

HARD SELL

One Writer's Handwringing About Pitching

By D F Mamea

718 words excluding byline

It seemed like a good idea when I signed up for the Writers Guild DateNight – a lark, even. I envisaged a fun, relaxed evening of sharing ideas with like-minded creatives who would seize on my brilliant ideas and we would All Ride Into the Sunset.

Enthusiasm counts for a lot in this industry. Blind enthusiasm, I suspect, is about as welcome as food poisoning.

DateNight minus 4 weeks through to minus 2 weeks

I had some ideas I wanted to share with the world and DateNight was their chance to become a reality. I did some research. For two solid weeks.

The thing is, I hate research - "It's a four-letter word. No – it's 'work'" - but professional pride and a growing fear propelled me forward. There was no shortage of advice and suggestions on the internet. And the local library's growing selection of screenwriting books provided touchstones for my pitching campaign.

DateNight minus 1 week

Despite learning the many ways to pitch-sell-and-close, familiar tendrils of dread and self-doubt plaited my intestines. I buried myself in the process of preparation.

I drafted leave-behinds. Single-page distillations of the project, not only would they succinctly describe the project ("It's a situational comedy about a jive-talking skateboard"), they would reinforce my verbal spiel in six to eight easy-to-digest bullet-points. They would also include my contact details for that extra touch of "You are reading the work of...".

I practiced smiling. I'm told that I come across as rather serious and unsmiling. I tried to strike a balance between confidence and humility: "Yeh, shucks - I so rock".

Which left the spiel. An interesting observation: instead of writing to be read, I had to write to be *heard*. And as with dialogue writing, it wasn't just content I had to worry about, I needed to lure, then hook, my audience:

PRODUCER

... A jive-talking skateboard.

ME

Called Samuel L Jackson.

PRODUCER

Called -.

Producer blinks rapidly, momentarily speechless.

ME

And his sidekick, a laid-back surfboard. Called John Travolta.

The Producer leans forward:

PRODUCER
Tell me more.

Enthusiasm was high. I just had to nail the spiel.

DateNight minus 6 days

"It's about a jive-talking skateboard and a laidback surfboard."

DateNight minus 5 days

~~It's about a jive-talking skateboard and a laidback surfboard.~~

"What if... a skateboard and a surfboard became friends?"

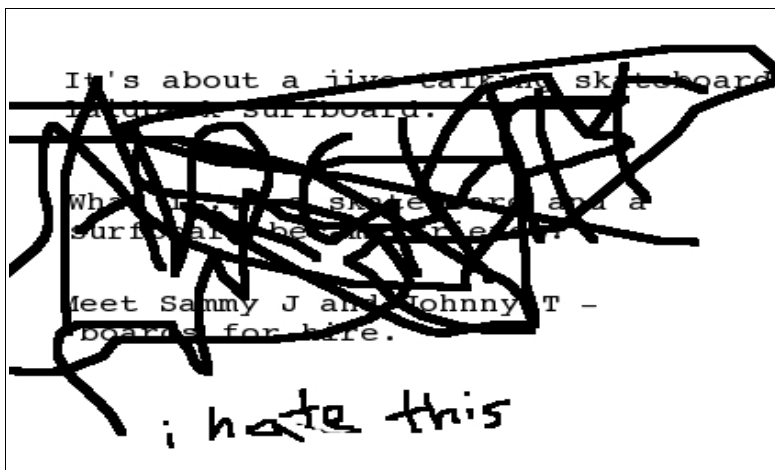
DateNight minus 4 days

~~It's about a jive-talking skateboard and a laidback surfboard.~~

~~What if... a skateboard and a surfboard became friends?~~

"Meet Sammy J and Johnny T - 'boards for hire."

DateNight minus 2 days



DateNight minus 1 day

"Picture this: Sammy J and Johnny T cruise the streets..."

DateNight - Debrief

For me, the best thing was experiencing firsthand most of what I'd read or heard about pitching. Okay: they're not leaping out of their seat, kissing me on both cheeks, and declaring the beginning of a beautiful friendship. I had to remember that the poker face

from across the table wasn't necessarily a reflection on me: I was one in a long, exhausting line of creatives pitching to them over an intense two-hour period.

The most useful sit-downs were where a *conversation* took place. Once the logline, plot description and themes were out of the way - what else did they want to know? The remaining time was filled up by a Q & A where I showed off the depth of my knowledge. Whether they could do anything with the project or not became almost beside the point. It was energizing to talk about a project with someone who could cut to the chase: what sort of audience was I after? why would they watch it? why was I so hot for it? how would it work?

Even when the going got tough ("Who in God's name wants to watch a skateboard and surfboard talking?"), it was good to realise in the rush of blood to the head, "I am so talking to the wrong producer". Just like with your career, you have to move on to your next opportunity - keep moving, keep hustling. Keep writing.

I have survived the gauntlet that is DateNight: I have speed-pitched to a blurry posse of producers. Pitching to a captive handful of people in a room should be *nothing*.

An exponent of *famous last words*, **D F Mamea** thinks of himself as a screenwriter first and foremost. Even as he is dragged into the roles of directing, producing and, lately, editing, he still introduces himself as a writer. Maybe he should work on how he says "No". His industry adventures can be followed at his blog, *Indelible Freckles* - <http://if.dfmamea.com>.