

The Business of Screenwriting: Movie Stars

[Scott Myers](#)



I am staring at a cardboard standup display of an iconic movie character from an Academy Award winning movie, one of the most famous cinematic characters in the last three decades. The cutout figure is positioned just a few feet away from a desk. And behind the desk is the actor who portrayed the iconic character. So I literally only have to flit my eyes mere millimeters to shift my focus: Actor. Iconic figure. Iconic figure. Actor."So," the actor says, "What's the story?"

We are there for a pitch meeting. The actor has an overall

deal with the studio. We have an overall deal with the studio. *Why don't you come up with a really big action story for him? It'd be great for you guys to work together.*

It would also help to defray the cost of our respective overall deals.

So we generate dozens of ideas, finally landing on one about a Vietnam vet forced by Bad Guys to steal an eighteen-wheel truck, filled with a mysterious explosive cargo, then drive it hundreds of miles along a treacherous route in a war-torn third world country. Not the greatest concept in the world, but we are confident we have crafted a compelling Protagonist role, one that will appeal to the actor in whose office we are currently sitting.

We are about to be proven wrong.

We start into our pitch. We run through the big opening incident. Lots of action. Gun play. Introduce Bad Guys. Set up mystery: What's with the explosive cargo? What's with the truck? What's their plan? Cut to where we meet the Protagonist.

And this is where our troubles begin.

Thinking like writers, if the Protagonist has got to drive a truck from Point A to Point B fending off rebel soldiers and cargo ready to blow to kingdom come, then let's invest the saga with a strong emotional plot, a psychological journey to accompany the physical journey. It's a redemption story.

A chance for the Protagonist to make up for a broken past.

So how do we meet the Protagonist? He's down and out. Drunk. A tortured soul passed out on the stoop of his crappy trailer home dwarfed by his beat-to-hell semi-truck. He's roused awake. Opens his bloodshot eyes and peers up at a face he hasn't seen in decades: His commanding officer from Vietnam.

"Got a job for you."

Just as we're about to get rolling with our story, the actor shakes his head.

"No, no. How about this."

He leans forward, gaze locked on us.

"I'm with you for the opening. Fine. After that, we cut to these two bright lights, growing bigger and bigger. A big rumbling sound underneath, ominous, powerful. The rumbling stops. We hear a door swing open. A shadowy figure descends into view. Fog, mist, the whole nine yards. And now our eyes adjust. It's a truck. The biggest, baddest truck ever. And I'm the driver climbing out of the cab. I step into frame against the lights, a shadowy figure, walking with a purpose. Step by step, heels on cement — thwack, thwack, thwack — straight toward the camera. Until my face appears filling the screen, eyes filled with fierce determination. And I am ready to... kick... some... ass."

By now he's standing right next to the cardboard stand-out of the iconic movie figure, which I note is two feet taller than the actor. Literally larger than life. And the truth suddenly dawns on me:

We're pitching a character. He's thinking a hero.

We're pitching to an actor. He's thinking like a movie star.

If you're a movie star, you have fans. And fans have certain expectations about the roles you play. The actor to whom we are pitching has zero interest in playing a down-and-out-drunk-living-in-a-dumpy-trailer-tortured-soul-Vietnam Vet. No matter what subtle character arc or compelling redemption story we have in mind, the very idea of him playing a broken soul simply does not compute.

He's a star. And he need only glance up at the cardboard stand-up he has planted near his desk to be reminded of his iconic place in movie history.

Every script he reads, every pitch he hears, every role he considers, he has to assess from the perspective of his place as a movie star.

So our project? Pass. And lesson learned: There are actors. There are movie stars.

When you go into a meeting with talent, be sure you know who you're talking to. The actor behind the desk. Or the eight foot tall cardboard standup.

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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