

TEN TIPS FOR SCREENWRITERS

Mickey Birnbaum

OVERVIEW

The screenwriter is responsible for organizing the complex web of character, dialogue, image and sound that constitutes a film. In addition to mastering the tools of the trade, the screenwriter must navigate the ever-changing rules of a highly competitive and collaborative business. Yet screenwriting can be engaging and satisfying. Here are ten tips for surviving and thriving as a screenwriter.

TIP ONE: BE ORIGINAL

Screenwriters gain respect and opportunities by standing out from the crowd. Whether you want to write an arthouse film or the next comic-book franchise, producers and executives want to work with writers who have an original voice and a wealth of fresh ideas. Don't be afraid to buck trends and innovate.

TIP TWO: WRITE A FILM, NOT A SCREENPLAY

Watch a thousand films. Not just Hollywood blockbusters, but foreign classics and old silents. Note how they're constructed. How they're edited. How music helps to tell the story. How the power and complexity of the image offsets the need for excessive dialogue. Now imbue your writing with these qualities. Film is a multi-disciplinary art, and you will be collaborating with directors, and composers, and actors. All these craftspeople look to screenplays as the jumping-off point for their creativity. Give them something to work with.

TIP THREE: INVESTIGATE OTHER DISCIPLINES

Few people in the film business have the time or inclination to teach you how to write. It's up to you to learn the tenets of dramatic structure and to make your work come alive as deeply as any novel or poem. Screenwriting "manuals" only go so far. Study theater to learn about character and dialogue; there are numerous books of playwriting exercises that will help you write for actors. Study poetry to cultivate a sense of rhythm and economy of language. Study fiction to understand the power of narrative momentum. Study art to underscore your sense of film as a visual medium.

TIP FOUR: NOURISH RELATIONSHIPS

It would be great if the quality of your work spoke for itself, but film is primarily a business. The competition is ferocious, and just getting noticed is a daunting process. Go to conferences, mixers, join independent film organizations. Meet collaborators, producers, executives. Find people to whom you can send your latest work. Between projects, send an occasional email or invite colleagues to coffee. Keep your profile high. Be discriminating, but not arrogant in your choice of contacts. Remember that today's junior executive could be running a studio in a few years. It happens a lot.

TIP FIVE: THINK IN YEARS, NOT MONTHS

Building a career in screenwriting usually takes years, if not decades. It's difficult to get an agent or manager, more difficult to land a development deal, and almost impossible to get a film made. You need to prepare yourself for a long haul, and take your daily pleasure in family and friends, and a day job that sustains and interests you.

TIP SIX: TREASURE YOUR EARLY DRAFTS

A mentor once told me that the only unalloyed satisfaction I would get as a screenwriter was writing my early drafts. He was right. After the screenplay goes out into the world come the producers' notes, the studio's notes, the

endless rewrites to conform to the needs of the marketplace. It's hard work, and involves painful compromise. If you're lucky, maybe once or twice in your career you'll have the opportunity to work in an atmosphere of mutual respect and common inspiration. Most of the time, your early drafts are your opportunity for creative integrity and freedom.

TIP SEVEN: REWRITE

I sit down each day and rewrite my script from the top to the bottom before I continue with new pages. This style may not work for you, but one thing's for certain: the script is rarely as good or as horrible as you think it is. Continued creative engagement with a script is essential to its success. Keep working. You'll know when it's done. Don't get lazy.

TIP EIGHT: LEARN TO COLLABORATE

The screenwriter is not a novelist. Or a poet. Or an artist. We do not complete our work in isolation, and we do not have ownership. (Screenwriting is the only art form where the author signs away copyright when she enters into a contract with a film company.) Check your ego at the door, and prepare to let a host of others play in your creative sandbox, including producers, film executives, directors, actors, composers, cinematographers, costume designers, production designers, and marketing executives. Some of your collaborators will be destructive to your work. Do your best to contain them. A few will be inspiring and make you glad you got into this business.

TIP NINE: LEARN TO LET GO

Often, producers want your idea, but not your execution, and you get replaced by another writer. Sometimes you'll work for years on a project, only to see the studio scuttle it. Don't take it personally, and if your project is derailed or disfigured, contemplate the wreckage, formulate your lessons, and move on to the next project.

TIP TEN: INTEGRITY FIRST, MONEY SECOND

Sure, the money is great, but it's unreliable. Don't go out and spend your seemingly enormous paycheck on a cherry-red Ferrari, because the next paycheck may be a long time coming. Screenwriters with savings aren't always looking for the next job. They have the luxury and the courage to say NO to projects that don't interest them. They have the calm center to fight appropriate battles over creative content, contesting producers' notes when they want to protect their vision. And their integrity earns respect. As an executive once said to me: "We don't like you better just because you say yes." Live frugally, write bravely, and fight to get good work done.

RESOURCES

Psychology For Screenwriters by William Indick

The Devil's Guide To Hollywood: The Screenwriter As God by Joe Eszterhas

Bambi Vs. Godzilla: On The Nature, Purpose, And Practice Of The Movie

Business by David Mamet

ABOUT MICKEY BIRNBAUM

Mickey Birnbaum has written screenplays for Universal, Paramount, Columbia/Sony, Interscope, Warner Brothers, and Leonardo di Caprio's Appian Way Productions. He wrote *The Tie that Binds* for Interscope/Hollywood Pictures, and his screenplay *Used Guys* is in development with Ben Stiller and Twentieth-Century Fox. He recently collaborated with director Steven Shainberg (*Secretary, Fur*) on a new screenplay. His stage play *Big Death & Little Death* inaugurated Woolly Mammoth's new Washington D.C. theatre in 2005. It has been produced subsequently around the country. The play was nominated for a Helen Hayes/Charles MacArthur Award for Outstanding New Play, and was a PEN USA Literary Awards Finalist. Mickey is a founding member of Dog Ear, a Los Angeles collective of nationally-renowned playwrights (visit www.dogear.org). Contact Mickey at robotclam@gmail.com.