

ON BECOMING A SCREENWRITER

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WORKER BEE: THE LOST YEARS

I've grown up with comics - from *Archie* to *Daredevil: Born Again* to *From Hell*. So it starts out as a comic. But I can't draw.

I try it as a paperback thriller. I've read my share of Ludlum and Heinlein and King.

Many years and countless drafts later, the manuscript for The Next Definitive New Zealand Novel (with ninjas, car chases and gun fights) remains unfinished.

Under cover of work, I come across Drew's Script-o-rama (www.script-o-rama.com). Intrigued, I begin reading my favourite films as screenplays.

I try out my own story in screenplay format. I've watched television and movies my whole life. What's so hard about it?

It takes just over two years - and then it's finished. My first feature script. I don't show it to anyone. But I feel different now. It's like a whole new world of opportunities has opened up. It's like the confectionery section of Foodtown expanding infinitely into the horizon. There's more to this life than paying bills.

I apply for a place in a one-year course at film school. I'm accepted.

I leave my worker-bee career behind. I change towns. I choose life.

WANNABE: YEAR ZERO

By the middle of the first semester, I concede that the auteur route is not for me. Although I can touch-type, programme a VCR, and develop nested Excel spreadsheets, operating a camera or audio kit is beyond my capabilities.

I concentrate on screenwriting.

SCREENWRITER: YEAR ONE

Upon graduation, I look at my feature script. The 150-plus page epic contemporary thriller is an embarrassing, awkward and ill-formatted teenage male fantasy. I begin rewriting it for a mature audience (with an eye fixed on a PG13 rating).

I score my first writing assignment: an erotic thriller. Informed by my own personal background as a shy and quiet Methodist minister's son, and citing Mamet, Goldman and Bergman as my influences, I give it my best shot.

I learn about negotiating deadlines, compromising on various plot points, and standing up for what I think works. The finished script goes out into the world to seek funding. My first paid gig.

I write a second spec script - a distant sequel to my first script - and submit it to the 1st Writer's Initiative. I miss the cut.

I hear about a film adaptation of a children's book and offer to write a treatment on spec. With help from WordPlay (www.wordplay.com), I try to write something that is faithful at its core to the source material and is compelling reading so that it sells itself. I'm competing against some real writers. I think I do a pretty good job - more Dreamworks than Disney - but it's not what they're looking for. I find consolation in that the real writers don't score either.

SCREENWRITER: YEAR TWO

I'm approached to write a treatment and screenplay for *Fast and the Furious* meets *China Girl*, set in Auckland and to be shot on a really low budget. I throw all manner of clichés into the treatment and get warm noises. Project loses momentum and everyone moves on.

After numerous calls and emails, I wheedle my way onto the *Shortland Street* writers' kit mailing list. I convince myself that not having sat through a complete episode prior to the kit's arrival means I bring a fresh mind to the project. I sit through a solid week of *Shortland Street* episodes. I write my part-episode. I am soundly rejected. Yeah, well I was only gonna do it for the money anyway. And the experience. And the contacts.

My partner gives me an idea for a topical local soap. Using downloads from John August's excellent website (www.johnaugust.com), and leftover material from the writers' kit, I write a treatment. It goes nowhere but it was fun.

I luck onto my second assignment: a director has outlined a genre feature. I state my concerns at the outset that it dances on the tightrope of 'copyright infringement' and am poo-hooped by both director and producer. I privately trial pen names as I take the outline and accompanying notes, and instead write what I think the project should be.

Am surprised to be kept on the project. And am paid for it, too.

During downtime, I make notes about a third spec script - no relation to either of my first two - that will be more Montana Sunday Theatre than Jerry Bruckheimer. A film is released about this time, and is reasonably successful - and the story is very similar to the one I have in mind. I shelve the notes with a heavy sigh.

I make noises - and actually start pre-pre-production - to make a low- to no-budget short film. The term 'herding cats' comes to mind. The project stalls and dies most unspectacularly.

SCREENWRITER: YEAR THREE

I'm asked to develop a television drama series. I tell them I've as much television experience as feature experience. Off their looks, I shut up and grin: absolutely - I'm your man. Show no fear, I tell myself. Build it and they will come, I tell myself. I dig up my notes from the previous year's television-writing 'experience' and throw myself into 'development'.

Meantime, the genre feature project attracts genuine - moneyed - interest. I churn out drafts. I churn out bios, synopses, outlines, breakdowns - you name it, I'll do it. I hate writing bios, synopses, outlines and breakdowns. I'm in it for the story, maaan. And the money. And fame.

Mindful of the previous year's fizzer with short film-making, I decide to go all out and make a feature on a similar budget. A genre piece, yeah...

... How hard could it possibly be?