

The Business of Screenwriting: Cynicism

[Scott Myers](#)

"In a town built on dreams, all too often they turn into nightmares. Somebody gets screwed. Just the way it is. And that's why cynicism is Hollywood's blood type."

me? cynical?



The screenwriter is droning on and on about how he got screwed. "It was a great script. Seriously. Sold it as a pitch. Sold it in the room. Went off and totally nailed the story. Everybody loved the script. I mean... everybody."

This declaration is made with no joy, no sense of pride. Rather the words emerge from the writer's mouth with the stinging snap of bitterness.

"Every hot young director in town wanted in. The energy behind the thing was amazing."

He nods his head, a smile crossing his face, caught up in reverie. The smile fades.

"All I kept saying was one thing: Whoever you choose, make sure they're funny."

The screenwriter sighs. Kicks at the grass. It's nice grass. For the price he pays for his kid's education at the private school where this conversation is taking place, it should be.

"But no. They..."

His voice trails off. He squints up at the L.A. sun. Shakes his head.

"I should have seen it coming. Should have known better. It was bound to turn out this way."

And there it is. Hanging in the air as thick as smog over Covina on a blistering August afternoon.

Cynicism.

Not some fleeting emotion or a transient mood. I'm talking a deep-seated presence that has latched itself onto the soul of this poor bastard, sucking the life-force out of his slump-shouldered sagging shell of a body.

Now that the floodgates are open, he can't stop himself. A major studio behind the project, signed a big star who was a favorite of the target demo. And the script. He keeps coming back to the script.

"We got so much work off it. Tons of meetings, big producers, directors. One of my absolute heroes actually said it was the best thing she'd read in years. But the movie? Went from something that could have made my career to..."

He struggles to say the words.

"Straight to DVD. Not even a theatrical release."

The poor sap. But so typical. Everybody who has worked in the movie business has a similar story. In a town built on dreams, all too often they turn into nightmares. Somebody gets screwed. Just the way it is. And that's why cynicism is Hollywood's blood type.

The screenwriter stands there, now having managed to create quite a divot in this high-priced Westside sod. Then from nowhere, a chuckle.

"And yet I'm still here, huh? Still standing. Pitching, writing, fighting. There's always a chance... the next one... it could be a hit, right?"

He grunts, then offers a dispirited "Riiiiiiight." And turns away trudging toward a dodgy future.

That screenwriter? That screenwriter is me. And this moment is a turning point in my life. As I plod away from my one-sided conversation with an unfortunate elementary school kid parent, a chat dominated by my mournful confession, I have a singular moment of clarity and manage to stand outside myself — so I can hear my own words.

And I don't like what I'm hearing.

When I first came to Hollywood, I was in heaven. I could not imagine a more perfect place to be. Writing stories for a living? Movies? My God, how could anything top that!

Then I started to meet professional screenwriters. And every last one of them had been forced to do a dance with cynicism. The stories they told! One dissipated tale of woe after another.

Scratch the surface of any Hollywood screenwriter and no matter what genre they prefer to write, they all gravitate toward telling the same thing: Horror stories. Of a personal sort.

The fact is making a movie is like a Space Shuttle mission. There are a million things than can go wrong. And the most damnable reality as far as a screenwriter is concerned... you have so little control. You can write the most pristine, perfect story, then see it all go to shit.

Of course, things can go the other way. *Juno, Little Miss*

Sunshine. You read interviews with Cody or Arndt, and they were thrilled with how the process went.

But when you're trapped in the clutches of cynicism, you can't see that. Good screenwriting experiences are an aberration. A twisted little blip. The default mode is "Screenwriter = Screwed."

So here I am, standing in the parking lot of my son's elementary school, and I realize I had become what I swore I'd never be — another angry, frustrated screenwriter with his own litany of woeful war stories.

My response? It took me several months of an honest conversation with myself, but I ended up rejecting cynicism. I refused to cede my life to bitterness as well as the system that leads writers there in the first place.

I made some big decisions, most of them basically insane as far as Hollywood conventional wisdom goes.

But they along with fate have led me to where I am today. And I can truly say I am following my bliss. I do what I'm good at. I do what I enjoy. Writing. Teaching. And yes, blogging about the craft of screenwriting and movies, both of which I love.

In some ways, I'm more dialed into Hollywood and moviemaking than I've ever been. I'm writing scripts, I'm writing books, I'm writing stories, I'm writing about Story. Working with students, helping them learn the craft and

find their voice.

All of it I find it all deeply satisfying.

I'd like to think I've replaced cynicism with *realism*. The movie business is a tough one, extremely competitive with innumerable challenges. But you don't have to lose your soul to succeed at it.

When you break into the movie business, you will have some great times. You will have some crap times. And when things go wrong, which they inevitably will, cynicism will come knocking at your door.

Somehow you have to deal with it... before it deals with you.

My advice [and it surely ain't original]: Find what makes you happy. Find what you do that makes others happy. Find what you're good at. And do that.

That you can control. That cynicism can't touch.

The Business of Screenwriting is a weekly series of Go Into The Story posts based upon my experiences as a complete Hollywood outsider who sold a spec script for a lot of money, parlayed that into a screenwriting career during which time I've made some good choices, some okay decisions, and some really stupid ones. Hopefully you'll be the wiser for what you learn here.

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