent the film, and by the sound of it, he's staying very faithful to the original source. Jackson is obviously the perfect person to remake the film. His goal, according to the report, was to flesh out the story and make it more "emotionally truthful. I put that ahead of anything else, including technology and the realism of the effects," he added. "Everybody's image of *King Kong* is that it's this amazing beauty-and-the-beast love story. And when you look at the original film, there is as sense that Kong is feeling an attraction toward Ann — probably the first empathy he's felt in his life toward another living creature. But Ann is not giving him a thing. She just looks at him as an object of horror the entire time. She screams at him; she's terrified. Her relationship with Kong doesn't go beyond that. We're having a lot of fun making it more psychologically real."

40th Anniversary of Ben Hecht's Passing

Last month Rafael Medoff of the *Washington Times* noted that it was the 40th anniversary of the death of one of Hollywood's most prolific and perhaps greatest screenwriter, Ben Hecht, first known as a playwright and then Hollywood screenwriter. Hecht, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, first made a name for himself as an uncompromising journalist in Chicago. Many early screenwriters started out as newspaper men. (Did you know that the use of the term SLUGLINE in screenwriting came from them?) He went on to co-author the Pulitzer Prize-winning play "The Front Page," a comedy-drama set in the Chicago newspaper scene, and became a screenwriter. His credits included the Oscar-winning *Underworld*, *Gone With the Wind*, one of the first screwball comedies, *Twentieth Century* and even a couple screenplays for Alfred Hitchcock including *Notorious*. During the course of his career, Hecht authored 25 books and 20 plays, and the Internet Movie Database lists 142 films to his credit.

Another WGA Strike on the Horizon?

According to a *Hollywood Reporter* report last month, the WGA contract talks broke down as Hollywood's writers rejected terms offered by the Alliance of Motion Picture and

Television Producers. Reportedly, they offered nothing in terms of DVD or Internet residuals or jurisdiction over reality, nonfiction, television or animation production. The impasse came three days after the expiration of the current agreement, and has some observers speculating that the possibility of a strike is real. Later the following week, the WGA and the AMP/TP met again and mutually agreed to resume negotiations in full session on June 1. In the interim, the talks most likely will continue in committees. Both sides have agreed to keep a news blackout in place.

SNL's Tina Fey Makes Screenwriting Debut

From the *Associated Press*, Tina Fey made news as the first female head writer of NBC's "Saturday Night Live." She is the co-anchor of the show's "Weekend Update" and an Emmy winner. Now she's a screenwriter with her first movie, *Mean Girls*. The movie stars Lindsay Lohan as Cady, a naive girl who falls in with her new high school's coolest, prettiest, most treacherous triumvirate of girls, called "The Plastics." She is currently developing a comedy series for NBC.

Bad Santa Writers Working on *Bad News Bears* Remake

Glenn Ficarra and John Requa, the writers responsible for Billy Bob Thornton's recent hit, *Bad Santa*, in which Thornton played a bad department store Santa, have reportedly been hired to write the script for the actor's next project, *The Bad News Bears* remake. In the 1976 film, Walter Matthau plays the coach of a loser Little League team of misfits, who he turns into a winner. Ficarra and Requa reportedly are already at work on the screenplay.

Kerry to Get Documentary Help

Documentary filmmaker George Butler (*Pumping Iron*, *The Endurance*) is producing and directing *Tour of Duty*, a film on Democratic candidate John Kerry, which will hit theaters during the height pre-election mania. Based on Douglas Brinkley's bestselling book of the same name, the film will focus on Kerry's Navy tour of duty in Vietnam, his years as a peace advocate, and how each contributed to shape his political career. Butler began work on the project in early 2003 and plans to have the film completed by Labor Day.

- Staff

Tambien meets the Chupacabra. It was a very fun, cool movie, but they wanted to turn it into a more serious, adult franchise. They basically said, “We want to make this *The Exorcist* in Puerto Rico.” It took some thinking. I then said, “I think we should bring in an outsider who’s a forensic serologist. I always like stories about men and women of science who are very rational and who aren’t necessarily spiritual or religious who are confronted with evidence that not everything can be explained through pure science alone. In this case, I wanted to do something about how possession is a real phenomenon. Unfortunately, that project was put into turnaround, so we’re now in talks with Screen Gems.

Has the work been satisfying enough, or are you itching to see something produced?

I’m very anxious to see stuff actually put on film. When you’re writing, you already see the movie in your head, and that’s very rewarding in itself, but I think everyone wants to see their work produced.

What kind of lifestyle do you have?

Modest slash struggling, I think. Until you become a big name writer. I never thought of myself as a freelance person. The idea that you don’t know where money is coming from is very frightening. I think nothing kills creativity like financial stress. I will say the film industry is the hardest business. Not to be quite as cynical as *Sunset Boulevard*, but there’s a great line in the musical version where they say, “Once you hit the jackpot, you have to keep winning,” meaning that it’s very stressful because, at the same time you’re writing, you have to be really conscious of where your next job is coming from.

What drives your writing — character, story or theme?

I for some reason find that outrage is very inspiring. When I write historical stuff, I tend to write either about dark events that have been covered up or wrongs that have been done to people. To me, the idea that you’re part of something that changes

people’s lives who’ve been wronged brings justice to them or recognizes a person who tried to do something heroic. That’s the best thing you can do as a writer. That’s incredibly exciting. I feel like if I can have just a small part in changing that, that’s incredible, and I feel like I’ve done something that’s going to impact history. Like I think *JFK*, irrespective of what people think about that film, very literally changed history. Because of that, legislation was passed to begin re-examining the JFK assassination files.

What advice would you give aspiring writers?

I do think, as unfair as it is, luck and being in the right place at the right time, meeting the right people plays a huge part. For example, I attended the first Hollywood Film Festival for Oliver as his representative. Sitting next to me was Sharon Y. Cobb, who became a close friend of mine, a writer who actually introduced me to later my agent at ICM. So you never know when you’re going to meet the people who are going to make a huge difference in your career. But I think the main advice I would give to people is people should write because I think good writing will always get noticed. Just follow the format. Write. The contests, The Nicholl fellowship and the Chesterfield Writer’s Film Project, are a great way to get your work seen. Some people say you don’t need an agent in this town. Yes, you do. The hardest thing is to get your work seen. If your writing is good, it just needs to get seen, so you need to find representation, and one of the best ways to find representation is to enter into those screenwriting contests because there, if your work is good, it will get noticed. - FT

Fred Topel is an experienced entertainment correspondent with a degree in Cinema and Photography from Ithaca college. His writing has appeared in The Hollywood Reporter, and online news outlets such as Herald Tribune Online, Daily Radar, eUniverse, and Cinefantastique.

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INSIDER REPORT

Hollywood's Hottest Companies

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PLAYTONE PRODUCTIONS

A partnership between screen legend Tom Hanks and producer Gary Goetzman, Playtone is known as much for its great taste in material as its star-power. Although the Universal Pictures-based company boasts big screen hits like *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *Castaway*, it's their innovative television programming, spearheaded by the HBO 10 hour series *Band of Brothers*, that the company holds as its pride and joy. But let's look at what they are currently working on.

Polar Express

A boy who still believes in Santa Claus—despite the skepticism of his peers—is rewarded for his loyalty, when a train called the Polar Express pulls up in front of his house on Christmas Eve to take him to the North Pole.

Studio: Warner Bros.

Director: Robert Zemeckis

Writer(s): Chris Van Allsburg, Malia Scotch Marmo, William Broyles Jr.

A Cold Case

The New York district attorney's chief investigator vows, before he retires, to solve the 27-year-old murder of a friend, even though the case couldn't be colder.

Studio: Universal Pictures

Talent: Tom Hanks

Director: Mark Romanek

Writer(s): Phillip Gourevich, Eric Roth, John Sayles

The Risk Pool

A charming but unreliable screw-up father is suddenly charged with raising his son after his estranged wife has a nervous breakdown.

Studio: Warner Bros

Talent: Tom Hanks

Director: Lawrence Kasdan

Writer: Lawrence Kasdan, Richard Russo

The Great Hartford Elementary Heist

An 11-year-old kid rallies a group of his

peers to recover property wrongfully confiscated by their evil school principal.

Studio: Universal

Writer(s): John Pardee, Joey Murphy

JERRY BRUCKHEIMER FILMS

A former advertising executive who moved into film production in the early 1970s, Jerry Bruckheimer has given audiences movies, videos and soundtracks that have topped \$11 billion in grosses to date. Together with the late Don Simpson, with whom he formed Simpson-Bruckheimer Productions in 1983, the producer set the trend for the big-budget, action/adventure films that dominated Hollywood's output throughout the 1980s and 90s. Their joint ventures included "Beverly Hills Cop" (1984) and "Top Gun" (1986), both among the 20 highest-grossing features of all time and both produced via the company's long-term deal with Paramount Pictures. Their pictures were honored with 15 Academy Award nominations, two Oscars for Best Song, four Grammys, and three Golden Globes.

Recently he has also become a powerhouse in television, sparking monster small screen hits like such as *CSI:Miami*, *Without A Trace*, and *Cold Case*. Jerry Bruckheimer has also established his company to be one of the most prominent behind the big screen with box-office sellers such as *Bad Boys 2* and *Black Hawk Down*, which was also nominated for Best Picture in 2001. Throughout time, Bruckheimer has remained one of Hollywood's most flourishing producers, and here's a peek at what's soon to come...

King Arthur

Awaiting Release

Historians have thought for centuries that King Arthur was only a myth, but the legend was based on a real hero, torn between his private ambitions and his public sense of duty. A reluctant leader, Arthur wishes only to leave Britain and return to the peace and stability of Rome. Before he can head for

Rome, one final mission leads him and his Knights of the Round Table, Lancelot, Galahad, Bors, Tristan, and Gawain to the conclusion that when Rome is gone, Britain needs a king—someone not only to defend against the current threat of invading Saxons, but to lead the isle into a new age. Under the guidance of Merlin, a former enemy, and the beautiful, courageous Guinevere by his side, Arthur will have to find the strength within himself to change the course of history.

Studio: Walt Disney Pictures

Talent: Keira Knightley

Director: Antonio Fugua

Writer(s): David Franzoni, John Lee Hancock

Affirmative Action In Development

A racist South Boston cop and an equally racist Military Police officer are sent to New Orleans to track down an AWOL soldier who committed a crime.

Studio: Walt Disney Pictures

Talent: Ben Affleck, Will Smith

Director: Michael Bay

Writer(s): J.J. Abrams, Billy Ray

Apaches In Development

A group of cops and ex-cops known as The Apaches track down a ruthless crack dealer who transports drugs inside the bodies of kidnapped infants.

Studio: Touchstone Pictures

Talent: Bruce Willis

Writer(s): John Ridley

Witness to the Truth In Development

Set in a crime-ridden Detroit, an FBI agent will stop at nothing to solve a case.

Studio: Touchstone Pictures

Talent: Michael Douglas

Writer(s): Mark Rosner

Director of HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN Opens Mouth and Inserts Foot

Alfonso Cuarón, the Mexican director of the third Harry Potter film, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, has called Hollywood movies “garbage.”

“Hollywood is a machine, 90% of whose product is garbage,” said the filmmaker recently.

He didn’t stop there, saying Hollywood makes “the world’s worst cinema,” he told Mexican reporters. Cuarón also rejected being labeled as part of Hollywood saying, “Why should one be proud of reaching Hollywood?”

Very well Mr. Cuarón, perhaps then you should stay out of Hollywood. I’m sick and tired of foreign filmmakers coming here, getting rich and fat, and then running home and saying how much better they are than us. Now I agree, a lot of what comes out of Hollywood is pure garbage, but for him to denounce and essentially bite the hand that feeds him is ludicrous.

The Prisoner of Azkaban took in over \$90 million dollars in its opening week, what percentage was Cuarón’s cut? What did he make? (Stay tuned we’ll find out) And then he turns around and says what he says, I’m sorry, but not a wise policy my friend.

THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW Director Roland Emmerich Continues Bad Filmmaking in More Ways Than One

Director Roland Emmerich is an “over-the-top” director. He’s responsible for two of the worst summer blockbuster movies ever, *Independence Day* (1996) and *Godzilla* (1998). And now you can add a third, *The Day After Tomorrow* is possibly the worst film I’ve ever seen. It’s cheesy, predictable, laughable, and frankly made for dummies, like most of Emmerich’s films.

Many scenes from *The Day After Tomorrow* bothered me, particularly the one showing Americans racing across the southern border as Mexican troops attempt to turn them back. Emmerich is preaching in his film, and after looking back at some of his other films, he’s been doing this for some time now.

But we have to remember, this is the same guy who said his latest movie deals with the “only problem big enough to force all the countries of the world to stop fighting and work together to save the planet.”

The Day After Tomorrow contains countless clichés, absurd scenes, and laughable lines. But most importantly, the movie is based on bad science or virtually no science at all.

“Scientifically, it’s about as far from reality as you could get,” Robert C. Balling, a climatologist at Arizona State University, told the *Salt Lake Tribune*. He added, “Leave it to Hollywood to find a way to politicize the weather.” In the movie tornadoes lay waste to Los Angeles, the British Isles



are turned into a sheet of ice, and Tokyo is hit with hail the size of bowling balls.

Emmerich, quoted by the *Washington Times*, admitted as much saying “Yes, it is over the top, but it has to be. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be a Hollywood movie.” His low standards for Hollywood movies is disturbing, but does explain his complete failure as a filmmaker.

US Lawmakers Warn Hollywood to Reduce Smoking in Movies

It was announced recently that U.S. lawmakers are warning the American film industry to reduce the amount of smoking in its movies. According to a report, they are concerned about studies that indicate children are more likely to smoke if they see it in the cinema.

Additionally, the U.S. government’s disease tracking agency, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), says about two-thirds of today’s films depict tobacco use, including those geared for young audiences.

I can’t see how this is a good use of our tax dollars. I mean, what’s next? A study on how films depicting the destruction of American political landmarks causes seventy-five percent of all terrorists to want to do the same? Please.

— Chris