

By Charles Davis



'A good script, moves me

For veteran Hollywood story editor Christopher Lockhart, a quality screenplay leaves him with an emotional experience, not indifference

FILM-INDUSTRY veteran Christopher Lockhart, story editor at the heavyweight William Morris Agency, is a walking library of screenplays. “In my 20 years in Hollywood,” he estimates, “I’ve read close to 30,000 scripts.” Not surprisingly, he has some time-tested views on what it takes to succeed at screenwriting.

Lockhart himself followed an unpredictable path to success in the film trade. Born in Staten Island, N.Y., he took an early interest in theater and movies, but mostly as an actor. (He played the mayor in *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* in the third grade.) His parents had to drag him away from the TV set, and through trivia books he learned the titles and backstories of all sorts of films and shows, and studied the names and faces of obscure actors.

In high school, Lockhart started writing, and in college fell into playwriting, which he took very seriously. Planning on a career teaching English, he attended New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, where he received an MFA in dramatic writing. He had taken a screenwriting course as an undergraduate, but found a more formal introduction to the subject at NYU and loved the medium.

Shortly after graduation, Lockhart scrapped the idea of a teaching career and moved to Los Angeles to write with a classmate. For 10 years, they carved out a meager living and had a fantastic time doing it. Then he landed his first solo assignment but did not enjoy writing alone, and has since called that time a reflective period. His life was about to change.

“Through some happenstance,” he recalls, “a friend introduced me to Ed Limato, the legendary talent agent [then at ICM], who currently represents the careers of Denzel Washington, Mel Gibson, Richard Gere, Steve Martin and others. Ed needed a person to oversee the influx of material into his office: scripts, books, plays, articles, movies, pitches, treatments. Material needed to be logged, tracked, read, covered.

“Ed is a voracious reader who understands that a good

script is essential to shaping an actor’s career. But it’s impossible for him to read every project. So he wanted a person to familiarize himself with all the material and serve as a resource to advise him in the search for viable projects—a very unique position within the agency world.

“I was not interested in administration work and was assured it would be 90 percent creative. I saw it as a rare opportunity to observe how the world of a talent agency operates. In the old days, studios put movies together. Now, talent agencies do, and it seemed like a good idea after 10 years of writing to learn the business from the other side of the desk. And working alongside the celebrated Ed Limato, and his list of clients, seemed like a no-brainer.”

Lockhart accepted the job at ICM and remained there for nine years, until he and Limato moved to the famed William Morris Agency in 2007.

What are your duties as executive story editor, and if there is a typical workday, what is it like?

I’m basically a librarian *and* a library. I keep tabs of all projects that come into the office and read them—keeping their stories in my head (and in notes, of course).

A workday consists of reading, writing coverage (basically a book report that synthesizes a piece of material and comments on its strengths and weaknesses) and development notes, tracking changes in new drafts of scripts, and putting together lists of titles (“We’re looking for sci-fi comedies, Chris”).

I have story conferences with my boss (especially when we disagree on a script), give story notes to actors, listen to pitches, network with executives around town, attend test screenings of clients’ films, and a litany of other things ...

The thing I enjoy most is that my trivia skills are constantly called upon. I often have to think like the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) and, in many ways, I was preparing for this as an annoying kid when I dragged

my father to the movies or sat in front of the TV or read those trivia books. I like to remind my parents of this fact.

Writers are often advised that the best way to break down the doors of Hollywood is to simply “Write a great script.” Your thoughts?

I think it’s more about the “right” script rather than a “great” script. When I first professed this, people were offended. My theory is simple. “Great” is subjective. Rarely does the entire town agree that any one script is great. I’ve often been bewildered at the six- or seven-figure sale of a mediocre script. Conversely, I’ve seen wonderful scripts remain unrewarded.

Scripts sell because they fit the needs of the buyer. “Right” encompasses those needs and a lot of factors that “great” doesn’t—like luck and the alignment of a network. Also, scripts sell because the timing is right. And it’s vital for a script to land in the hands of the right representation, someone who believes in the material and knows how to position it in the marketplace. Writing a great script is a given. But, with the fierce competition, it simply isn’t enough. It has to be the “right” script.

What do you love to find in a screenplay, and are there things you repeatedly see that you believe are tired?

It’s difficult to pinpoint anything that’s universally tired or doesn’t work, because a talented writer will make anything old seem new and can always find a way to make something work. There’s nothing better than reading a script that spins clichés around into something fresh. [The comedy] *Knocked Up*, for example, took a fairly familiar and unremarkable concept and spun it around by creating a character (played by Seth Rogen) who is an atypical leading man—and a mismatch for Katherine Heigl. This added a fresh layer of conflict that would not have existed if the role had been written for an Ashton Kutcher type. Smart screenwriters take the familiar and knock it off balance just a bit, which can make the old seem new.

A good script moves me. It makes me laugh, cry, angry, frightened, forces me to reflect. I want the script to be an emotional experience. I want to feel different at the end of the script than I did at the beginning. It’s not easy to structure a story to evoke emotion. Most scripts leave me indifferent.

Who is your favorite screenwriter?

“Favorite” isn’t the word I would use. But there are screenwriters I find very reliable. I may not always connect with their scripts, but the read will definitely be worthwhile.

Sarah Schroeder



A standout script is one that offers readers an emotional journey, says Christopher Lockhart, story editor at the William Morris Agency.

Some writers who fit that bill [include] Steve Zaillian [*Schindler’s List*], John Logan [*Gladiator*], William Wheeler [*The Hoax*], Tony Gilroy [*Michael Clayton*], Scott Frank [*Get Shorty*] and Charlie Kaufman [*Adaptation*].

Screenwriting is an art and a craft—and the most successful writers have mastered each. The “art” involves the innate ability to re-create life and characters through conflict and truth. The “craft” involves the technical aspects—like dramatic structure. The latter can be learned, the former cannot. In my opinion, the artist often creates meandering and self-indulgent work, while the craftsman often creates superficial entertainment. It is the confluence of both that results in the great work.

All kinds of resources, including script doctors, books and contests, are marketed to help aspiring screenwriters. What do you think of this industry?

Continuing education is important, so I try not to be too judgmental about the fringe industry. But I am wary of services that exploit the Hollywood dream—luring aspiring pros with vague promises of success. Ultimately, it’s a personal thing. I may deem some service to be professionally worthless while a writer finds personal value in it.

A few years ago, I took a sociology course at a local college solely for fun. I simply wanted to know more on a particular subject, and it was rewarding. If a writer seeks that sort of reward, then it’s worth the money. If he pays with the hidden agenda that this will somehow launch his career (“The consultant will read my script and recommend it to his Hollywood connections”), he’ll be disappointed.

Ninety-nine percent of all screenwriting contests have little connection with the industry, and a win means absolutely nothing in the professional arena. Contests love to suggest that a win will help open doors, but it’s highly unlikely, since most contests are unknown to Hollywood and the proliferation of them is almost satirical. The Nicholl Fellowships (sponsored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences) are one of the few exceptions. Contests that award big cash prizes are worthwhile, because a win boosts the bank account—even if it doesn’t open Hollywood’s doors.

Luckily, the best resources are the cheapest. Screenwriters should understand the business they want to be a part of. Read the trade papers *Daily Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter* (check them out in a limited fashion online) and Nikki Finke’s blog, *DeadlineHollywoodDaily.com*, all of which will educate on the players, what’s selling, which projects are in the pipeline, and what films top the box office. Go to the movies and become familiar with the sorts of projects studios are



making. And read screenplays—preferably the ones that have recently sold on spec.

Most importantly, network. It's almost impossible for a writer to step into town with a script and sell it—without knowing someone (who in turn knows someone, and so on). The bigger the network, the greater the odds of success.

What advice would you give novices to help them better learn the art of screenwriting and how to sell their work?

I would avoid many of the “do’s and don’ts.” The truth is there’s no one way to do anything in this business. Each writer has a unique story of breaking in.

Much can be learned by reading screenplays and using common sense. I would warn that material should never be sent out before it’s ready to be seen. Impatience is a common mistake of those trying to break in.

I would also add that “concept is king” for new writers, who must think long and hard about their subject matter. The majority of all screenplays lack a concept that is both dramatic and cinematic. Also, it must be easily conveyed. A concept like Sheldon Turner’s thriller *Two Minutes to Midnight* does it all: *After his wife is kidnapped, a notorious divorce attorney scrambles to find her before he has to pay the unorthodox ransom—commit suicide.* This is a concept easily communicated that allows us to see the movie. Of course, a good screenplay “writes to concept,” meaning it exploits the concept to its fullest—which is something many new writers fail to do.

Is there common advice that you believe is off the mark?

The Internet has given rise to lots of advice—most of it from neophytes. It’s difficult to say advice is “off the mark”—especially if it’s based on personal experience. However, much of the advice on the Internet is not based on real industry experience but regurgitated stories that are reinvented and eventually distorted. Always consider the source before putting advice into action.

THE CHRISTOPHER LOCKHART FILE

- Christopher Lockhart lives in Sherman Oaks, Calif., with his wife, Sarah, a chiropractor, and their baby boy.
- He recommends two books in particular for aspiring screenwriters: “I think Michael Hague’s *Writing Screenplays That Sell* is a simple but good look at the basic structure of a commercial Hollywood film,” he says. “It’s a good place to start. I also like *Screenwriting Updated* by Linda Aronson, which examines both conventional and unconventional ways to tell stories.”
- He teaches a screenwriting class at Los Angeles Valley College, lectures around the country, and has offered craft and business advice at the Web site www.twoadverbs.com.
- An award-winning DVD, *The Inside Pitch*, offers workshop advice from Lockhart. It costs \$19.95 and is available through the online store at www.kallis.org and at www.writersstore.com.

How important is it for aspiring pro screenwriters to move to Los Angeles?

Writers don’t need to be in Los Angeles to write, and they don’t necessarily need to be here to sell a script (provided they have a good L.A. network in place). But, realistically speaking, if a writer wants a career, he should be in Los Angeles. The competition is so great and many competitors are in L.A., personally beating down doors. This is where the dealmakers live. This is where deals are made. This is where scripts are developed.

Most writers don’t make a living selling scripts. Instead, they earn a paycheck through writing assignments, which are won by meeting executives, pitching ideas, and strong industry contacts. While there are always exceptions, in order to sustain a living, a writer most likely has to live within the industry. However, as the Internet grows and video conferencing becomes more widely available, it’s possible the requisites will change.

What are some favorite screenplays and why do they stand out from the thousands of scripts you’ve read?

It’s always the emotional experience. Years after reading a wonderful script, I may not recall the plot details but always remember the way the script moved me. ... I’ve been lucky that some of my favorites made it to the big screen starring clients—like *The Hoax*, with Richard Gere, *What Women Want*, with Mel Gibson, and *Kinsey*, with Liam Neeson.

In a query letter, how important is the logline and how do you make one effective?

A logline is very important because it communicates the basic dramatic idea of your screenplay. ... In 99 percent of all cases, it is the only thing an executive will consider when reading a query. A logline introduces us to the protagonist, tells us what he struggles to achieve, and what stands in his way—and all in just a sentence or two.

A logline for *Die Hard* could go like: *A New York City cop in Los Angeles struggles alone to save his estranged wife after she is taken hostage in a skyscraper by a group of terrorists.*

What is next on the horizon for you?

My life has been like a good script—a series of unpredictable cause-and-effect events. I never try to plan much, because both life and Hollywood are mercurial. While I hope to expand my producing ambitions, I’m focused on another sort of production due this year: my first child. [He and his wife had a son, Jack, in June.]

Charles Davis

Charles Davis’ fiction debut, *Angel’s Rest*, received a starred review in *Publishers Weekly* and was a BookSense pick. The author’s second Southern literary novel, *Drifting South*, is due out in December. He is currently at work on his third novel and has hopes of one day adapting some of his stories for the big screen.