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SCREENWRITING

Script to Screen

Four writer-directors share the lessons they've learned

by Lindsey Michelle | Published February 9, 2010

Ben Hecht, the highly prolific and often uncredited writer in Hollywood's heyday, once said about directors, "They scowled at the dialogue, shuddered at the jokes and wrestled with a script until they had shaken out of it all the verbal glitter and bright plotting. Thus they were able to bring to screen only evidence of their 'genius.'"

Feelings such as this may be the main reason why many writers decide to choose a director who completely shares their vision—themselves.

The allure is the freedom and ability to turn their script into the exact film they envision. However, no matter how well the script plays in their head, when the writer steps behind the camera as director, inevitable changes to the screenplay are reluctantly made.

Four diverse writer-directors met this challenge and shared their experiences.

I Did It My Way Writer-director Sean McConville, whose horror film *Deadline*, starring Thora Birch and the late Brittany Murphy premiered at Cannes Film Market on May 13, 2009, didn't intend to become a director. But when he realized that his best chance for getting a film made was to direct it himself, he penned a screenplay with limited locations and characters that



Melissa Leo and David Strathairn star in writer-director Nicole Quinn's 2007 feature *Racing Daylight*.

could be shot for a low budget.

Writer-director Rob Williams also didn't originally intend to direct his own scripts, but felt that it was easier to direct his gay-themed films himself rather than find a director to take on the material. His latest film, *Make the Yuletide Gay*, premiered in the festival circuit in May of 2009 and was released on DVD this past November.

"There are still straight directors (and straight actors) who have reservations about working on a gay film," he says. "As a gay writer-director, I don't have to worry about working with another director—gay or straight—who might not understand my vision or know the market."

Nicole Quinn decided to direct her 2007 feature *Racing Daylight*, starring Melissa Leo and David Strathairn, when she discovered that "money people seemed to lose interest in the conversation when I told them I wasn't directing or didn't have some credits-as-long-as-your-arm guy." She attempted to work with a co-director, but when he too lacked enthusiasm for the film, Quinn took sole directing responsibility. [Find out more about Nicole Quinn's struggles to finish *Racing Daylight* [here, in the article she wrote for MovieMaker.](#)]

"I was cheaper," she says, or in other words, free. "So economics and passion were the deciding factors."

Nate Barlow had strong feelings about directing the anthology film *Tales from Beyond*, which has appeared in numerous film festivals and is available on DVD.

"Directing one's own work allows for a certain cohesiveness of vision from beginning to end. For certain, deeply personal stories, directing oneself may be the only way to go," Barlow says.

Barlow had an additional challenge when it came to directing—he was one of four writer-directors on the film; though each of them directed a separate segment of the anthology, there were times when they were forced to collaborate.

"Since the interconnecting story was directed by all of us, it was during the filming of those sections that conflicts naturally arose," he says. "How should we shoot it? Who has final say? There were definite power struggles. With strong personalities, coming to a consensus could be quite challenging. But on the positive, having multiple sets of eyes provides a natural system of checks and balances. It was interesting to work under such a structure once, but I'm not sure I would do it again."

Bye, Bye Subplot McConville found that a subplot in the screenplay didn't work during filming. Though limitations on time and money were a factor in eliminating the subplot, he realized, "The script was essentially a story of a woman alone at a house, and that to move away from that to another

story/location... eased the suspense and tension we'd built up."

Williams also eliminated a subplot while filming *Yuletide*. In the original script, there was a conflict between two relatives to try to help explain why the main character was afraid to come out to his parents.

However, Williams admits, "It always felt a little heavy handed, as if we didn't trust the audience to identify with the kid's fears of not meeting his parents' expectations, which is such a universal fear. When we filmed those scenes, they really didn't work and were the first to be cut. That taught me to trust my instincts and trust the audience—not everything needs to be spelled out."

Location, Location, Location The most frustrating and challenging aspect of filming for each of the writer-directors was acquiring and using locations.

Though Barlow wrote his script with a tight budget in mind, certain shots had to be changed or eliminated due to, he says, "shoot day time limits and the practicality of locations."

When Quinn lost funding for *Racing Daylight*, she was forced to rework the script without locations that she didn't own, though in the end she ultimately felt it was a "much better script."

Williams made changes to his locations right up until filming, since he says he "wrote several scenes in specific locations, but then had a hard time finding the right, affordable spot to use."

He did, however, learn one big lesson regarding locations: "Until I have much bigger budgets, I will never write a scene on a college campus again! I was shocked at how difficult and expensive that turned out to be."

Dialogue Dilemmas Though Barlow is proud of the film he created, especially with the limitations of a tight budget, he does have one regret about *Tales from Beyond*. "I would change the dialogue," he says. "It was intended to make the two main characters sound like semi-slackers—and it does have that effect—but now when I listen to them speak, I'm just not fond of what they say. I feel like I could have picked better language that would have delivered the same effect. Perhaps more table reads would have brought me to that realization earlier."

McConville found that when it came to the dialogue in *Deadline*, less was definitely more. He edited out all unnecessary dialogue during filming. "There are two or three five- to 10-minute sequences in the movie with no dialogue whatsoever," he notes, "and those are the places I am most proud of and I feel are the most effective in the movie."

Next Time, I'll... Some of the writer-directors have specific changes they'd make in directing their next film.

McConville would spend more time on the initial screenplay, developing the characters and outline. He plans to hire professional screenplay consultants to critique his next script. "I think pre-planning is the most important part of the process and you can never have enough preparation time, but [can] easily *not* have enough preparation time," he says. "The price for lack of preparation is paid in production and post-production, of course."

Barlow would attempt more complex camera angles. He shot his segment of *Tales from Beyond* with a stationary camera, but now feels that "[although the camera] served its purpose inside the supposed comfort of the main character's 'normal' world, I now believe that outside of that situation some variety in movement would have benefited the film."

Quinn has less specific alterations, as she feels that every film takes its own path. "There's no right way to do any of this," she says. "Each project finds its own way, and then when you start again everything has changed, so you can't even do it that way again."

"You have to pick your battles and go with what's possible," says Williams. "There are definitely scenes in *Make the Yuletide Gay* where I wish we had been able to get one more reaction shot or one more take of a long Steadicam shot, but you do what you can and make the best of it."

Though the writer-directors interviewed have every intention of continuing to direct their own films, Williams does have one ideal director in mind. "I'd gladly let Ang Lee direct one of my scripts," he says.

It seems, despite the freedom and control a writer-director craves in order to maintain their own "verbal glitter," there are always exceptions.