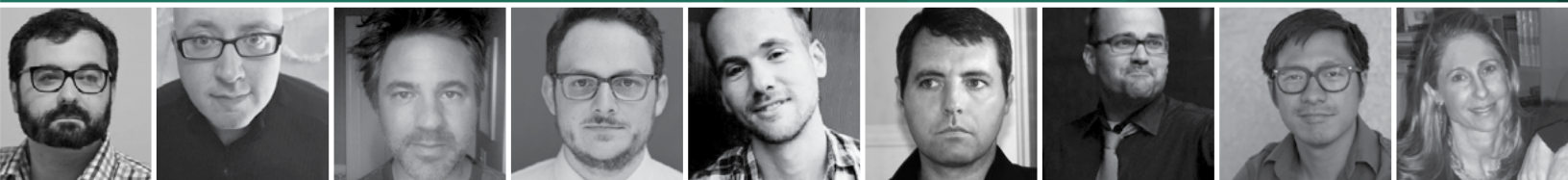


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How to Sell a Script:

15 stories from writers who sold their specs in 2016-2017

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How to Sell a Script:

15 stories from writers who sold their specs in 2016-2017

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Introduction

By Lee Jessup

Every feature film screenwriter out there dreams about selling a spec screenplay, shedding the moniker of a writer just starting out (be it the preferable handle of Emerging Screenwriter or New Voice, or the significantly less favored designation of Baby Writer or Aspiring Screenwriter) for one that is more dignified, namely a Professional Screenwriter who is, for all intents and purposes, made. After all, back in the 90's selling a spec script used to be THE way to put your screenwriting career in the fast lane. However, much has changed in the industry today.

The spec market, which was really more of an auction space through the 60's, 70's, and the better part of the 80's, exploded in the 90's, following the 1988 WGA strike, when material by previously-unavailable name screenwriters (who were until that point writing on studio contracts) flooded into the marketplace, and moved from agent to market to sale at a dizzying pace, complete with bidding wars and ticking clock methodologies. During that time,

screenplays written on spec such as Shane Black's THE LAST BOY SCOUT, Joe Eszterhas's BASIC INSTINCT and INDEPENDENCE DAY by Dean Devlin and Roland Emmerich made its creators instant industry superstars by virtue of the associated price tag. Unknown screenwriters too were able to emerge seemingly overnight and generate the sort of sales - and purchase prices - that left many eager to figure out how to do the same.

Although the spec market first showed signs of contraction leading into the new millennium, it wasn't until the WGA strike of 2007/2008 that it came to a virtual halt, leaving many a spec screenplay that might have sold in the good old days when concept and big idea were king languishing on the shelf. Today, executives, agent and managers all point to that strike, to the years of 2007 and 2008, as the point in time when everything changed. Spec scripts stopped selling at as steady a pace. Most buyers favored buying into a "package," complete with talent

attachments, as opposed to a “naked” spec. This simple reality of today’s ever-evolving market is what makes spec scripts sold into the professional space - and the scribes who wrote them - more fascinating than ever.

In this new age of screenwriting, where Peak TV is growing larger by the day and the spec market continuously fluctuates, not many screenplays are privy to a glamorous spec sale. For most first-time writers, it doesn’t matter whether the script sold for a mid-six-figure deal to a major studio, or for WGA guild minimum, as long as it put them in the map. A spec script selling may not mean immediate house-buying money in the bank; what it does mean is that a bona fide industry player has put his money where his mouth is, and that the writer behind it has emerged into the professional space. The scribes who are able to accomplish this feat in today’s marketplace offer much for us to learn: In these pages they share with us the inspiration, the drive, the stops and milestones along their screenwriting journey, and the lessons that pushed them along their path and helped them along the way, invaluable information to comb through, be inspired by, study and explore for anyone seeking to do the same.

Lee Jessup is the author of Michael Wiese Productions’ *Getting It Write: An Insider’s Guide To A Screenwriting Career*. She is a career coach for screenwriters, with an exclusive focus on the screenwriter’s professional development. Her clients include WGA members, Golden Globe and Emmy nominated screenwriters, writers who have sold screenplays and pitches to major studios, best-selling authors, contest winners, staffed television writers, as well as emerging screenwriters just starting on their screenwriting path.



“A spec script selling may not mean immediate house-buying money in the bank; what it does mean is that a bona fide industry player has put his money where his mouth is, and that the writer behind it has emerged into the professional space.”

1

Spec Spotlight:
David Hauslein
from Big Break®
to Big Sale

by Andrew Bloomenthal

Buck Run, a poignant script by David Hauslein, follows the tragic circumstances of rural Pennsylvania teen Shawn Templeton, as he grapples with hardships no one his tender age should have to face. He's poor, his mom dies of cancer, and he receives precious little comfort from his estranged father, who begrudgingly takes him in. And then there's the oppressive weight of living in a small depressed mill town, where hunting is the chief recreation, economic prospects are few, and hope runs in even shorter supply. Yet there's a stark beauty to Shawn's raw pain and to the setting itself, authentically expressed by Hauslein—a Pennsylvania native, who spoke to Final Draft about creating a story near and dear to his heart.

What was your inspiration for this story?

I grew up in Bucks County Pennsylvania, but then moved to California, and when you move away from a place you've lived your whole life, you realize things about where you come from that might not have been clear initially. I started mythologizing my past, blowing things up and getting nostalgic about things I never used to care about.

The core of the story was inspired by a farmer's market where I used to hang out pretty much every weekend, where you'd see people selling MacDonald's toys and old toasters. The people seem to be having a good enough time, but I always wondered how many of them were relying on the revenue to afford groceries for the week. So it started there, and then it somewhat became pastiche and I started building a story around it.

These characters are extremely hard-edged. Was this your life?

It wasn't so much my life. I tend to write about things I'm afraid of and things that I dread. When I first starting writing, I had trouble explaining what my stories were about, because I write to atmosphere and tone first. I want the world to be realistic and specific, and then I create characters that could live there. And rural Pennsylvania, with its failing steel mill towns, has a specific set of circumstances and a specific feel, with regional archetypes, you've probably never seen before. It's a beautiful place with lots of unique architecture, but it's an old place, with an eeriness to it. I wanted to show an appreciation but also a critique of the area I come from.



"It wasn't so much my life. I tend to write about things I'm afraid of and things that I dread."

The script dives deep into hunting culture. Did you have baked-in knowledge of this activity, or did you heavily rely on research?

Hunting was definitely not something I've had a lot of experience with. I've shot guns, but I'm not a gun guy. My experience with hunting is that in Pennsylvania, on the first day of deer season, schools are half empty, because it's like an unofficial holiday, and the kids are all let out to hunt. Going back to tone: I like the idea of the forest just on the edge of houses, where nature encroaches on people's lives. I remember once being on my swing set in the backyard, and a guy in an orange vest, with a rifle, came out of the woods, looked at me funny, then turned back around. We'd hear gun shots close to our house, which was always unnerving. And maybe once a year in Pennsylvania, you'd hear stories about someone supposedly accidentally getting shot during a hunting trip, where it was actually an intention to cover up a murder, but I don't want to give too much away.

“How often can you say you submitted a script and a film was made completely how you wanted it to be?”

Tell me about landing the literary representation that helped you get this property produced.

To correct you: I don't actually have representation, but I'd love some! I've been working on the script since about 2009, and it's my first proper feature, which I began while earning a Bachelor of Arts in Motion Pictures and Television degree from Temple University. But as a writer, my technique was really immature. I had done the Final Draft Big Break™ Screenwriting Contest in 2011, and I made it into the top 40, but not into the top 10, and I get it; there were obvious problems with logic and accuracy. I then went to the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, where a lot of talented people in the screenwriting department pushed me hard, so I kept developing it.

Once the script was in salable shape, how did you get hooked up with the purchaser?

I graduated school without any leads, and was already starting to feel some dread, because I had all this debt and the script wasn't getting much traction. But I had been contacted a couple of times by some people I went to school with, who were interested in optioning the script, but there was never any money, so I was getting discouraged and feeling bad about the whole writing thing. It's hard to self motivate when you're in that head space. But then, I got four or five calls that I ignored, because it was from the same person who called me before, but then I got an email that said, “We need to talk, because I have this interested actor who's good friends with [director] Nick Frangione, and we could probably get a few hundred thousand dollars to make the movie.” So I did a rapid succession of rewrites, which felt great, because there's nothing like having hard deadlines, where there's a light at the end of the tunnel. The money was still on the small side, but then I thought, “Will you guys be a signatory of the Writers Guild of America? Because I'd really like to get into the Guild.” So they went ahead and became a signatory, so once the film completes filming, I'll get an invitation to the Guild, which was the carrot for me.

Without an agent's guidance, how did you negotiate the actual dollar amount for the sale?

You're sort of out in the woods, trying to figure it out, so I called up the Writer's Guild and they very patiently explained things that I could have very easily read on their website. But I needed to talk to someone, because I was completely and utterly clueless. I ultimately just took the Guild minimum, because it's a low budget movie and it's important that this film gets made. I obviously want to get paid, but I don't want to bleed the film, because regardless of what people think of this movie, how often can you say you submitted a script and a film was made completely how you wanted it to be?

**Screenwriting Tips**

- Look for inspiration in your life. Great characters aren't created in a vacuum. Anytime you meet someone who you like – or dislike – jot down what you think it is that makes them unique.
- Don't feel like you have to be a master of what you are writing about. As Andrew states, he wasn't particularly a "gun guy," but he knew enough – and saw how it affected his community – that he was able to weave it into his story and make it authentic.
- Write, write, and re-write. The work of writers is done in the editing. Don't feel discouraged if after two months you've only written 10 pages. Conversely, if you get inspired and write an entire treatment in a weekend, don't think you're done. Great writers are always working on their stories.

Career journalist **Andrew Bloomenthal** has covered everything from high finance to the film trade. He is the award-winning filmmaker of the noir thriller *Sordid Things*. He lives in Los Angeles.

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Spec Spotlight:
Donald Diego
Takes Inspiration
From His
Wedding Year

by Eva Gross

Donald Diego went to six weddings last year, including his own. "I was like, 'Oh, I'm so happy for you but I actually have to call my caterer with final numbers for my wedding.'"

There should be a special kind of commendation for that amount of juggling. What he found instead was a prime writing opportunity. During a hiatus from his TV writing (he is the Executive Story Editor on ABC's new *American Housewife* and previously wrote for *Community*) and during a steady stream of weddings, Diego wrote *The Wedding Year*, his first feature film script. The spec chronicles one woman's journey through her own jam-packed wedding year (15 in 12 months!), which forces her to confront her own feelings not only about marriage but about her future in general. Lakeshore Entertainment recently acquired the script.

"I started writing [*The Wedding Year*] when it dawned on me – we would get one invitation and then my wife would get one and I finally realized, 'this is a lot' ... I thought this would be a funny thing for a couple to go through and then going through it affirmed that idea. It's insane. Weddings are always fun but the family is crazy and friends get weird."

Speaking for many of us in our late 20s/early 30s, "I can relate." I went to five weddings last year, myself, my role ranging from plus-one to Maid of Honor. And weirdness was a common denominator. As was love and friendship and truly fantastic dance parties. But there is something almost undefinable that pervades the planning and celebrating of weddings, a unique stress that brings out qualities just as unique in those participating.

For Diego's protagonist this stress becomes a catalyst. "She's a young kid and it's about whether she wants to take that next step, not only with marriage but with her own life, whether she wants to make that transition into adulthood," Diego says.

Diego got his own start into adulthood in Boston doing improv comedy and sketch writing. "That's when I knew I didn't care about classes anymore, I just wanted to do that. But I didn't know that being a film writer or a TV writer was a thing that I could do – it just didn't cross my mind that was an actual job."



"I went to five weddings last year, myself, my role ranging from plus-one to Maid of Honor. And weirdness was a common denominator."

From there he moved to New York and began interning at The Onion News Network writing web sketch shows. He made ends meet as a barista. “I was that guy making your cappuccino and writing scripts on the side,” he laughs.

“It’s OK to doubt yourself. But you have to push through that.”

His knowledge of the industry limited at that time, he began cold calling agencies. “I didn’t know any better to be scared of calling agencies. I just started calling CAA and was like, ‘Hey, will you read me?’ I actually got read but then that relationship withered because I was this crazy person just calling them out of the blue.”

“Then I got smarter about it,” he says. “I got a friend at a production company to email for me so I didn’t look that crazy. A person who is kind of reputable kind of vouches for me.”

He’s now with WME and Think Tank Management, his work vouching for itself. To writers just starting out now he advises that it’s “OK to admit you don’t know everything. It’s OK to doubt yourself. I’m not one to say ‘never give up’ but there are going to be down days for any number of reasons and it’s going to make you think, ‘what am I doing?’ But you have to push through that. Hold your nerves and stay on

target. Just keep going, which is the thing I just said I wouldn’t say.”

And as for his wedding schedule? “We’re finally almost done. I think we have two more next year and then hopefully we’ll have a good five or six year block before babies start.”

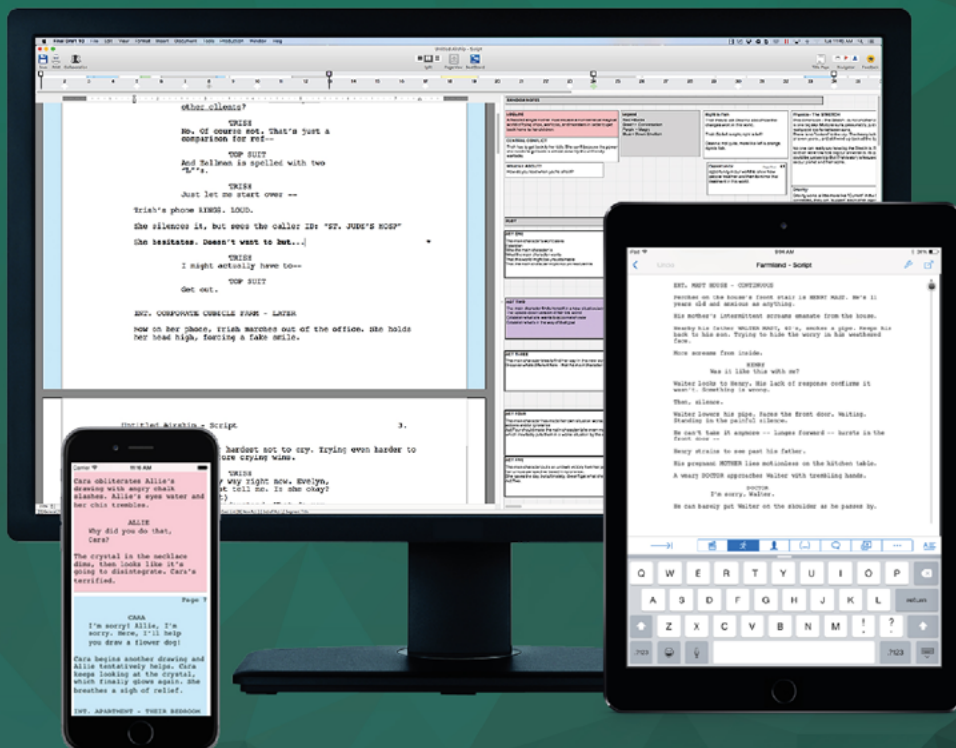
Eva Gross is the Director of the Big Break™ Screenwriting Contest. She studied writing at Emerson College in Boston and has enjoyed time as a journalist, a book buyer, a script reader and a Collections Processor with the Writers Guild Foundation Library and Archive.



Screenwriting Tips

- Be open to inspiration in unexpected places. Diego found his while on hiatus from his TV writing, as he planned his own wedding and attended the weddings of friends.
- Nurture the love of your craft. Diego started writing as a young adult, doing improv comedy and writing sketches, then landed an internship at The Onion News Network.
- It’s OK to admit you don’t know anything and to doubt yourself—but push through those rough days. Hold on to your nerve, and stay on target.

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3

Screenwriter Matthew Altman Talks Martial Arts and Spec Script Sales

by Andrew Bloomenthal

The son of a Broadway theater electrician, Matthew Altman literally grew up immersed in the glow of the entertainment sphere. After spending years as a lighting technician himself, on mainstay theatrical hits like *Les Misérables*, *Nine* and *South Pacific*, it was only natural for the native New Yorker to pivot his energy towards writing stories for the silver screen. After selling his balls-to-the-wall action thriller *Red Widow* to STX Entertainment last month, it's clear that Altman is on the right path.

Red Widow follows retired super-spy Sara Drake, whose life of domestic bliss is tragically upended when a rogue team of CIA special ops murders her unsuspecting husband. Suddenly thrust back into the spy game, Drake embarks on a bloody revenge campaign that leads her to discover some serious high-level malfeasance. Consequences will be dealt.

We chatted with Altman about penning his thrilling tale and bringing it to market.

Tell me about your trajectory as a screenwriter.

I was always heavily into comics, martial arts, movies and TV, plus I read a lot of a science fiction and fantasy novels. I always wanted to write, but I just didn't know what I wanted to write. In college, I did the honors English program at University at Albany, SUNY, and by my final year, I realized I wanted to write movies, so I read Syd Field, *Save the Cat*—all of those books, and wrote my first script, which took about a year to finish and was terrible. But I gradually got faster and better by reading scripts like Shane Black's *Lethal Weapon*, and I eventually started doing well in contests. I was a finalist in American Zoetrope [Screenplay Contest], which got me my current manager Jim Wedaa, who encouraged me to make the move to L.A. and take the plunge.

How do you communicate to your manager that you've written something noteworthy, and what's his typical turnaround time to read submissions?

I write a lot. I treat it like a job, and I'm one of the few writers who actually enjoys the process. I've certainly experienced the pain of facing the blank page, but I enjoy creating worlds, and stories and characters, and I spend a lot of time doing it, so it's honestly not a big surprise to my manager when I tell him I've got a new script. Thankfully he's good at reading it



"I write a lot. I treat it like a job, and I'm one of the few writers who actually enjoys the process."

quickly—usually over the weekend, which may include a Monday and Tuesday, but he’s going to get back to me that next week, in all likelihood. If he likes a script a lot, he’s the one who makes my agents read it, because my agents are great, but they’re super busy, and they only want to read something they can sell right away, which is totally understandable. It’ll take the agent maybe a week or two to read it—especially if the manager highly recommends it. In this case, I actually gave [my manager] two projects around the same time, and he actually liked them both enough to give them to an agent who just joined my team at APA—Ryan Levy, who encouraged my lead agent Chris Ridenhour to read *Red Widow*, which Chris loved as well, so we decided to go out with that one, which was obviously fortuitous, because it worked.

Do you ever feel vulnerable when sending out something you’ve put your heart and soul into writing?

Not any longer—maybe because I write so much. I’ve sent a few projects that just haven’t clicked with anyone. Last year I sent out an invisible-kid script, and never heard anything back, so I guess they didn’t like that one. But I write a lot, so there’s probably less impact because of that, and I’m not precious about any of my scripts.

How does your representation loop in the producers who are ultimately going to be making this film?

Red Widow was shown to a lot of different producers and the three who liked it the most took it into territories that they had relationships with. Jim Wedaa had a relationship with Matt Berenson, who took it to STX because he had a relationship with them, so basically whichever producer got someone to buy it was going to be attached as the producer. If a company is interested, they’re going to contact the agent/manager right away, which is what happened with STX. We went out Monday, and by Thursday, they made us an offer.

“If you’re writing for spec, you just have to let it all go and let it all hang out.”

Compare your relationships with your manager versus your agents.

Agents are doing the deals with the lawyers and they have a lot more relationships with the buyers, where the managers are generally more into developing your career. Not to say the agents don’t want to advance your career, but they’re not going to be developing scripts with you. They want to see the script when it’s ready, which makes sense, because they have a lot of clients and they’re busy doing the actual negotiations. In this case, my manager is also attached as a producer, so he’ll have notes in that regard, which I’m happy to take. But I generally submit pretty complete drafts.

I always ask action film writers if they worry about the costs and logistical complexities of filming elaborate action scenes, and thus far, no one has felt constricted by these concerns. What’s your opinion?

My opinion is that you can’t write with budget in mind unless you know you’re writing for low budget. But if you’re writing for spec, you just have to let it all go and let it all hang out. I will say, because of my martial arts background, I try to make the fight

scenes realistic and have some sort of logical flow-through, but I tend to overwrite these scenes the most in the early drafts and I have to pull back, tone it down and make it more concise. But at the same time, it's a movie and you want to have fun. You want the audience to have fun and the readers to have fun, and you want to give the actors cool stuff to do, so you can't worry about budget and the other stuff. You just have to go for it. Generally, if you're writing specs, you have a high level of detail in explaining action, because no matter what, it will give you an idea of how long a scene is supposed to take.

Does your martial arts background allow you to flesh out fight choreography in your head, and better imagine how bodies in conflict would move?

Yeah, a lot of time when I'm choreographing what's going on in my head, I'm having characters react the way I know they'd react, depending on how trained I'm writing a character to be. I wrote one script where no one had any martial arts training, and the fight scenes were a lot simpler because they didn't know how to do it. But when they know how to fight, I get really into how people would react and what kind of techniques they would use, and I can really play with it.

Discuss how the story seemed elementary at first, which amplified the payoffs of the twists that came.

I was trying to establish this perfect world that Sara had constructed—this façade, as fast as possible because it's all going to end by page 15, when everything gets turned over and we learn that everything we thought was true, wasn't true, which I like.

Red Widow is vivid in its descriptions, articulating sound effects, such as the "THOCK-THOCK-THOCK-THOCK-THOCK of a knife chopping vegetables". Is this so people reading it will enjoy the experience?

Yeah, I definitely want to write something people will enjoy reading. Screenwriting is funny, because you're creating a blueprint for something that doesn't exist. But even though it's not a book or something that lives on its own, it should still be something you enjoy, as if you were seeing a movie or reading a comic book or watching TV. You should have some excitement and fun with it, and I love making it as tight and fun and readable as possible.

Career journalist **Andrew Bloomenthal** has covered everything from high finance to the film trade. He is the award-winning filmmaker of the noir thriller *Sordid Things*. He lives in Los Angeles.

More information can be found on Andrew's site:

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Screenwriting Tips

- Immerse yourself in what you love. Comics, martial arts, and science fiction and fantasy novels feed Altman's creative streak as much as film and TV do, so he enjoys spending time creating worlds, stories, and characters.
- Write more projects so that you become less precious about them. You'll always have pride in your work and want to put your best work out there, but having more to submit takes the pressure off waiting to hear back on that one script.
- Don't worry about the budget unless you're hired to write for a particular budget. In a spec script, you just have to go for it.

4

Spec Spotlight: Calvin Starnes Talks Transitioning from Grip Department to Spec Script Sales

by Final Draft

FD: How did you get started in the entertainment industry?

Calvin Starnes: I kind of stumbled into it. My major in college was Political Science. But, in my junior year I randomly took a Super 8 class, which ultimately led me to an internship at this small art-house theater. After that I started working on low-budget movies and student films. And whenever a big movie or commercial would come through town, I would go work on that as a Production Assistant. I did that for a couple of years then eventually moved to Los Angeles and worked as an Assistant Director for about a year. But, then I got an opportunity to switch to the Grip Department and did that for a long time. I only started writing a handful of years ago.

FD: You have great credits in both film and television, from *The Hangover* to *Parks and Recreation*. What was that like for you over the years?

CS: At first it is every bit as exciting as you would think it would be. But, as the years ticked by it became a grind and the long hours eventually drove me to want to leave. But, I would never take it back. There was a lot to love. I met a lot of amazing people. I got to go to places I never would have gone or even been allowed to go. And I got to do and see some really cool stuff.

Plus, coming from the production world helps me as a writer. I'd recommend to all writers, if you have an opportunity, definitely get some time on set. It's going to translate to a greater understanding of what your written words mean. If you write "the little girl and her dog are lost at sea during a raging sea-storm" then it helps to know what that means in terms of budget.

You have a kid, so now you have restricted working hours and have to hire a teacher. You have an animal, so you need an AHS rep and an animal wrangler. Is it a water tank? Or is it the actual ocean? Wind and rain machines? Marine coordinator? Visual effects? And on and on. If you know how sets work and movies are made, it gives you a better ability to write to budget. Not to the dollar obviously, but having an awareness makes you a better writer, especially when dealing with executives who might be asking you to cut money out of your script.



"For me, feedback and notes are such an important part of my process."

FD: How did the transition to writing happen?

CS: One night my wife and I were watching *28 Days Later* and during the scene when Jim is running up the stairs screaming “DON’T LEAVE ME!” to Selena with the Infected right behind them; pretty much the scariest thing imaginable; and my wife turns to me and asks, “You wouldn’t leave me behind would you?” I looked at her like she was crazy and said “Are you watching the same movie I am?! Of course I would leave you!” Joking, of course.

After that we started talking about, “If you got zombified I’d keep you in the backyard” or “If you went to jail, I’d break you out.” We went through all the things that we would do for one another and that’s how the idea for my first script, which ultimately landed at Screen Gems, was born.

And through the course of that experience I thought, “OK maybe I can take a shot at a career in writing.” I didn’t give up my day job straight away, but as I began to have a little more success and get more traction, I was finally able to say, “OK, I’m going to do it full time.”

FD: Your first script for Screen Gems was also a Heist film. Can you talk a little about that interest?

CS: The first one, I had no idea what I was doing, so I just kind of jumped in. Didn’t do an outline, didn’t do anything. Just said, “I’m going to write a script.” To say I wrote with a focus on character would be false because I didn’t know what that even meant. Looking back though, I remember loving writing the character stuff the most. The set pieces were cool, but telling her story was the most fun.

My next script was a heist/car movie. And the script that just went out was about international jewel thieves. After that I said, “No more heist movies!” But, I found myself wanting to tell this story about an older married couple who were retired bank robbers. And all I really wanted to do was just write about this

married couple and their journey through this part of their life. But, it also happened to take place in a heist movie. Apparently, I have a thing for heist movies.

FD: Can you talk about those first steps you took towards getting representation and getting your work out there?

CS: I queried. I got my script to a point I was happy with, although as a first time writer, it was nowhere near ready. I made the classic rookie mistake of thinking “Oh, they’ll get it or they won’t.” My older self is slapping my younger self on the nose.

I sent out a lot of queries, but only a handful of people requested it. And the only legitimate person was the manager I’m still with at Circle of Confusion. He requested it and a couple of weeks later called me and said he liked it. It needed work, but he had an executive at DiBonaventura who was looking for something like what I had written. Then through the process of developing and trying to sell the script with DiBonaventura attached, I landed an agent as well.

FD: What was the rewriting process like?

CS: I can’t remember my process writing the first script before I sent it out. I just wrote and wrote until I was sick of writing and then said, “Done.” At the time, I don’t think I even had readers beyond my wife. I didn’t even really get feedback from anyone before I sent out that initial draft. And I don’t say any of this as a good thing.

For me, feedback and notes are such an important part of my process. Maybe when you’ve been writing for years and years as a “working writer” then, okay, you’re veteran enough to know what you’re doing without notes. But, early on in your career I think it’s so important as you’re learning your craft. That honest, truthful feedback you get from outside sources can elevate your writing, whereas when you’re writing in a vacuum with yourself as your only critic then you are limiting your chance to grow.

Anyway, after my script landed at DiBonaventura I got notes from them. Then once it was optioned at Screen Gems I was getting notes from both DiBonaventura and Screen Gems. Sometimes it works in perfect harmony. And sometimes you have to navigate choppy political waters when you get conflicting notes. Luckily it was the former for me. But, that was definitely getting tossed into the deep end. Going from next to no experience to having to parse notes from executives who do this every day. You find your way. And if you don't, you drown.

FD: What do you plan to work on next?

CS: A few things, but I'm most excited about a contemporary Sci-fi/Fantasy feature. I'm pitching it as *Lone Survivor* meets *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, but with no talking animals... and nothing gets stolen.

FD: What inspires you to keep writing?

CS: I don't care if I'm famous. And obviously getting paid is nice, but I don't do this solely for money. But, what I really want to do is write a movie that someone stays up until three in the morning watching for the millionth time because they just love the hell out of it. To write a movie that people love and watch over and over again would be amazing. And if you write something where people create fan art or cosplay or do themed parties around it; that just seems like the coolest thing to me.

FD: Do you have any other films or shows that have inspired you along the way?

CS: *Heat*. *Heat* was my touchstone writing the first movie. It didn't make it into the script, and not that I even think that I could replicate what Mann did, but I just kept thinking of that gun battle through the streets of L.A. And I wanted my characters, who were women, to have their version of that. It was that world and that movie, definitely.

Just off the top of my head... *Shawshank Redemption*, *Training Day*, *True Romance*, *The Godfather*, *Boyz N The Hood*, *Aliens*, *Die Hard*, *Matrix*. I could go on all day. My most recent favorite is *Mad Max: Fury Road*. It's definitely one I can't not watch when it's on. That movie just punches you in the face and makes you remember, "Oh, yeah. This is why I love movies."

FD: What advice would you give to younger writers?

CS: It's OK to admit you don't know everything. It's OK to doubt yourself. It's OK to ask for help. And just know that there are going to be dark days. Days that are going to make you want to say, "What the fuck am I doing?" Or even, "I have no idea what I'm doing." You have to push through that. You have to hold your nerve and stay on target and just keep going. This is a hard job and it is not for the faint of heart. Swing for the fences, but definitely try to go in with eyes wide open and with realistic expectations.



Screenwriting Tips

- Learn how sets work, or if you can manage it, spend time on set or gain production experience. Awareness of how films are made helps you understand what your words mean in terms of effects and budgets.
- Get feedback and notes on your script, especially as you learn your craft. Truthful feedback from outside sources—not just friends and family—can elevate your writing and help you to grow.
- Watch films that inspire you. Even if you can't replicate what those writers or directors do, thinking of scenes and characters from those films can infuse your stories with the same feel.

5

Spec Spotlight:
Isaac Adamson
Talks *Bubbles*

by Valerie Kalfrin

Isaac Adamson felt he had a toehold in the film industry when his first novel, *Tokyo Suckerpunch*, was optioned in 2000—but his spec script *Bubbles* launched him to a whole new level. Here's his story.

Growing up in Fort Collins, Colorado, Adamson studied film at the University of Colorado at Boulder but soon learned he preferred writing fiction. "I was an awful cinematographer—nothing I shot ever looked the way I wanted—and I learned pretty quickly that while re-shooting a terrible scene cost a pretty penny, rewriting a terrible sentence is free," he said.

The optioning of *Tokyo Suckerpunch*—a detective story blending martial arts, gangsters, geishas, and Japanese pop culture—demystified the screenwriting process as Adamson saw the scripts generated during development. After crafting the time-bending thriller, *Complication*, published in 2012, he wrote his first script, a caper about bumbling criminals accidentally killing Chicago's mayor. It's still in the "metaphorical drawer," but writing it forced him to learn screenwriting, and gave him confidence.

"I've been concentrating on screenwriting for about the last three years—and only making a full-time living at it for about the last year or so—so it still feels a little funny calling myself a screenwriter," he said.

He first thought of *Bubbles*, a biopic of Michael Jackson by way of his beloved chimpanzee, after running across two items: a news story about Bubbles living in a Florida ape sanctuary after Jackson's death, and *Me Cheeta: My Life in Hollywood*, a 2009 pseudo-memoir about the chimp who played Tarzan's simian pal. The idea of seeing Jackson through Bubbles's eyes intrigued Adamson, but the story didn't fully gel until he saw 2014's *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* portray the conflict and hierarchy within the primate social structure.

"A lightbulb just went off: What if Bubbles spoke with a pseudo-Shakespearean voice and believed himself to be the heir of The King of Pop?" Adamson said.

The challenge became not letting Jackson overwhelm the story. "It's similar in ways to *Amadeus* in that the story isn't really about Mozart; it's about Salieri. Yes, it does function as a Michael Jackson biopic, but he's not really the protagonist."



"I learned pretty quickly that while re-shooting a terrible scene cost a pretty penny, rewriting a terrible sentence is free."

Bubbles topped 2015's Black List. Soon afterward, Adamson was tapped to adapt Alcon Entertainment's psychological thriller *The Ice Twins*, based on S.K. Tremayne's book about a family turned upside-down after an accident kills one of their twin daughters.

Then producer Andrew Kortschak of *End Cue*, along with Dan Harmon and his Starburns Industries production company, acquired *Bubbles* to become a stop-motion animated feature. Harmon was an executive producer of *Anomalisa*, nominated for a 2016 Best Animated Film Oscar.

"*Bubbles* wasn't conceived as animation, and I think that's part of what Starburns found appealing, given their aesthetic," Adamson said. "The brand of hyper-realistic stop-motion animation they pioneered in *Anomalisa*, besides looking amazing, solves a lot of the practical puzzles in turning this script into an actual film, like how do we find an actor who looks like Michael Jackson, how do we train a chimpanzee to do the moonwalk, how can we recreate *Neverland* without spending a bajillion dollars."

Adamson enjoys writing and watching most genres except fantasy. His favorite film is 1950's *Sunset Boulevard*. "I watch it at least once a year."

He encourages other writers to read as many scripts as they can, write what interests them, and not get too fixated on a single idea. "Write every day, even if just for an hour," he said.

He composes ideas in Gmail (easy access anywhere and less intimidating), but once he's ready to write, he uses Final Draft.

Valerie Kalfrin

Journalist / Screenwriter / Script Consultant

Valerie Kalfrin is an award-winning crime journalist turned entertainment writer, screenwriter and emerging script consultant. A member of the Florida Film Network, she has written for The Guardian, Bright Wall Dark Room, The Script Lab, Signature Reads, and The Tampa Bay Times, among other publications.

Find her at valeriekalfrin.com



Screenwriting Tips

- Read as many scripts as you can, and have interests across a range of genres. Not becoming fixed on a single idea provides for more opportunities for inspiration. A news story and a pseudo-memoir helped Adamson's story to gel.
- Choose subjects you love. Your passion for the subject will come through in your writing, even if the topic is a difficult sell.
- Enjoy the process. Adamson, who is also a novelist, studied film in college but soon learned he was an "awful cinematographer." Reshooting a terrible scene is expensive, he says, but rewriting a terrible sentence is free.

Why I Write...

"I can't stop dreaming and exploring lives more complicated, adventurous, and dangerous than my own."

Edward Ricourt,
Screenwriter

*Now You See Me, Jessica Jones,
Wayward Pines*



"Writing for us is that itch you can't scratch until you get it on the page."

Chad & Carey Hayes,
Screenwriters

*The Conjuring, The Conjuring 2,
The Reaping*



"I write because a good story can make you set aside everything you think you know, and open yourself to something new."

Nicole Perlman,
Screenwriter

Guardians of the Galaxy



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6

Spec Spotlight:
Hayley Schore
and Roshan
Sethi on their
recent sale of
Exposure

by Valerie Kalfrin

Paths through development and medical school led Hayley Schore and Roshan Sethi to TV writing, where an executive producer thought they'd make a good team. The duo scored their first feature spec sale this year with *Exposure*. Here's their story.

Growing up in Venice Beach, Schore aspired to write short fiction and plays. She studied fine arts and creative writing at the University of California at Berkeley but became drawn to screenwriting, earning a Writers' Program certificate through UCLA. "Screenwriting sort of melded the visual with the verbal. Fiction writing with more a visual approach," she said.

She found work in development at companies such as King World Entertainment and Steven Bochco Productions, doing notes on scripts and looking for writers. Her first TV credit is as assistant to David Milch, co-creator with Bochco of *NYPD Blue*. She later worked as a script consultant.

Sethi, meanwhile, grew up in Calgary, Alberta. With his twin brother, he graduated from Harvard Medical School but had always been interested in writing. After a year of residency, Sethi was working in a radiation oncology program when he met writer/producer/director Amy Holden Jones, then creating a medical pilot. She enlisted Sethi as a consultant.

Although that show didn't work out, another of hers did: 2014's *Black Box*, a drama about a neuroscientist keeping her own mental illness a secret.

Jones again asked Sethi to be a medical consultant; Schore helped develop the show doing research and later writing. Jones, a veteran screenwriter (*Mystic Pizza*, *Indecent Proposal*, *The Getaway*), suggested that the two write together. Both were hired as writers for *Code Black*, the 2015 CBS medical drama now in its second season.

They're no longer with *Code Black* but have a feature in the works. Entertainment One acquired their spec script, *Exposure*, about Rosalind Franklin, a scientist whose work in crystallography was instrumental in the discovery of DNA's double-helix structure in 1953. Franklin died of cancer in 1958. Scientists James Watson, Francis Crick, and Maurice Watkins later shared the Nobel Prize for the discovery in 1962.



"I think every script you read helps you understand what works and what doesn't."

Sethi learned about Franklin during his undergraduate study at Yale University. His genetics class read Watson's book *The Double Helix: A Personal Account of the Discovery of the Structure of DNA*, which portrays Franklin as an antagonist. "Our professor was really interested in her true story," he said.

Brainstorming feature ideas with Schore, he suggested Franklin, whose navigation of a male environment appealed to his writing partner on another level. "I went from the feminist mecca of Berkeley to a male-centric world," she said.

Their biggest challenge was developing Franklin's many layers. "The truth is that she wasn't the most pleasant person in the world, and she wasn't an innocent hapless character. To do justice to her complexity was a fine line to walk," Sethi said.

"It wasn't that Rosalind was entirely unpleasant," Schore added. "She had all kinds of defenses she needed to survive. She had a hard time trusting people because she couldn't really trust them."

Although their tastes in TV differ—Schore likes *Mad Men* while Sethi enjoys *Girls*—they find that they complement each other.

"We've been lucky from the beginning in that we write in similar ways (even though) we both come from different backgrounds and experiences," Sethi said.

"Roshan always tells me I sound like a development exec," Schore said. "I think every script you read helps you understand what works and what doesn't."

Both of them collaborate on scripts but also will do individual passes on a script and then compare.

They advised other writers to find a mentor and to pick subjects they love. With *Exposure*, "this is something we thought would be a difficult sell, but it's something that we felt passionate about, and that

passion comes through," Schore said. The two write using Final Draft.

Valerie Kalfrin

Journalist / Screenwriter / Script Consultant

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Find her at valeriekalfrin.com



Screenwriting Tips

- Read, read, read. Every script you read helps you understand what works and what doesn't.
- Choose subjects you love. Your passion for the subject will come through in your writing, even if the topic is a difficult sell.
- As a writing team, of course you'll collaborate on scripts, but it's also fine to do individual passes and then compare each other's work. Your strengths likely will change from project to project.

From one screen to another...



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Big Break Finalist
Joseph Greenberg
Tells His Tale From
Draft to Sale
(Part I)

by Andrew Bloomenthal

NFL media specialist Joseph Greenberg has always been an aspiring screenwriter on the side. But given how Twentieth Century Fox just dropped six-figures on his spec script *Man Alive*, things are changing for the 39 year-old New Jersey native.

In this dystopian tale, aliens have taken over the minds of Earth's inhabitants—all except for the protagonist (aptly named "Man"), who is oddly immune to the alien assimilation tactics, and must live amongst them in a perpetual stalemate.

Greenberg submitted scripts to the Final Draft Big Break Screenplay Contest on several prior occasions, and his persistence paid off in 2014, when *Man Alive* won the Science-Fiction/Fantasy category, triggering a storm of requests from literary agents and managers wanting to read Greenberg's material. The script ultimately fell into the hands of Greenberg's now-manager, Scott Stoops. After Greenberg was whisked off to L.A. for a dizzying week of meet-and-greets with financiers and production companies, Fox spoke the loudest and purchased the property for Fargo creator Noah Hawley to helm as his feature film directorial debut.

In this first installment of a two-part interview, Greenberg spoke to Final Draft about creating the thrilling page-turner that couldn't be denied.

First off, where do you hail from?

I'm proudly raised in Bordentown—"Exit 7" in Jersey speak.

How did you come up with the idea for *Man Alive*?

It was actually a couple of different things that were swirling around in my head that coincidentally collided at just the right time. The set-up of this story is an updated take on *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. My wife and I were watching the 1978 remake starring Donald Sutherland, and there's a scene where pod-person Jeff Goldblum and pod-person Leonard Nimoy catch up with Sutherland and shoot him with a sedative—presumably so he'll fall asleep and they can absorb him. And my wife said, "I don't understand. They've been chasing him through the whole movie, so why don't they just kill him?" And I said, "They don't want to just kill him, they want to absorb him." And the next thing that popped into my head was, "What if there was someone in



"You have to just let your hands go, meaning you have to write everything down without over-analyzing it."

that universe who couldn't be absorbed, who just woke up the same every day?" The realization that he has to live in this world is where *Man Alive* starts, long after the alien invasion began.

"I was interested in telling a story that was inverted, where a guy comes home and is totally fine, but there's been some sort of first-order change at home, which is quite literally not the place he left anymore."

The character of *Man* has a robust knowledge of weaponry. Tell me about the inspiration for his character.

The character of *Man* is based on a friend of mine, who went to Iraq for 18 months, and was in combat in Fallujah and some really bad places. He was there for the surge and was awarded a couple of medals. But when he came home, he was able to pick up where he left off and he now works for the Secret Service. And I remember going to his coming-home party in Georgia, and asking him about what it was like over here, and he said he just wanted to get home to his family and be happy and healthy, and he did that. This guy could be the poster child for the military. "Hey, come serve in the military and then when you come home, great things will await you!" We've all seen films where the soldier comes back from war and can't let go of that battlefield and has trouble readjusting. *American Sniper* is a perfect example. But I was interested in telling a story that was inverted, where a guy comes home and is totally fine, but there's been some sort of first-order change at home, which is quite literally not the place he left anymore. So the character is loosely modeled after my friend's experiences, and my idea to put a character like that in an off-the-wall situation, to see how it evolved.

The epic battle scene, where *Man* mounts a military-style forced retreat defense against the aliens, seems like it will require a lot of choreography, explosions and other moving parts. Did you contemplate the logistical complexities and budgetary considerations of shooting this scene when you wrote it, or did you let your mind run wild?

To put it in a boxing term, you have to just let your hands go, meaning you have to write everything down without over-analyzing it. I never stopped and said to myself, "This is way too big and it's not going to sell." Maybe going forward, it would be different if I picked up an open writing assignment where

I knew what the budget would be. But if I'm just writing something on spec, out of my head, I don't consider those things at all, because you're ideally fleshing out a character that you're following through the story, and you want them to go wherever they need to go, and second guessing yourself would restrict your imagination. It's not really so much about budgetary concerns; it's more about content. I had to let go and follow the story how I saw it, because I didn't think anyone would respond to the violence in the script. I mean, in the first five minutes, *Man* walks into a food court with an axe and starts hacking people up, so I thought anyone reading this would think I should be committed. But I had a graduate school writing professor who would say, "You have to write like your parents are dead." Because most people self censor their voices when they're writing something that's extreme or visceral, because they think, "What will mom and dad say when they read this?" That's the voice I had to let go of, to let my creative voice come out.

How did the Final Draft Big Break Screenwriting Contest come onto your radar screen?

I've always used Final Draft software, going back a few years, now. And I don't live in California; I live in Southern New Jersey, and even though I can get to New York, it's not really a commutable distance, so I'm not in a film town and I'm not in an industry sphere, so it was just a matter of, "I want to be a writer/director, how do you do that?" From the director point-of-view, you need to keep making short films and try to get them noticed in short film festivals, which I've done, but there are also writing competitions, and every year I wanted to make a submission to the top contests, so I constantly did searches for, "What are the top ten screenwriting contests," and Big Break was always on that list. I entered for two or three consecutive years, and submitted *Man Alive* to the 2014 competition, and then I kept getting alerts that it was moving up—past the quarter-final round, past the semi-final round, then the finals, and then [Final Draft vice president]

Shelly Mellott actually called me to tell me that I had won the Sci-Fi category, which they refer to as a "finalist," because the grand prize winner is the "Winner," but I prefer to say "Sci-fi Winner." Once it won, I got a lot of emails from people at management companies, saying: "Hey, could I hop on the phone to talk to you?"

So you were actively pursued?

Oh yeah. I didn't query anybody...

Career journalist **Andrew Bloomenthal** has covered everything from high finance to the film trade. He is the award-winning filmmaker of the noir thriller *Sordid Things*. He lives in Los Angeles.

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Big Break Finalist
Joseph Greenberg
Tells His Tale From
Draft to Sale
(Part II)

by Andrew Bloomenthal

In Part I of this interview series, New Jersey screenwriter Joseph Greenberg spoke to Final Draft about craft and writing his spec script, *Man Alive*, which sold to 20th Century Fox for an impressive six figures. In this second installment of his interview, Greenberg describes the process of acquiring literary representation and greenlighting the sale of his script.

After *Man Alive* won the Science-Fiction/Fantasy category of the 2014 Final Draft Big Break Screenplay Contest, you were actively pursued by management companies, correct?

Oh yeah. I did not query anybody. Basically, it was a lot of management company assistants who were trying to make a name for themselves, by monitoring screenwriting contests to see if they could read the winning scripts. I wound up hooking up with Aengus McLoone. I worked with him rewriting two drafts, and he was insightful and had great notes, but he decided to take a break from the industry, so he said, "I would really like to show this to my very good friend Scott Stoops." Scott liked it, and kicked it up to his bosses, Jake Wagner and Jake Weiner, who called me less than a week after I sent it, and I wound up signing with them as management. We did another polish, then they started showing the script around, and a few days later, I was contacted by Bryan Besser and Parker Davis at Verve [Talent and Literary Agency], who I Skyped with for over an hour and I loved what they had to say, so I signed with them as well. So with "the team" officially assembled, they showed the script to 46 producers and financiers, and got great responses from a lot of people who wanted to talk to me—either because they were interested in the script, or maybe the script wasn't for them but they liked the writing style and wanted to meet me, so I came out to L.A. and did 25 meetings in five days.

Describe the difference between your interaction with your managers, versus that of your agents.

I'd say my conversation was more relaxed with the management guys, who had an in-depth take on my script, and the notes they gave me weren't, "This doesn't work and that doesn't work," it was more like, "I see what you're trying to do here, and you might bring it out a little better if you did X, Y & Z." They even got the more nuanced stuff. And I'd say



"I've learned things about the pre-development phase of getting movies made, that I had no clue about before."

I was generally a bit more nervous with the agent, because he's the rock star who figures out a plan and executes the deal. It's a different dynamic.

What were your personal thoughts on signing on with your representation?

My personal thoughts were that I really didn't want to f*** this up. In school, nobody tells you how to secure representation and nobody tells you what to look for with your rep. I knew agents and managers got ten percent and that lawyers got five percent, but beyond that, I didn't know what questions to ask. So in the past three weeks, I've learned things about the pre-development phase of getting movies made, that I had no clue about before.

How involved were you in negotiating a dollar figure for the sale of your script?

Well, before I even went out to California, a company made an offer for an option, but [my representation] wouldn't give them an answer until after I flew out for my meetings. Once I got there, I first met with Scott Stoops, and then together we went over to see Bryan and Parker at Verve, and they walked me through the week. "Here's your schedule, which may change, but we'll let you know right away if it does." They explained that meetings with people interested in me as a writer would be more laid back and conversational, versus meeting with financiers interested in the script, which would be more like, "Here's our plan for getting the money and getting this film made." I ended up having a lot of good meetings. There was really only one bad meeting, but I really enjoyed meeting with everyone out there, because they were passionate about the script, which was great.

After I got home, the agents followed up with everybody, and there was one company I absolutely loved, who made an offer and the agents were putting together our counter-offer, when Fox came in and really picked up on it, because [Fargo creator]

Noah Hawley was interested in directing it. My agents said, "We didn't think this was a studio movie, but Noah has a great deal with Fox who he's working with on *Fargo*," so I was told to stay by the phone, because Noah would want to talk to me at some point during the day. When he called, we talked for more than a half hour, and I really liked his take on the script, so I called my agent back and said, "I love him," and he said, "Okay. Let me hop off the phone and get the deal done." And he did. It was a happy day.

"The next thing I know, I had to put my phone down and leave the room because it was constantly buzzing."

When it comes to all parties agreeing on the purchase price, do your agents say, "This is the proposed figure, you need to literally tell us 'yes,'" or do you have to confirm your approval in an email?

It was just verbal, and then the paper work came in the next day. They said a deal like this is like lightning

striking, where a hot, young director who has a major deal with a studio, likes the spec script and the studio picks it up. That was how I broke into the business, which doesn't happen any more. So you have to trust that your agents are negotiating on your behalf, and I definitely did, because they did such a good job keeping me informed. I remember asking, "Do you need me to do anything?" And they're like, "No, don't do a thing."

In the final phone call, a team of six people was on the phone, and they said, "This is what the offer started at, this is the final offer, this is how we arrived there, and as your representation, we would council you to accept this, but in the end, it's up to you." I said, "yes," and they said, "Okay, I'm going to hop off the phone and let Fox know." At that point, it's basically a handshake agreement, and then the agent is responsible for making sure everybody gets paid. The lawyer gets five percent, which was another thing that completely blew me away, because I didn't even know I had a lawyer. (Laughs) "Hi Joe, this is Allison, I'm your attorney."

So as a writer, give me two adjectives to describe the feeling you had when you officially agreed to the sale.

Oh Jesus...I should be able to do this, because screenwriting is all about concision. Well, when they first called to tell me that Fox was interested, which was a coup in itself, I was feeding my two-year old macaroni and cheese, and I'm thinking, "I've got to put down this mac and cheese and get busy doing what they need me to do," but they're like, "Relax, just finish what you're doing," so I hung up the phone and finish feeding my daughter the mac and cheese, and then I suddenly got this nervous feeling of elation. It was definitely surreal. But it really sunk in when the press release went out the next day and it showed up on the IMDb news page and one of my friends saw it and posted it on my Facebook wall. The next thing I know, I had to put my phone down and leave the room because it was

constantly buzzing, and when I picked it up, I had like 110 notifications from Facebook, 10 missed calls, and eight messages. It was just wild. That's when the magnitude of this really started to sink in--this realization that I might be able to just write as a screenwriter, which is something I've been working for since I got out of undergraduate school, which is damn near 20 years ago.

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Screenwriting Tips

- To borrow a boxing term, let your hands go when you write. Just write everything down without overanalyzing it or thinking, "This will never work."
- Another way to quiet that inner critic? Write as if your parents (or loved ones) won't see it. Many writers worry about what their parents might think if they touch upon extreme or visceral material, but the story should go where it needs to go.
- Enter the top screenwriting contests. You'll not only hone your skills, but your work will get noticed, especially if you don't live in an industry town.

9

Spec Spotlight:
BenDavid Grabinski
Sells *Bravado*
to Paramount

by Shanee Edwards

With the sale of his spec script, *Bravado*, screenwriter BenDavid Grabinski has become an overnight success...after 10 years. Here's his story.

Growing up in the Midwest, Grabinski knew he wanted to be a film director at 10-years old. "I was really obsessed with movies, so I had this long-term plan that when I turned 18, I would just move to L.A. and become a director," he said. But his parents had other plans for their son that included a college degree. Reluctantly, Grabinski agreed to study journalism at Iowa State. He liked the idea of journalism because he could write movie reviews and didn't have to take any math classes. One summer, while Grabinski was working at Wendy's, donating plasma and reading comic books, he decided he would just try writing a script for the heck of it. His buddies told him the script was good and he believed them, so he just kept writing.

After college, he moved to L.A. and passed one of his screenplays, *Imaginary Barry*, to his actor-roommate, who in turn showed it to a few people. Soon, the screenplay was optioned and Grabinski got a call from an agent at William Morris Endeavor who wanted to set up a meeting. The agent was keen on packaging his script with one of the actors represented by the agency and gave Grabinski a big speech about how making his film with this particular actor was going to be the best thing he could do for his career. Ironically, the actor passed on the script, but Grabinski is still with the agent from that meeting. It's been 10 years.

Grabinski is thrilled to report that his latest spec script, *Bravado*, recently sold to Paramount. Producer Andrew Lazar (*American Sniper*), helped develop the script and is producing. Though wanting to keep the main plot points under wraps, Grabinski did say that *Bravado* is about a war veteran who comes back to be a cop and, "it spirals out from there." The story also deals with gun issues related to the militarization of the police.

A huge fan of *The Fast and the Furious* movies, Grabinski is hoping to create a franchise that is tonally similar and also explores, "machismo and the family dynamic in the context of a heightened modern adventure movie. I like movies where stuff explodes, people destroy each other, there are car chases and twists and turns." Though it sounds like a box office smash, Grabinski doesn't write specifically for the



"His advice to young writers is not to try to emulate someone else's career path."

marketplace. “You don’t know what the trends are going to be, you don’t know what the marketplace is going to be tomorrow, you just have to work really hard, write a lot, take criticism and be patient.”

“I like movies where stuff explodes, people destroy each other, there are car chases and twists and turns.”

Grabinski’s advice to young writers is not to try to emulate someone else’s career path. “Overnight success does happen, but it’s usually a manufactured narrative for someone’s PR. Some things take longer and some things take shorter and I think my main advice is, you have no control over anything except your own work. I’ve been working as a screenwriter for 10 years and I would have liked to have more movies made by this point, but at the same time, my writing has really improved and I understand the business a lot more. I feel a lot more confident in my writing and in my ability. I think that it’s all about staying positive.”

Most importantly, Grabinski says to never stop writing specs. “It’s very easy to forget that, but just keep writing specs as long as you have ideas.”

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Bravado was written on Final Draft.

Shanee Edwards graduated from UCLA Film School with an MFA in Screenwriting and is currently the film critic for SheKnows.com. She recently won the Next MacGyver television writing competition to create a TV show about a female engineer. Her pilot, *Ada and the Machine*, is currently in development with America Ferrera’s Take Fountain Productions.

You can follow her on Twitter: @ShaneeEdwards.



Screenwriting Tips

- Don’t write specifically for the marketplace. You can’t know what the trends will be or what the marketplace will want in the future. So pursue what you like, and be patient.
- Likewise, don’t try to emulate someone else’s career path. In this industry, you have no control over anything except your own work. You can’t beat yourself up if you’re not an “overnight success” like someone who wrote that latest buzzed-about smash.
- Take criticism well, and don’t get discouraged. As you write more, you’ll become more confident in your abilities and understand the business better, which only helps over the long run.

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Hammerspace
spec script nails
down live-action
and animation in
an emotionally
powerful story

by Shanee Edwards

For writer Mike Van Waes, it all seems surreal. After putting his nose to the grindstone for over a decade, he's finally made his first spec sale. His family-friendly adventure screenplay *Hammerspace* reportedly earned him somewhere in the mid-six figures from Warner Bros. Final Draft sits down with him to find out more.

Van Waes' seemingly calm voice belies the excitement boiling underneath. He's suddenly in high demand and admits feeling like he's caught up in a whirlwind. "Going from zero to sixty when you've been working for something for thirteen years, and then, it suddenly happens - I'm shocked, but in the best of ways. There's meetings and calls, a lot happens all at once. Suddenly you're doing the thing you always wanted to be doing. It takes a minute to adjust," says Van Waes.

Because he's been a script reader for various studios for the last decade, Van Waes knows all too well that the Hollywood system has recently been bombarded with superhero films, remakes and sequels, leaving little room for spec sales. Despite this fact, he doesn't begrudge Hollywood for relying on proven properties. He thinks there's room for everything including reboots, remakes and sequels because "a good story is a good story and is always worth retelling. But as a creative person, an audience member, a writer and a reader, I think it's crucial to also be supporting original content."

He describes his original script *Hammerspace* as "a story about Mason, a terminally ill teenager who discovers a key to an alternate dimension, one that is purely animated."

Finding the key to *Hammerspace* gives Mason cartoon-like powers and access to things we've only seen in cartoons. "He makes a friend from the other side and the two have to heal his broken family and things build up to a bigger, potentially disastrous combination of the two dimensions they have to work together to stop."

The term "hammerspace" refers to the fan-born, classic act of a cartoon character suddenly taking an object, like a hammer, from behind their back or pulling it out of thin air. The term is commonly used by animation and comic book insiders, but has never been explored as a subject for a film.



"It takes a lot of work and a lot of commitment, and I think any creative person goes through cycles of insecurities and doubts, but I never wanted to quit."

After studying both film and animation at NYU, Van Waes says, “*Hammerspace* is this really cool idea and I thought, What if someone could use it in real life? Someone could just reach into their pocket and pull out anything they could think of. So that’s the inspiration, because I’ve always wanted to create a project that was a combination of live action and animation.”

“See as many films as you can, but read as much as you can. More specifically, read the bad scripts, because the bad scripts trigger your critical thinking in a way that the good scripts don’t.”

But Van Waes admits his story is more than just a fun fantasy. “Mason sees his own mortality and has seen his life fall apart, due to no fault of his own. He’s had to see his family suffer the ripple effects of that as well. He has no control over what’s happening in his life, and suddenly, he’s given access to this other universe that gives him power over things he never thought possible.”

Like all good stories, this one is personal to Van Waes. “I know from experience what it’s like to have illness and other health factors destabilize your life and the people around you. So that was kind of my ‘in’ to this project. The fantasy of having control over things you never had before.”

Because Van Waes has a background as a script reader, we want to know what advice he has for other writers. “I’ve found that it seems like there’s no lack of big ideas or set pieces, fun, new special effects and worlds we’ve never seen before. But nine times out of ten, my development notes will focus on building up the character, making sure they have proper emotional arcs and that they’re relatable, that we feel for them and that the emotions come out organically. So if there’s an explosion, we care about what effect that has - it’s not just a spectacle.”

His number one piece of advice? “See as many films as you can, but read as much as you can. More specifically, read the bad scripts, because the bad scripts trigger your critical thinking in a way that the good scripts don’t. You have to read good scripts to understand what material is capable of doing, but when I read a great script, it’s always hard to figure out what the writer did to get there. When you read bad scripts, you’re constantly critiquing them and you’re wondering, Why did they make this choice, because I would have done this.”

Though pursuing a career as a screenwriter is a long rollercoaster ride, Van Waes says giving up was never an option. “It takes a lot of work and a

lot of commitment, and I think any creative person goes through cycles of insecurities and doubts, but I never wanted to quit.” His tenacity has paid off.

.....
Hammerspace was written on Final Draft.



Screenwriting Tips

- Build characters before set pieces. A script is more rewarding when we care about the emotional fallout of an explosion beyond just pure spectacle. Make your audience feel for the characters through proper emotional arcs.
- See as many films as you can—and read as many scripts as you can, good and bad. The bad ones trigger your critical thinking in a way that the good ones don't. With a good script, it can be tough to figure out what the writer did to tell that story. With a bad script, the choices you question are more visible.
- Hang in there. Van Waes made his first spec sale after working as a script reader and writing and submitting scripts for thirteen years.

Shanee Edwards graduated from UCLA Film School with an MFA in Screenwriting and is currently the film critic for SheKnows.com. She recently won the Next MacGyver television writing competition to create a TV show about a female engineer. Her pilot, *Ada and the Machine*, is currently in development with America Ferrera's Take Fountain Productions.

You can follow her on Twitter: @ShaneeEdwards.

11

Spec Spotlight:
Nick Yarborough
on *Letters From*
Rosemary Kennedy

by Roe Moore

Nick Yarborough is making a splash in the Hollywood scene with his upcoming dark biopics *Letters from Rosemary Kennedy* and *The Secret Life of Dr. James Miranda Barry*. A rare native to California, he took time to speak with Final Draft about his experience.

RM: How did you end up in Hollywood?

I'm one of those weird ones that was actually born and raised here in LA. I grew up in Hermosa Beach and am now in Santa Monica. It's just kind of lucky that Hollywood happens to be located where I also grew up – I would've moved to Ohio or wherever if that's where the film capital of the world was – but luckily it's always been right here in my backyard.

RM: The decision to become a screenwriter happened early on in your life. What inspired you to go that direction?

Movies were always my number one obsession as a kid. And while I felt like there were a lot of limitations as a teenager for trying to learn directing or acting or something, I realized that as long as I had a pen and paper I could always write. Even if your stuff is terrible, the basically free commodity of a pen and paper are always available to self-generate material, and I think this is a big part of why I gravitated toward it. Writing does not put you at the mercy of anybody but yourself – compared to say a director's need for a script or an actor's need to be involved with a production in order to really exercise craft – but both professional and amateur screenwriters arrive at the blank page with the same resources of their effort, discipline, and imagination.

In terms of influences that really solidified the decision for me: Quentin Tarantino's early movies were definitely the first time I remember noticing the work of original screenwriting on display in such an unignorable way. You can't really discuss *Pulp Fiction* without talking about how the screenplay choices are the most distinguishable aspect. Later on, I came across the screenplays of S. Craig Zahler and his work was an equally important influence in terms of recognizing the type of prose and tone that I found most influential on the actual page.



“I realized that as long as I had a pen and paper I could always write.”

RM: What draws you to write darker material?

This is sort of a complicated question for me. I do really enjoy things that are on the extreme side of things – I’m a big horror buff in fiction and metalhead when it comes to music – but I am never intentionally trying to make something dark for the sake of being dark. To me, if I’m trying to put the audience through an extreme situation – like a lobotomy in Rosemary’s case or the much more intense climactic scene of my upcoming script – I want the experience to be as intense as possible if that is what the situation calls for and art is not the place to hold back. Still, I am probably drawn to “darker” material because of this. I like art that pushes and challenges the audience’s boundaries.

RM: What was the process of getting literary representation like for you?

After finishing *Rosemary* around March of 2015, I submitted it to a couple of contests (Nicholl, Page, etc.) It did well and I got some bites off those, but nothing really ended up materializing that felt right. I then submitted it to the Black List website where it received some really positive reviews and was selected as a “Feature Script” in November of 2015. I had a couple of people reach out to me in the aftermath of that and went with the fantastic guys who ended up being my managers: Allard Cantor and Jarrod Murray at Epicenter – I signed with them on my birthday in January of ‘16. They sent it out to a few production companies – including a producer named Greg Lessans at Weed Road. He is a saint of a man who is really supportive of me. He then sent it to WME, and I signed with my awesome agents at WME in I believe March of ‘16, after which the script’s attachments came a few weeks later. In other words, a lot of waiting and patience for a few months (not to mention the years of writing and stack of scripts before that) followed by a real whirlwind of a situation.

RM: I’m sure it felt like it happened overnight.

Definitely. The dominoes all kind of fell into place in a very surreal way, though again, this was after the script had actually been written a few months ago and I had spent years without much luck. But yes, those weeks when everything came together were very, very exciting and made everything worth it.

RM: How has your involvement been since the script has continued to move toward production?

Sam Gold is now attached to direct; he won the Tony last year for the musical *Fun Home*. I went back and forth with him on notes and a re-write, which has been ongoing.

RM: You mentioned you worked as an assistant?

Yup, my first job out of college was as an assistant to a producer. I kind of consider this my grad school – I got to really learn about development, production, and turn out a lot of scripts in my free time. After I had made a little bit of money from this, I decided to quit and write everyday until the money ran out (much to the thrill of my parents). I wrote *Rosemary* and a couple of other scripts during this time. The money then ran out, and I had to get another job as an assistant until *Rosemary* was discovered.

RM: How did your time working as an assistant to a literary manager impact your writing?

The single good thing about working as an assistant was that it was literally my job to read a wide variety of scripts and then give my thoughts through coverage (this is when you write a summary and your thoughts about the script). I was constantly exposed to different styles of screenwriting and realized early on which were the types that I responded to and found most effective. This was extremely important in terms of identifying and articulating in a very analytical why a script worked

or didn't – How did the script manage to evoke these emotions? What techniques did the writer use? How did this writer's style impact the storytelling? – all these kind of questions. And with these answers in mind, I could then apply them to my own stuff. Writing criticism is one of the best exercises for learning craft – I still do so after a book or movie makes a big impact on me to try and understand how it managed to evoke such a reaction.

RM: Another project of yours, *The Secret Life of Dr. James Miranda Barry*, is also in the works.

Yes, very excited about that. I think it is another opportunity to create a unique biopic with an unusual character at the forefront and a story that is very relevant, though it is also very different than my previous stuff and playing to different emotions than anything I have done previously...which is also why I'm excited about it.

RM: You seem to have a heavy hand in biopics, are there other genres you would like to branch out?

Absolutely. There are so, so many other genres I hope to tackle. The irony is that I was actually writing a lot of tough guy stuff before *Rosemary* – mostly in crime, war, and horror. But after coming across her story and being so haunted by it, thought this might be an opportunity to hijack the biopic umbrella to try and tell her story through other subgenres – as a coming-of age-story, a dread-filled horror movie, and a family melodrama – which were all subgenres that I loved and wanted to try.

I'm trying to apply this same overall approach and have a lot of ambitions with trying to find new angles to the genre in my upcoming biopics, but yes, very much hoping to branch out into other genres that I've always wanted to pursue after that very soon.

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Nick is currently represented by WME and Epicenter.

Roe Moore

Script Supervisor / Screenwriter

Originally from Aurora, CO, Roe Moore is a script supervisor, screenwriter, and emerging director based in Los Angeles, CA. She has worked on commercials, film, and television shows. Her favorite number is 2 and she loves dachshunds.

More can be found on her website:

www.RoeMoore.com



Screenwriting Tips

- You always have the ability and the tools to generate new material. Both professional and amateur screenwriters arrive at a blank page with the same resources of effort, discipline, and imagination.
- Write criticism, even if it's not published, to articulate in an analytical way why a story works or doesn't. Yarborough writes reviews of books or films he likes and doesn't like as an exercise to understand why they've provoked such reactions and pinpoint the techniques the writers used.
- Make sure that your choices serve the story. Yarborough likes art that pushes an audience's boundaries, but he doesn't intentionally try to write something dark just for the sake of it. He'll make a situation intense if that's what the situation calls for.

12

Spec Spotlight:
Sam Franco &
Evan Kilgore on
*Keeper Of
The Diary*

by Asmara Bhattacharya

Most people know of Anne Frank, the Jewish teenager who chronicled her two years hiding in an attic during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands in World War II. The Frank family was subsequently discovered and sent to concentration camps, where millions of people were enslaved and slaughtered. Anne herself perished in the Bergen-Belsen camp at the young age of sixteen.

The Diary of Anne Frank, the journal Anne wrote while in hiding, is indisputably one of the most significant and widely read books in the world, published in over sixty languages. Yet 70 years ago, just after the end of the war, her father Otto could not find a publisher willing to present Anne's historic document to the world. *Keeper of the Diary*, the spec script writers Sam Franco and Evan Kilgore recently sold to Fox Searchlight, recounts Otto Frank's struggle to publish his daughter's diary.

One almost incidental line in a diary edition's introduction caught Sam's eye: "Otto struggled to get the book published." Sam recalls "literally circling that. I still have a copy of it."

Evan observes, "You always hear about the diary, and you hear about the circumstances in the attic. But you never hear about how did the diary come to be in our hands today?"

They were fascinated by the idea that a book so many people connect to emotionally could face an uphill battle to be published, just as so many less notable manuscripts do. "It's always interesting to hear the path that something as iconic as *Diary of Anne Frank* took," Evan continues, "that that would take the exact same process of fifty people rejecting it."

Inconceivable though it may seem now, publishers at the time overlooked the diary's potential cultural impact because they feared it was not commercial enough. Despite the extraordinary power of Anne's writings and observations, "they were just looking at the bottom line," Evan marvels.

Publishers also worried that, so soon after the war, readers would shy away from such a heart-rending story. Sam, whose wife lost family in the Holocaust, does not take the horrors of this war lightly. But "we made a conscious decision to not go into the concentration camps or really



*"Be curious
about things
and enthusiastic
about what
you're doing."*

even show Anne herself," he explains. "We didn't want to take away from what this story was about."

Evan elaborates, "What really drew me close to her story, and also to the story behind the diary, is that this is a fresh perspective that takes us away from the atrocities and really helps us examine it from a perspective of hope."

"Don't let the fear of someone stealing your idea prevent you from reaching out in the first place."

The birth of Evan and Sam's partnership is a tale of breaking the rules. After Sam submitted a script to an agency and heard nothing but crickets, he convinced an assistant to forward him the coverage, "which, as you know, is not something that's usually done," Sam laughs. The notes were great and, surprisingly, had Evan's name on them. So Sam called the story department and spoke to him. "And we lived happily ever after," intones Sam. "I guess it's a lesson to never take no for an answer."

The pair have reams of ideas, and when an idea sparks to both of them, they go after it. They're obsessive about research and meticulous about detail, and they take notes by hand. According to Sam, "There's a lot of divide and conquer. We very often find different things and bring different things to the table, in terms of whether it's a story idea or a character element."

They're drawn to history, politics, espionage, thrillers. Projects in development include *Mayday 109*, about a young JFK saving his crew when their ship is destroyed, and *Undefeated: The Rocky Marciano Story*, about the heavyweight boxing champion. They're also working on a dark fictional thriller. "It doesn't have to be a true story, but it has to feel real to both of us," says Evan.

Sam's background includes film marketing and producing. His experiences drive him to analyze things like film successes and failures and potential audience appeal when considering projects. "That's the purpose of these movies, to inform and educate and inspire and get people to see it."

Evan started writing in kindergarten, completing his first novel in middle school, and got his first book publishing deal in college. While he would never forego either prose or scripts, right now he's in screenwriting mode. "That's where my head is, and that's where all my thoughts will be dedicated. And it is hard to switch back in the middle." He credits Sam's eye toward production, connections, and marketing with elevating them to a different level. "It's easy to just get shut in a fictional world and not think of all those things."

Keeper of the Diary leapfrogged the usual protracted marketing process, ending up in a bidding war that lasted barely thirty-six hours. Before the team knew it, an offer came in with a 60-minute clock on it, then another with a 30-minute clock. When the deal closed, "there were tears," Sam admits. "It was really emotional to kind of get that validation."

“We one hundred percent have our team to thank,” Evan jumps in, rattling off an army of reps: Jeff Portnoy, Mia Chang, David Boxerbaum, Valarie Phillips, Eric Feig, Matthew Jacobs. “They knocked it out of the park on this.”

Sam struggles to balance work with two small children at home. “Headphones are great,” he laughs. Oddly, he and Evan work on opposite schedules. Sam stays up till all hours to write while the kids are asleep, and Evan wakes up at four-thirty every morning to get his writing in.

“We’re both striving for the same thing,” Evan asserts, “which is carving out a little time for ourselves when no one else in the world can get to you.”

The duo recommends that writers be entrepreneurial. Sam advises, “When you have the opportunity to meet people that can potentially assist you, you don’t have to hold on to things so tightly.” In other words, don’t let the fear of someone stealing your idea prevent you from reaching out in the first place.

“Don’t think about being a writer,” Evan emphasizes. “Actually just sit down and write every single day, whether you’re hating it right now, whether it’s working or not.” Also, don’t give yourself a time limit. “You’ve got to be dedicated enough to say, ‘I don’t care how long it takes. This is in my blood and I can’t help doing it every single day of my life.’”

“Have a passion for things. Be curious about things and enthusiastic about what you’re doing. If you can put those things together, you’ll succeed.”

Asmara Bhattacharya

Screenwriter / Playwright / Script Reader

Asmara Bhattacharya is a produced screenwriter/playwright, script reader, and festival screener, with multiple placements at Final Draft, Nicholl, Austin Film Festival, and other competitions. A trusted sounding board and consultant for industry professionals, dedicated fans also caught her in *Independence Day: Resurgence* and NBC’s *The Night Shift* – for one glorious half-second each.

More can be found on her website:

www.dickflicks.net

or follow her on Twitter: @hotpinkstreak



Screenwriting Tips

- Be entrepreneurial. If you have an opportunity to meet people who can assist you, don’t let the fear of someone stealing your idea prevent you from reaching out for a connection.
- Don’t think about being a writer to the point that you give yourself a time limit to break in or be discovered. Just sit down and write every day, even on days when you hate it. Your work will improve through that dedication, and your curiosity and enthusiasm will propel you forward.
- It can be a struggle to carve out writing time, especially when juggling family needs. Try headphones, or write before your kids awaken or after they go to sleep—anything to carve out time for yourself.

13

Spec Spotlight:
Pete Barry
discusses
Marian

by Roe Moore

From playwrighting to the big screen, Pete Barry has been involved in creating stories and telling them in various mediums for a long time. With his recent script, he takes a twist on the character Marian from the original Robin Hood. The project has Margot Robbie attached to play Marian and is quickly moving along in the process. Pete shares his experience as well as how he came to being the hot up-and-coming screenwriter.

Q: How did you become part of the film industry as a screenwriter?

Pete: The first project I worked on was a short film that was a modernized version of Edgar Allen Poe stories. Strangely both projects started in the same place. It was a community online called MoviePoet – which is now sadly defunct – but I got hooked on it. It was a place where people used to come and write a lot of short scripts. There was a contest every month and I got hooked up with a filmmaker there. *Marian* also sort of came out of that community where there was a feature contest at one point. I started working on it back then.

Q: What got you started as a writer?

Pete: I think when I was about five years old and wrote my first comic strip – I wish I still had that, but I think it's been lost to the ravages of time – it was always something that I was doing. When I was about eight, the local paper published one of little short stories and I think it was about a little boy who hits a baseball into a neighboring house. So, I was always writing. I was always doing a myriad of things like as a kid, my brothers and I would make little movies and whatnot. I got into theater. Did I ever sit down and say, "Hey, I wanna be a writer when I grow up?" I don't think that ever occurred to me until...maybe two weeks ago – no. (LAUGHS). I'm not sure there was a point where I said, "Yes, I think I'm gonna be a writer. I think it was something I was doing along with other creative things like acting and playing music and songwriting.

Q: Well, writing is leading the way for you creatively. Is it something that you hope to continue pursuing or do you anticipate leaning into your other creative outlets as well?



"I do like twists on already established stuff. That is something that I've always found interesting."

Pete: My general philosophy is see where life takes me; although, right now, life is sort of pulling me in a very strong direction. I think if I can make a career out of this – which hopefully this is the first step towards – that would be great. I don't see myself abandoning smaller projects. I'm also a published playwright; I'm not gonna stop writing plays. I'll probably still write songs or whatever. I'll probably keep writing various things. A lot of playwrights do end up in television or film because they...money among other things. But no, I mean – a lot of artists like to play with different mediums so if you have those things, it's hard to give one up. That being said, you know, when something hits like this, then you want to pursue that avenue and that's where career comes in and the other things start taking a backseat maybe for a little while.

Q: How have the other creative outlets impacted or influenced your writing?

Pete: I went to school for theater and at the time the school I was doing it was not – that was the only track you could do. You could do the tech track. Basically, if you were a theater major, you were and an actor. I wrote short stories and wrote fiction and I said, "I'll take a hand in a play because then I can act in the thing that I wrote." Essentially, I write with a partner sometimes. We had a couple plays that went up in New York in the National Fringe Festival and got a little bit of a buzz. I think he and I had the opposite of things: I was always writing and thought I can always be the person on the stage, that way my writing will be done right; he was an actor who eventually said, "I need a part for myself, so I'll just write it and then I'll do it." I think these different paths lead you to writing in different ways. In my case, I think the writing was always there.

Q: What are some highlights from your career so far?

Pete: Like I said, I'm a trained actor. The last most exciting thing that happened to me was I got one

of my short plays accepted into the Samuel French Off-Off Broadway Short Festival a couple years back and I got to act in my own play. And the best thing was although it was an Off-Off Broadway festival, but the house they had with Playwrights Horizons, the play extended its run. So, they bumped us up to an Off-Broadway theater. So technically, I played an Off-Broadway house in my own one-man play. And it was the most amazing thing until Margot Robbie walked into my life.

Q: What makes a success in your opinion?

Pete: I do feel extremely lucky. There's all kinds of things that go into your success I think. And you cannot discount the luck part of it. But you also can't discount the work part of it. I've been writing basically for my whole life. I don't have quite the output as some writers, but I do write quite a bit and I've worked at it. I have quite a volume. I think every writer works differently and at their own pace and at their own learning speed. But it really helps to generate mounds and mounds of garbage to get to the gems that you'll eventually create once you take an honest look at yourself and evaluate it. And then you need the luck that somebody wants to do that thing that you're doing. With *Marian*, I got very fortunate that many people were looking for something like that at that time. I'm super happy that this was a script that got accepted. It's one of the multitudes of things that I've written in my life. I'm very proud of the script.

Q: What was the inspiration for *Marian*?

Pete: Growing up, I loved Disney's animated *Robin Hood* with the foxes. My daughter was about four years old, and I was like, "Oh, you gotta watch this thing." And she saw it, she loved it. And I was like, "Wonderful. I've passed it on to my daughter." And she says, "Daddy, can we go outside and play Robin Hood?" "Absolutely." We went out to play Robin Hood. She's like, "You'll be Robin Hood. And I'll be Maid Marian." And I said, "Wonderful. What

are we doing?" She says, "You – here's a stick, you fight the bad guys." I said, "Great. And what will you do?" She says, "I'll watch. I'll watch you fight the bad guys." And I asked her don't you want to fight the bad guys too? She said, "In the movie, Maid Marian just watches." I thought maybe we should do something about that. So, I credit it to my daughter. When I started *Marian*, I did some actual research and in the original ballad of *Robin Hood*, there are many of them and it's a lot of oral history so they all contradict each other. There are various forms of it. But here's the funny thing: in one of the earliest ballads, Marian shows up as a page boy and whoops Robin's ass. She wasn't just a demure fox. She was actually the only person who could beat Robin Hood. So, I thought clearly that's the Marian I want to write about.

Q: What is it about writing new twists on old stories that interests you?

Pete: I do like twists on already established stuff. That is something that I've always found interesting. I think I have a Sherlock Holmes somewhere. I'm probably not alone, but when you're steeped in pop culture and you're steeped in literature, there's something about you want to make up your own stories with these characters. And so, saying, taking a twist on something that exists does call for me. The last play we put up in the New York Fringe Festival was exactly that. We did a twist on Antony and Cleopatra which, at the time we wrote it, it was 2011 in the middle of the Egyptian revolution, so we combined Cleopatra with the Arab Spring. Like I said, it is something that calls to me; however, having said that, I do also enjoy making things up off the cloth. When you do these pieces which are twists or interpretations or an already existing story, one of the things you get is a lot of procrastination. You could go research forever and just say, "Okay, I don't need to write. I'm reading twelve books on my nightstand. I gotta get through these books before I put anything on paper." Are you going and doing solid research or are you surfing and Googling like what

kind of bow and arrow do they use in the twelfth century? So, that can be a thing to watch out for. Make sure you're not drowning in research.

Q: Speaking of which, how much did you research for *Marian*?

Pete: I did do a lot of research for writing *Marian*. *Marian* was a very quick write. Once I had the knowledge in my head, it was like, boom. It just came out. In a sense, research can help you but you gotta watch out that you're not just reading and ignoring writing.

Q: What was the process to getting representation?

Pete: So, once again, I chop this up to luck. It was a solid decision that led to a cascade of events. Essentially, I put the script into a few contests. I only submitted it to the Nicholl's Fellowship and they didn't want it. Then, I submitted it to the Tracking Board Launchpad. If my story is any indication of what they can do, I would recommend it to every person. It was a great experience. *Marian* made the first-round cut. Almost immediately, Chris Contreras (who runs the contest) got in touch with me. Once you make that cut, then you are part of their family and they're gonna try to get your stuff out to the people who need to see it. He put me in touch with the producer Ron who knew David Boxerbaum at Paradigm. It was basically once I made that cut, it went from Chris to Ron to David to Margot – it was an amazingly fast chain reaction. Once it got noticed by the right people, that's basically what happened.

Q: That's extraordinary!

Pete: Yeah. And I think if a writer were wondering how does that happen, again, this just happened to me. I'm not an industry insider by any stretch of the imagination. But I think it genuinely is a combination of I worked really hard on the script and it really sings. So, it was the culmination of all the years of work and attention to the script to make it as iconic.

And it was the fortune of the right person saw it and loved it, and gave it to the hands of the right people for it. And I will say that *Marian*, it is right for this time. Right now, with *Wonder Woman* coming out in the summer and we got *Rey* [from *Star Wars*] up on the screen. Women are rising in the cinema as well they should. And a funny thing, I went on IMDB the day the news broke, and I already got haters. People are like, "Hollywood putting out more of this trash." And again, it's funny because I can understand their point-of-view. I am very proud, and I think it's going to be an amazing movie. But I can see the point-of-view of like, "Well, this is Hollywood just cashing in." I wrote this five-six years ago when there was no trend. I don't deny that I hit a nerve on the zeitgeist right now. And that is a happy accident. I would suggest honing your craft is the utmost important and write stories that mean to you. I will go against some people who advise me to say you have to look at the market. Yes, you can look at the market. I'm not saying don't look at the market. But I don't think I could've thought this one through. I got lucky in that sense. Now, the next piece I will take the market into consideration. I'll say, "Alright, now that I'm in a place where this is my job that I can do, then yes. Absolutely. I'll take it into consideration." That's part of your job now.

Q: Sure. I mean, there's no linear or scientific way to make a career happen in Hollywood.

Pete: Right. I think the agent who's repping me now, he just has a taste and he has to know that his taste works because as soon as it's gone, then he's in the water. He can't sell something. He doesn't just have the taste to know what he likes. And I think part of that is having his finger on the pulse of the town and the industry. There's some undefinable quality that he may be looking for and that's very hard to second guess. You can do it, I'm sure. But it's hard. You have to buckle down and get that sixth sense of what that market's going to be. If you're a writer and don't have that, I think I would advise you to pursue your passion rather than to pursue the market. I

may stand alone on that. You can agree or not agree with me but you must have heart in your writing. You never know where that market is going to go next.

Q: What is it that makes things stand out?

Pete: That brings it back to how did this happen. Eventually — and weirdly and not always — the cream rises to the top. When you make something that is professional level and then put it out in the world, people are gonna notice it and be like, "Wow. That is something that I want to see, and I want to do, and I want to be a part of it."

Q: I saw you are part of a community called The Porch Room.

Pete: The Porch Room is theater-based with a little bit of film group. We don't have a space; we used to call us a homeless theater company. But we seek out the spaces that we produce our stuff in and then we write, direct, act and whatever. It's very much the model of what I grew up in. In my heart, it's what making art is. I went to Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania. The Porch Room is a reference to a theater house that I was in before they tore it down. A lot of those people in this theater house came out at a very specific time where they sort of had this mentality of forming communities. There's a group of people who eventually formed the company called Broken Umbrella Theater Company. They put on theater themselves; they're all the actors and the producers and the writers and the directors. And they found a niche making art in this community. They all became artists all on their own terms. One of our theater professors, Charles Richter, he loved the age bracket of his kids. They may not be — by the standards of are they on Broadway? Are they in Hollywood — well, now one of them is Charlie. But are they super rich recording stars? No. But they are making art in their own communities surrounded by loved ones who love to do that art and making it happen. And they make a difference. They're an artistic fundamental part of that community now.

And thinking about that makes me smile because they were able to do that. The Porch Room, now, the artists involved have, in various times, moved and scattered to the wind. We are all on the East Coast. But we mostly do our work by phone, by email, by internet. And we find a place locally and submitted to the New York International Fringe Festival.

Q: It seems like having an artistic community is very helpful.

Pete: If you're just a writer, that can be difficult. There are writing groups everywhere. Even where I live, there's a local writing group where I can go and write with those people. Writing can be kind of a solitary thing. I understand that can be a little difficult. But, if you are a dramatic writer, a fiction writer, then I think it behooves you to go check out your community theaters, go check out all those artists and say, "How can I find a community of likeminded people who aren't just 'I'm gonna write a play and ship it off to regional theaters and hope that they do it'" – which is a good idea – but "I'm gonna write a play and I'm gonna be in it down at the park." "I'm gonna go put this up in my garage and invite the neighborhood kids over to see it." With YouTube, you can make your own TV show right now. You can get out your camera, get all your friends, and go make content. This will also teach you something that's hard for as a writer which is how to take criticism. It'll teach you to be like, "What you wrote is not perfect. And maybe someone has a vision that can make it grow and not just let it hit a brick wall." I would say yes, finding a community of likeminded people is vital to growing and you can put up your work in a certain capacity. That can certainly help you. It's a lot of fun.

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***Marian* is currently in development. Barry is represented by David Boxerbaum at Paradigm and Andrea Dimity of Pannon Entertainment.**

Roe Moore

Script Supervisor / Screenwriter

Originally from Aurora, CO, Roe Moore is a script supervisor, screenwriter, and emerging director based in Los Angeles, CA. She has worked on commercials, film, and television shows. Her favorite number is 2 and she loves dachshunds.

More can be found on her website:

www.RoeMoore.com



Screenwriting Tips

- Although luck plays a part in success, you also need to do the work. Writers work at their own pace and their own learning speed, so even if you don't have the output of other writers, it helps to "generate mounds and mounds of garbage to get to the gems," Barry says.
- Listen for ideas in your own life. Barry was inspired to write *Marian*, with Maid Marian as a proactive character, after his young daughter suggested they play Robin Hood but just wanted to watch him fight the bad guys; that was all she knew the character of Marian did.
- Surround yourself with an artistic community. Writing can be solitary, so check out community theaters and other outlets, such as writing groups or YouTube, where you can produce what you write and learn how to take criticism. Finding a community of like-minded people is vital to your growth as a screenwriter.

14

Spec Spotlight:
Liz Hannah,
Writer of
The Post

by Asmara Bhattacharya

The publishing of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 represents a crucial turning point in modern U.S. history. So it's no surprise that Pascal Pictures was eager to acquire Liz Hannah's spec script *The Post*, which explores the *Washington Post's* role in exposing the secret Department of Defense study of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. *Washington Post* publisher Katharine Graham and editor Ben Bradlee fought the government in court for the right to publish the Pentagon Papers in what is now the seminal legal case concerning freedom of the press.

But for Hannah, this monumental event—which paved the way for Watergate—wasn't the main attraction. She was hooked by the remarkable story of Katharine Graham. "I really come at every project through characters. I'm not somebody who can look at a plot and figure out all the twists and turns. I'm never going to write *Independence Day*, although my agents would probably love me to do that. But I come at things through character, and Katharine Graham is an amazing woman and an amazing character for me to explore. And not just her, but Ben Bradlee is also stunning on his own and had his own incredible life."

Cradle-to-grave biopics, in Hannah's experience, don't pack as much power as spotlights on a pivotal window of time in someone's life. Graham led an incredible life, but publishing the Pentagon Papers was monumental in shaping not only U.S. history, but Graham's own identity. "She was a woman who had a voice," marvels Hannah, her voice lighting up whenever she speaks of Graham. "She stepped up and became the kind of person she would be for the rest of her life.

"Really, the movie is not a whistleblower film," Hannah asserts. "The movie is not about, necessarily, the Pentagon Papers. It's about this woman and how this event ended up being what changed her."

Hannah views *The Post* as a kind of coming-of-age film. "The time that the movie takes place, she's in her mid-50s, and that time in a woman's life is really fundamental, regardless of if you're the head of a newspaper or if you're a stay-at-home mom. And I think that time in a woman's life is not talked about a lot."



*"Constantly
keep writing.
It's the only
thing you have
control over."*

As one might expect, an enormous amount of research went into this script. Hannah watched every documentary and read every book and memoir she could get her hands on, including a good portion of the Pentagon Papers' 7,000 pages. But the development process for *The Post* was quite different from that of most specs. She pitched her original idea to Star Thrower Entertainment, who then helped develop the concept with her but also gave her plenty of latitude to shape and write the screenplay on her own. The script went out in October and was picked up on Halloween.

"I really come at every project through characters. I'm not somebody who can look at a plot and figure out all the twists and turns."

"At that point, *The Post* was out to a couple of studios and was starting to get a buzz. Suddenly people knew what my name was, which, three weeks earlier, nobody had ever heard of me."

Production and development work early in Hannah's career offered ample opportunity to read scripts and mold her tastes. It's important to "constantly be reading and constantly know what's out there, good and bad," she advises. Hannah has also been fortunate to be surrounded by strong female role models and supporters. "The first three years that I was there it was all women in the office, which was awesome. Super, badass women." Such strong women in her professional and personal life naturally lead Hannah toward stories centering on dynamic female characters.

Production taught her the practical side of filmmaking as well. "It's nice to be able to walk on a set and know what everyone's job is and not be intimidated by a budget, or understand how a DP works and a grip works. It's unfortunate, Hannah laments, that so many writers never get the chance to walk onto a set until their first production, often years after actually writing the script. "As a writer, it's so important to just try and get there because it's also really easy to just sit and stare at your computer and not know what it all looks like or what goes into making it."

Hannah is still interested in producing, acknowledging the benefits to maintaining greater control over one's projects as a producer. But she cautions newer writers with little experience not to take on too much. "That's a lot of weight to put on your shoulders and a lot of job titles to fully deal with right from the get-go." For herself, she's focusing on writing for the time being and will add directing somewhere down the line.

Her advice to other screenwriters? "Constantly keep writing. It's the only thing you have control over. It's really, really easy to get overwhelmed by not

selling something, or by things not working out the way that you thought they would. Writing is the only thing you have control over. And it's a powerful thing to have control over because, at the end of the day, material really does stand out."

Hannah adds, "Find a group of people who will listen to you when you didn't make that sale. Get people that you trust, who are going to be honest with you, and who make you a better writer. It's really easy to just sit in your own bubble and stare at a computer all day."

For now, Liz Hannah is staring down another massive stack of books and government papers as she digs into another momentous true story. "It's really important to look at history and look at things that maybe we don't want to be repeated. Not necessarily historic stories, but important stories are what I feel like I should be doing right now."

Asmara Bhattacharya

Screenwriter / Playwright / Script Reader

Asmara Bhattacharya is a produced screenwriter/ playwright, script reader, and festival screener, with multiple placements at Final Draft, Nicholl, Austin Film Festival, and other competitions. A trusted sounding board and consultant for industry professionals, dedicated fans also caught her in *Independence Day: Resurgence* and NBC's *The Night Shift* – for one glorious half-second each.

More can be found on her website:

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or follow her on Twitter: @hotpinkstreak



Screenwriting Tips

- Tackle your script by focusing on a character. Hannah says she's not somebody "who can look at a plot and figure out all the twists and turns," but she loves exploring characters.
- Just keep writing. It's easy to become overwhelmed by not selling a project or by things not working out the way that you thought they would. Writing is the only thing you have control over.
- Nurture a supportive network. Surround yourself with people who will listen to you when you didn't make a sale, or when you're struggling with your work in other ways. You want people you trust who will be constructive but honest, which makes you a better writer. It's hard to improve when you're in your own bubble.

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Spec Spotlight:
Joe Ballarini,
Writer of *Skyward*
(Part I)

by Asmara Bhattacharya

Joe Ballarini has sold a lot of spec scripts. But *Skyward*, the spec he sold recently to Fox, may be the most consequential one yet. Every writer has that “one special story that you keep in your heart,” says Ballarini. “And this is one of them.”

Based on a true story, *Skyward* tells the incredible tale of two East German families who escaped over the Berlin Wall by building a hot-air balloon in their garage. Ballarini fell in love with “this remarkable story of escape and rebellion and the search for freedom without the use of weapons.”

Constructing a hot-air balloon is harder than it might seem. To see one inflate up-close is to witness an eight-story-high behemoth rise from the ground and take flight. The families had to acquire enough fabric to cover two-and-a-half basketball courts. “They didn’t want to be found out,” Ballarini reminds us. “You couldn’t exactly just go and grab these miles of clothing that were required for it. So they had to go and get different clothes from different department stores.”

Add to this the fact that there were no hot-air balloons or balloon companies in East Germany. The two families—led by electrician Peter Strelzyk and bricklayer Gunter Wetzel—learned about propulsion systems, aerodynamics, and viable materials by trial and error. Some of the errors forced them to start over with a new balloon.

“It’s pretty incredible for them to have done this without ever actually seeing one in person, without ever actually having flown in one.” Their courage moved Ballarini profoundly; their anger at their government’s intrusion on freedom and privacy, their yearning for a better life. On the flip side, Ballarini could also relate to the families’ nagging worry that their situation wasn’t worth the risk. “I think I’m brave writing a spec screenplay. They’re making a spec hot-air balloon.”

If a script centering on a border wall seems well-timed, it’s because it was not an accident. Ballarini began looking into East German escape stories “about a year-and-a-half ago, when the election started rising and there was mention of a wall.” Though he was excited by the story, work and life took over, and the screenplay sat unfinished for most of the year.

But during the annual Hollywood lull around Christmas, and with a newborn at home, Ballarini rediscovered *Skyward* with a more urgent perspective ... a father’s perspective. “I



“A big plus about writing fantasy, is the ability to hide.”

connected to this story on a visceral level of wanting to protect your family and going to such great lengths to protect them.”

Halfway through the script, Ballarini realized that Disney had made a similar film starring John Hurt and Beau Bridges over 30 years ago, *Night Crossing*. Nearly every writer has experienced that particular panic upon discovering that someone else had the same idea. But Ballarini’s lawyers assured him that, because it is a true story, he was in the clear, and the writer forged ahead.

Dramatizing a true story is tricky business, especially when one doesn’t have the opportunity to get to know the people who lived it. Ballarini strove to be true to their spirits, looking for goalposts along the way to inform him of where his characters might have found themselves emotionally. For instance, a footnote that Peter’s son had to take over and help build the rig let Ballarini know that the children, for their own safety, had been kept in the dark. “That moment when he says ‘I need your help’ is a great father-son moment.”

Don’t expect Peter and Gunter’s wives to be hovering ineffectually in the shadows. “I didn’t want this to be, ‘It’s two men doing daring things, and their wives were terrified the entire time.’ The only way you could pull something like this off is to have an incredible life partner.”

The writer’s relationship with his own wife, and the strength he witnessed in her through pregnancy and childbirth, strongly influenced his depiction of Doris Strelzyk. Doris partners with husband Peter in the risk and responsibility, double-checking calculations and doing quality control. Ballarini didn’t want the wives to “just be the wives. I wanted them to really be the companions and the ones who were also driving this train ... in a fun way, they’re fighting to be the main characters themselves.”

Known more for writing family adventures (*My Little*

Pony) or paranormal scripts (*Dance of the Dead*, *The Residence*), Ballarini is not keen on message films. “It feels very medicinal, to use my producer Karen Rosenfelt’s words,” he explains. And a recounting of a historic event can easily fall flat emotionally, zeroing in on facts and timelines and neglecting the spiritual center.

“Every writer has that one special story that you keep in your heart.”

But with *Skyward*, the scribe found a voice he has never been comfortable expressing before, one he realizes now has been lurking within him for some time. It’s a voice that is “a lot angrier, a lot more urgent, a lot more paranoid, but couched with a need and a desire for freedom, hope and inspiration.

“I said some things in this script that I don’t normally say.” When *Skyward* went out, Ballarini worried that this newfound rawness might spark negative reactions. A big plus about writing fantasy, he muses, is the ability to hide: “That’s not the way I feel. That’s the way a blue orc feels ... Oh, no, I’m not talking about that, I’m actually just talking about the politics of being a pixie.”

In the end, though, *Skyward* was a story that simply

would not let him go. And, judging from the ardent response so far, Ballarini's impassioned rendering of it will connect deeply to many.

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In Part II, we'll talk more with Joe Ballarini about his career, the business, and his views on the craft.



Screenwriting Tips

- Quips and quirks alone don't enchant audiences. Even if you're writing a fun family adventure, aim for it to be relevant to the time period of the story or the market. Understanding the characters' mindset elevates the emotional experience.
- Vary what you write to expand and exercise different muscles in your writing toolbox. If you have one "zombie tool" that you use all the time, Ballarini says, you're just going to keep using it instead of stretching yourself.
- Don't let fear, procrastination, or ego stop you. Start writing with the knowledge that you'll have to rewrite it and likely rewrite it again. Or as Ballarini says, "So get over it, get used to it, and get to work because it's a process of constantly reworking your stuff."

Asmara Bhattacharya

Screenwriter / Playwright / Script Reader

Asmara Bhattacharya is a produced screenwriter/ playwright, script reader, and festival screener, with multiple placements at Final Draft, Nicholl, Austin Film Festival, and other competitions. A trusted sounding board and consultant for industry professionals, dedicated fans also caught her in *Independence Day: Resurgence* and NBC's *The Night Shift* – for one glorious half-second each.

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Spec Spotlight:
Joe Ballarini,
Writer of *Skyward*
(Part II)

by Asmara Bhattacharya

“For every spec you see that I have sold, I have not sold a lot of stuff. I’ve written a ton of things that weren’t that good, which was me chasing the spec market.”

In Part I, we talked with Joe Ballarini about *Skyward*, his script about two families escaping over the Berlin Wall and his most recent spec to sell. Here, we’ll cover more about the craft and the industry.

With his first spec sale, Ballarini consciously wrote in things like catchphrases and a bit with a dog. But the writer cautions that quips and quirks alone won’t suck people in on a deeper level. “I do write big, fun, fancy movies and big, fun family adventure films, but I always try to have them be slightly relevant to the time that they’re in.” Inviting the audience into the characters’ mindset will elevate their emotional experience, even in a spy comedy.

For *Skyward*, Ballarini “put the popcorn aside for a moment and put some steak and potatoes out there.” His previous historical dramas include *Saigon A Go-Go*, a spec about American entertainers in the Vietnam War, and *The Nativity* for New Regency. “I always want to keep pushing and keep expanding and exercise different muscles in my toolbox. If you have one zombie tool in your toolbox, you’re going to just do it over and over again.”

Ballarini’s first love was, and is, directing. “I’m always writing with a director’s hat on and trying to make it as visual, as cinematic as possible.” In *Skyward*, in which an article about the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta sparks the idea for escape, the writer painted a visual by having the protagonists pin blueprints for their makeshift hot-air balloon around the magazine photo of balloons flooding the sky.

Ballarini does at least one short a year to maintain his directing chops. But he keeps writing features with bigger budgets than a first-timer would be granted. He actually began *Skyward* with the intention of directing, but soon realized it would be too expensive for an indie. Over time, Ballarini’s learned that writing with the mindset that the writer alone will direct can stop a project that might have gone further. That said, he helmed an indie-comedy feature, *Father Vs. Son*, a few years ago and is developing something to get him back in the director’s chair.



“Stop procrastinating and start writing because you’re going to have to rewrite it, and then you’re going to have to rewrite it again.”

But the scribe considers himself lucky to be a working writer. “My job is actually to entertain children and inspire people.” People want to believe in monsters under the bed, and Ballarini has found a way to play all day and build worlds for a living. “You do really have to immerse the audience, even if it’s an enchanted forest or if it’s East Germany in 1978. You have to create that entire world. And I do like creating fun worlds and exploring them.”

As a storyteller whose tales tend to revolve around children, teens or women, Ballarini was conscious in *Skyward* of writing a 30-something-year-old guy as the lead, possibly for the first time. He himself responds well to strong female characters or, more accurately, “just strong characters that are so much more.”

He enjoys writing females partly because it is acceptable to explore their vulnerability, their emotional honesty, without portraying it as weakness. “I don’t know if we’ve seen that guy yet who can encapsulate the complexes of everything inside of you.” Ballarini infused his *Skyward* leads with this vulnerability, making them “as expressive as possible while being 36-year-old German men.”

While he longs for the day when audiences just see an amazing human being onscreen rather than a groundbreaking African-American character or an unorthodox female character, Ballarini recognizes that we’re not there yet. “I think, especially in this time, it’s super-important to represent intelligent females—intelligent female characters that are powerful, not just because you put a sword in their hand.”

Ballarini’s penchant for fantastic adventure and kid protagonists shines in his upcoming projects. *Greenglass House*, based on Kate Milford’s novel, follows two children unraveling the mysteries of their smugglers’ inn as peculiar guests show up. And the graphic-novel adaptation *Imagine Agents*, with Michael Keaton attached to produce and star, is “essentially police rescuing kids from these crazy imaginary friends.”

The writer’s first children’s book series debuts in June: *A Babysitter’s Guide to Monster Hunting*, about a secret society of babysitters protecting the world against the forces of darkness. “It was my chance to be director, writer, actor, composer, costume designer, set builder ... just everything.” A health scare and a frustration with development hell triggered the revelation that Ballarini wanted to write a kid’s book. “What if you kept cooking meals and no one was there to eat them?” he groans. “I just want to see something get made that I can give to my grandchildren.”

“Just write stuff that you actually genuinely love, not stuff you think is going to sell. Take the pulse of what people are responding to, but don’t obsess over it.”

Certain that no one would ever want to make the story into a movie, he went after a publishing deal instead. But intellectual property is king, and “As soon as we got a publisher, now studios are interested in it.” *Walden and Montecito* snapped up Ballarini’s as-yet-unpublished books, with the writer slated to adapt them.

The need in the novel form to explore and express more of the character’s inner journey has freed up the scribe’s screenwriting. A prose writer can’t get away with a sidelong glance and a beat. “In a book, that better be a paragraph. That better be a page.” In *Skyward*, for instance, Ballarini physicalizes a character’s discomfort by having him scratch his neck and light a cigarette, offering meaningful insight that a “beat” would not. “Prose writing invited me to be a little bit more messy and a little bit more mushy, more descriptive, a little bit more human.”

Meanwhile, Ballarini is learning how to work with a newborn at home. “I drink a lot more coffee than I used to,” he laughs. On a serious note, he says that “It’s very difficult because there’s the temptation to half be with your kid, like, ‘I’m writing, but you’re also right here with me.’ And I want to be able to give him my full attention.” And the writer can’t speak highly enough of his wife, who has pushed him back to work in his downstairs office while she cares for their child upstairs. “She’s just been incredible.”

Having precious, little spare time forces Ballarini to prioritize baby and work over notorious time-stealers like Twitter wars. “It focuses you like never before and also opens your heart up like never before, too.”

With such a varied and successful background, Ballarini has a lot of valuable advice for writers. “Stop procrastinating and start writing because you’re going to have to rewrite it, and then you’re going to have to rewrite it again. So get over it, get used to it, and get to work because it’s a process of constantly reworking your stuff.”

Also, be aware of the human tendency to reject any notes out of hand. “There’s a big part of us that says, ‘They’re wrong! How dare they do that?’” Ego can block writers from making changes that improve the story. Ballarini encourages writers to instead view others as allies who want to make the movie with them.

Be fearless, and strive for a high degree of professionalism. “Seek the people you want to work with and try to get in touch with them,” he encourages writers. “If you do have people that acknowledge your work and really like your work, be true to them. Be good to them because they’re your allies.

“Just write stuff that you actually genuinely love, not stuff you think is going to sell.” Take the pulse of what people are responding to, Ballarini says, but don’t obsess over it. “However you feel after taking your read of the world, go write that. Then do it again. And then do it again. When it doesn’t work, do it again. My hard drive is full of projects that haven’t happened or are about to happen. And you just can’t give up. You can’t give up.”

Asmara Bhattacharya

Screenwriter / Playwright / Script Reader

Asmara Bhattacharya is a produced screenwriter/ playwright, script reader, and festival screener, with multiple placements at Final Draft, Nicholl, Austin Film Festival, and other competitions. A trusted sounding board and consultant for industry professionals, dedicated fans also caught her in *Independence Day: Resurgence* and NBC’s *The Night Shift* – for one glorious half-second each.

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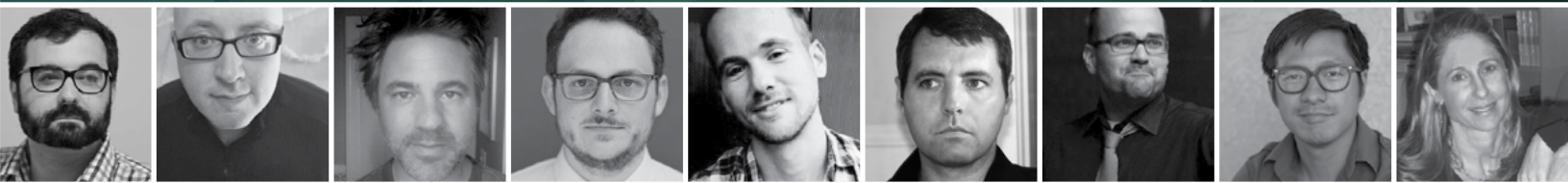
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