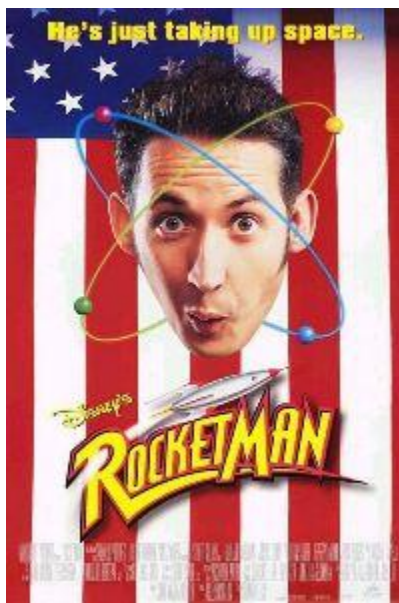




Our very own J.C. and Adam had the privilege to attend the 12th Annual [Nashville Screenwriting Conference](#) that was held June 4-6 in Nashville, Tennessee. Along with attending several of the great panels featured this year, they had the chance to chat with a some of the panelists, which resulted in a few of them agreeing to partake in our CUT TO: shenanigans.

First up? Craig Mazin. The co-writer of the hit comedies *Scary Movie 3* and *4*. Currently, he is writing *The Hangover 2* with director Todd Phillips, as well as an action-comedy for producer Jerry Bruckheimer, a science-fiction comedy for Paramount Pictures, and a family adventure for 20th Century Fox.

Craig served on the Board of Directors of the Writers Guild of America, West from 2004 to 2006. He also runs [The Artful Writer](#)—a website for professional and aspiring screenwriters.



Q: I'm very interested in how you got your start with *Rocketman*, which was easily one of my favorite live action Disney movies growing up. What was the process like? Were you hired? Did you write it with Harland in mind?

A: Boy, it's always a trip to meet people who say *Rocketman* was a favorite movie when they were growing up, because I wrote it when *I* was growing up...

I wrote the movie with my then-partner Greg Erb (who still writes for Disney...he was one of the writers of *The Princess and the Frog*) when we were both in our early 20s. I was 24 at the time, and working as a marketing executive at Disney. Our boss at the time took a liking to us and suggested that we try and write a screenplay for the studio.

I remember that Greg and I went to go see the documentary *Crumb*, but it was sold out, so we caught a showing of *Apollo 13* instead. And afterward, in our 24-ish way, we decided that *Apollo 13* would have been much better if Tom Hanks had been playing an idiot.

Back in the mid 90's, Disney was making a ton of movies, and they were always looking for material for the pipeline. We wrote the script fairly quickly, it was passed along to Harland's manager by our agent, and within a matter of days, Harland was attached and the movie was green-lit.

Nothing has been that simple since. :)

The first draft wasn't written specifically for Harland, but the subsequent drafts were. We loved working with him, and he was instrumental in keeping us on the project. He added a lot of his own jokes as well. I don't think Greg or I would have ever come up with, "Fun is my Chinese neighbor's middle name."

Q: Can you explain a little about how you approach the rewriting process and how it works when you have an actor attached to bounce ideas off of?

A: I approach rewriting the way I approach blank page writing. All bets are off. I consider what I have, where it could be better, and then I start doing the work. If I have any tendency, it's too be *too* aggressive with the rewriting, but that's probably better than being too precious with the material.

You can always scroll back a draft or two to pick up stuff you should have kept. You can't, however, magically produce rewritten pages you've never actually done.

When it comes to writing with actors, I personally love it. You just have to be careful, because actors necessarily have a specific viewpoint centering around their character. If they're not deeper into their own character than the overall story or other characters, then they're probably not doing their job. Of course, as the writer, you have to be the caretaker of the story and *all* the characters.

As long as you can keep that perspective, then working with actors is a joy.

Q: Let's back up a little, when did you first realize you wanted to be a writer? Did you always know or was it at that moment with Greg Erb you mentioned previously?

A: No, by that point we already had a manager and agent.

I think when I was in college, I started to realize that creativity wasn't just wankery, but a proper vocation. So once I graduated, I drove out to LA and got a day job...and worked on screenplays at night.

I certainly didn't always know. When I entered college, it was my intention to be a neurologist, actually.

Q: What was it like to sit in a darkened theater with an audience and watch your words come to life for the first time on the big screen?

A: Nauseating.

Until you are finally held accountable for the screenplays you write, you are not fully a screenwriter. You *must* see your work produced in order to learn what you should and should not do.

I recommend that every budding screenwriter take a short script...or even a long one...and try and shoot it. Doesn't need to be a Red Cam. But shoot coverage, edit it together, and learn how to be accountable to production.

Q: What was life like for you immediately after *Rocketman* was made?

A: Immediately after, life was more humble. :)

Q: Has watching actors act out and speak your written words changed your process in any way?

A: I think the experience of watching actors perform your work *must* change you, unless your work is so specific. It appears that Mamet changes actors, rather than vice versa.

Well, no one's going to ever accuse me of being Mamet.

Still, there are aspects of one's writing that are idiosyncratic to the writer and shouldn't change. Actors want this as much as we should; writers have styles.

For new writers, I think watching their work performed usually leads to one big change: LESS. We come to understand how we rob actors of opportunities when we force them to SPEAK their minds instead of perform their minds. At Nashville, Richie LaGravenese told me that he and Francis Lawrence, who is directing Richie's latest script, often go through an exercise where Richie tries to rewrite a scene to get the same intention across without *any* dialogue. In the end, you often need *some* dialogue, but less than you might think.

One of the most famous lines in recent film history is dialogueless: the words that Bill Murray whispered in Scarlett Johansson's ear in *Lost in Translation*.

Q: Has being a director had any effect on you as a writer?

A: Directing only reinforces this. When you direct, you not only have the actors' faces and bodies to help tell the story, but you have the camera, score, sound, pacing...

Think of the 3rd act of *Goodfellas*. Henry Hill is telling us about his day: where he has to go, what he has to do, how to make spaghetti sauce, why everyone's driving him crazy. But that's not the story that Scorsese is telling with his direction. He's showing us an increasingly addicted Henry, a helicopter that might or might not be following Henry, an editing style that is frantic and jagged, and a score that pounds the tension of the sequence.



The movie is figuratively on cocaine. That's not something a character can remark to another character. That's something you have to script *in between* the dialogue. The dialogue, at that point, almost becomes background work...like a crowd of extras or something.

Q: Sum up your feelings of Hollywood today and the process of getting a script made into a film. Do you feel that it's a good process overall?

A: Okay, so Hollywood today...it's tougher than it was when I started. No doubt about it. Simple reason: fewer movies are getting made. A lot fewer movies. That means a process that was already arduous and somewhat arbitrary and often creatively reductive and psychologically harrowing has become even more so.

Is it a good process? No. I don't think so. I think that Hollywood has made the same mistake other businesses under stress have made: they've cut back on R&D. Well, screenplays are the R&D of this biz.

Will it improve? Yes, I think so. This country is going through something worse than a recession...better than a full on Depression, thank God...and when we emerge on the other side, I think there will be revitalization of development.

The best situation for now, and back then, and in the future, and always...will be development partnerships between the key creative elements. In my mind, the best movies are made when writers and directors work together in a trusting relationship. Nothing beats that. Studios try and play that role with writers, and they often fail. Directors try and makes movies without closely working with writers, and that often fails too.

Writers and directors. To me, that's the key.

Q: What was the first screenplay you ever read and how did it change or alter your approach or perspective on filmmaking?

A: That's a good question. I hadn't considered being a screenwriter until about 1994, and sites like yours didn't exist. Actually, "sites" didn't exist.

The first actual screenplay I read was probably *Jerry Maguire*. In retrospect, that was a wonderful place to start.

Q: When you first started to learn the craft, did you read/study any how-to books on screenwriting, and if so, which ones did you find to be the most beneficial?

A: In the beginning, I read Syd Field's *Screenwriter's Workbook*, and I read Chris Vogler's book *The Hero's Journey* as well. Frankly, I didn't find either of them to be much help. Sooner or later, you leave that stuff behind and start creating your own method. I've never read any of the other books.

For your readers, I'd say this: don't spend a dime on any of that stuff. Just watch every single Pixar movie, and really study them. Break them out into index cards if you want. Note how the characters, plot and theme all unfold in parallel. That's the only screenwriting school you need to really absorb the fundamentals.

After that, watch movies, read novels, read screenplays...but mostly importantly, forge your own path through your own writing.

Q: What is your writing process like (i.e. schedule, outline, notecards, treatments, etc.)?

A: If left to my own devices, I'll start with the basics. What is the main idea of the story? Who is the main character? What is the movie about? How is the main character the person that must be the center of the story, and how does the meaning of the story relate to that character's persona?

From there, I start to outline the rough shape of the film. Once I have that, I try and get a basic scene-by-scene sense. I'm not dogmatic about it; once I start writing, I always have license to stray as need be.

I do find that actually writing out an outline will often generate good ideas for the script that I might otherwise not have found. The simple act of typing is usually more productive than sitting around and thinking.

Q: What software do you use and why?

A: I use Movie Magic Screenwriter because they match Final Draft in terms of features, and because their customer service is outstanding and 100% free. Can't say the same for Final Draft. I endorse Movie Magic. They're great guys, and they're really responsive. I talk to them and make suggestions all the time about how they could improve the software; at least one of my suggestions made it in to the most recent version.

Q: So then, in your bio in the program at the NSC it said you had sold a few specs. Can you talk about them at all?

A: Specs? It did? I don't think so. Because I haven't. :)

I've always been a pitch guy. In fact, I'm writing the first spec of my career right now, believe it or not. [J.C.'s Note: Craig's right, I was looking at the wrong bio.]



Q: For a few years there you were (seemingly) only doing the parody movies, was it something you liked to do or was it a good stepping stone? I know a lot of people look at those films as just shit that Hollywood is throwing out there, so how do you deal with that? Do you think they were good for you as a writer?

A: Yes, there was a five year stretch of nothing but spoof films. It wasn't planned, and I certainly didn't think it would be three movies in a row. Then again, the movies made a ton of money, and once that train starts rolling, they really don't want you to jump off.

I loved it. To write and produce and direct spoof movies with David Zucker and Jim Abrahams and Pat Proft...c'mon, that's a joy. I was working on an equal footing with guys whose movies had seriously formed my sense of humor in the first place.

Look, people who confused our movies with the stuff that Friedberg & Seltzer make...what can I say? I don't blame them on one level; the ersatz spoof movies literally traded on marketplace confusion, so I can't freak out if people got confused.

I think our movies were much, much better than theirs. I also think that we were battling the studio on each of the films to try and keep out stuff we didn't like and keep in stuff we did like. Sometimes we succeeded. Sometimes we failed. Sometimes, by the way...the studio was right. Were our movies on par with the original ZAZ stuff. No. We never got to that level. There was far too much in our way, including this new insistence on loading these movies with pop culture references. That was something we always struggled with.

And when it came time to test the movies, the audiences seemed to love those...while, at the same time, sort of hating us for doing them. It was a weird thing, and our hand was forced.

I will tell you in my experience as a writer, nothing is harder than writing a spoof movie. Nothing. It's brutal. You can't settle for smiles. Every joke has to make at least a third of the audience really belly laugh out loud. And there has to be three jokes like that per minute. No rests, no breathers. And you need sequences that make everyone roll with laughter every ten minutes.

It's like sprinting for 80 minutes.

Just thinking about it makes my eyelid twitch.

So no, writing those movies wasn't a stepping stone. And they were good for me as a writer. And I don't care if people run them down. I'm proud of the work, and I'm proud of my friendship with David and Jim and Pat and Jerry. One day, Jerry pulled me aside and said, "You're the fourth ZAZ guy." That means the world to me, and puts any sneering dismissal in its proper context.

The fact that Jerry is senile and tells everyone he meets that they're the fourth ZAZ guy is completely irrelevant.

Q: So how did the Hangover 2 come about? Also, during the conference you talked about how different it is writing with the director, would you mind sharing some of that for the readers?

A: I've known Todd Phillips for a while. I worked with him briefly on *School For Scoundrels*, and we've been friends for a few years. Right after he finished shooting his upcoming movie *Due Date* (which is great, by the way), he needed to get a script in shape pretty quickly to launch into *Hangover 2*. Because time was of the essence, he asked me to come on board to work with him and Scot Armstrong (who wrote on a bunch of Todd's movies).

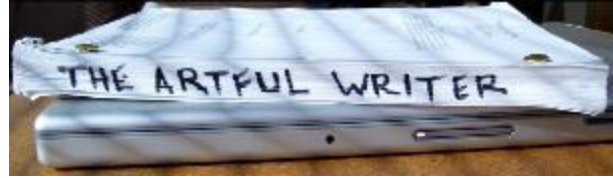
It's been great. I love writing for those characters, and Scot and Todd and I work really well together.

I love writing with a director because I feel like the work is being crafted for production, rather than for a document to be read by people who will then decide if a director should be hired. It's not that those people are terrible, it's just that the entire mission is speculative. When you're writing with a director, you are writing what will be shot. That's an enormous benefit, and it does make you more accountable to the words you put on the page.

Q: After being at NSC and hearing the audience members ask the same questions over and over it becomes clear how little aspiring writers actually do research on the topic. How naive they all are. They all want their script read by actors, directors, agents, and they think it's just going to happen like that.

But the thing is, there are numerous sites out there now that all up and coming writers should visit to learn more about the occupation of being a screenwriter and what it takes to actually make it in the business.

Yours is one of the best of them, you have forums with heaps of information and forums where pros even answer questions. Was there an initial thought that made you want to start the site?



A: It's a funny thing: the more information available, the lazier people get about seeking out information.

I started the site back in '04, I think, because I wanted a place to talk about the real professional issues faced by real professional screenwriters. That's why I called it "The Artful Writer" as opposed to "The Artistic Writer." It's about being canny and savvy when it comes to the trade we practice.

It started small like all of these things. It's been pretty amazing to watch this thing grow all on its own; I don't really advertise or promote the site in any way. If people are there, they've come to it honestly.

Q: The site is very informative on many levels but at the same time I didn't realize that a screenwriting site could be popular if it didn't give biased reviews and links to scripts that are in development. What are your thoughts on sites like that: ScriptShadow, Spec Chaser, etc.?

A: I wrote about this topic recently on my site: <http://artfulwriter.com/?p=1018>

I think anyone who publishes a screenplay that is in active development is an anti-writer asshole who doesn't understand what development is, doesn't understand what writing is, and doesn't understand what professional behavior is.

My argument turns on nothing more than this: screenplays aren't paintings or novels that are "done." They are constantly being worked over. Sometimes a draft represents a writer's best foot forward. Sometimes a draft represents what the studio or a particular director wants, and it's an experiment...never meant to be seen.

There's a reason theaters have curtains. You're not supposed to see what's going on behind stage unless you're a member of the troupe. It ruins the illusion, and it also forces the creators to be careful, guarded and nervous.

If writers want to know what's selling, they can read the trades, but for the love of God...chasing what *just sold* is the dumbest strategy ever. Tell me, what was Diablo Cody chasing when she wrote *Juno*?

Start your own trend, people. There's no value in these websites that offer you unauthorized views of unfinished works.

It's awful, counterproductive and selfish.

Q: So, why do you think sites where the author has been asked by professionals not to post scripts or not post negative thoughts that could harm the development of a project, continue to do it?

A: I think the internet makes some people feel famous. It's not real fame. It's nonsense fame. But they enjoy the attention, so they keep doing what they do.

Q: After John August's [blog about Scriptshadow](#) went wide, ScriptShadow made some snappy comment about throwing his John August DVDs away. Did you ever get anything from him in any form?

A: No. Honestly, who gives a shit if Christopher Eads throws away John August DVDs? Like that changes anything in this world?

Q: Also, you've been extremely lucky in that only two of your scripts have ever leaked, *Harvey* and *A Short Happy Life*. Both of these projects remain unproduced, would you still feel negative toward reviews of these scripts or, since they are dead, would it even matter?

A: I'm okay with those scripts being reviewed, because they basically represent my final work on those projects. If someone asks my permission, and I think it's okay, then I'm happy to grant it. So with something like *Harvey* or *A Short, Happy Life*, I'm totally cool with it. Also, those scripts aren't in *active* development. They died years ago when the rights ran out at Miramax.

Q: You were on the board of directors for the WGAw and a lot of your blogs go into that territory as well. Were you instrumental in any major changes while there?

A: I was.

Some of what I did was institutional; I made sure that the Guild routinely and quickly publishes the minutes of each Board meeting on the WGA website (which was modernized by a committee I led). My most lasting accomplishments, however, have been in the area of credits. Because of my work on the Board and as the co-chair of the Credits Committee, we have made some very important and lasting changes to our credits system.

Our biggest change is currently up for a vote...so ask me this question again on Wednesday and I'll let you know if we prevailed. :)

Q: It seems like at the end of every screenwriting interview the interviewer asks the writer to give advice, but personally I hate it because I know that if you write a good script then you will get attention, so, that said, is there anything you want to promote or you have coming up that you want to talk about?

A: I just want to say that I really enjoyed my second Nashville Screenwriting Conference, I'll certainly be back next year, and I really encourage people who are serious about learning from pros to check that event out. It's the real deal. Any time you can hang and eat BBQ with Larry Kasdan and Phil Robinson and Scott Frank and Richie LaGravenese and Ted Griffin...something's obviously going right in a big way.

Thanks for a good interview!