

Taking shortcuts in development is the surest path to 'development hell'

MY FIRST SCREENWRITING TEACHER at NYU film school was Patricia Cooper, who'd served as the highest female executive at a major studio at the time, overseeing big movies at Paramount during the 1970s. She marched our class up to the Gulf & Western Building at Columbus Circle and sat us down in a screening room that resembled what I imagined a first-class airline compartment looked like, then showed us Francis Ford Coppola's "The Conversation."

As we gushed over it afterward, she praised the film but confessed to disappointment with the script. This was my first glimpse of major-league Hollywood story development.

My second teacher was Venable Herndon, co-author of Arthur Penn's "Alice's Restaurant." Venable's class was like a Reichian encounter group, but to get out of it in one piece, you didn't have to bare your primal wounds, only write a screenplay.

My third teacher was once-blacklisted Ian McLellan Hunter, who fronted for and wrote with Dalton Trumbo on "Roman Holiday."

Ian's wild but warm wit delighted the class, which he taught out of his cozy if cavernous Upper West Side apartment. "Everybody has ideas, but it's the execution they buy," he'd tell us, but he knew a good idea for a movie when he saw one.

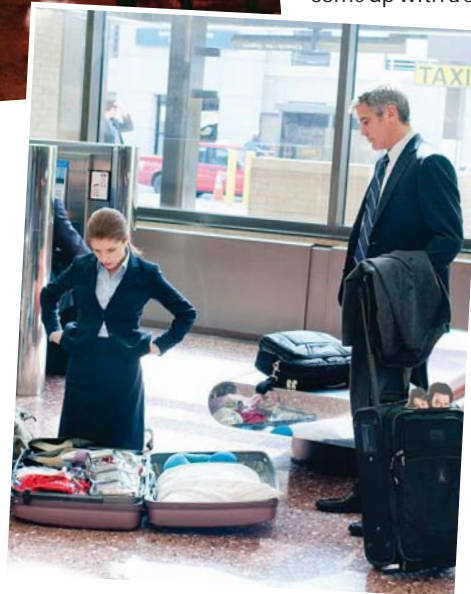
When I began reading and developing scripts for directors and producers, I met executives such as Beau St. Clair, Amy Pascal and Sherry Lansing. I met producers including Ed Feldman, Marvin Worth, Lauren Shuler, Jack Brodsky, Lynda Obst and Ray Wagner. And I met directors such as Howard Zieff and Dick Donner who, while not writers themselves, could walk into a room, size up a rewrite in five minutes and leave the script funnier, more emotionally engaging and more visually captivating than the A-list writers who'd been slaving over it for weeks.

I met writers, too, including Robert and Roger Towne, Charles Shyer & Nancy Meyers, Lowell Ganz & Babaloo Mandel, Jeff Fiskin and too many others to list here.

But before long, a nasty shadow fell over story departments around town. A local newspaper that should've known better sneered at "D-girls," a label neither I nor anyone else I knew had ever uttered on or off a studio lot. Soon, it seemed "development" rarely was printed without the word "hell" after it.



"BUILDING ON PAST ACHIEVEMENTS"? This season's awards darling "Up in the Air," right, is said to have been influenced by 1975's "Shampoo."



As development execs and story analysts slowly decreased in number, so did many of the richer, more complex and, yes, highly commercial scripts I used to read every other week (or at least every other month). In a weakened economy, scripts increasingly were expected to come in "camera-ready," though they almost never do.

This isn't to suggest development hell isn't a real place, even if you can't always see "the signpost up ahead," as Rod Serling would say, on the way to it. But fewer folks in the biz who eat, sleep and breathe cinematic storytelling means, to my mind, longer odds of breaking with the formulaic on the big screen.

It might be normal for writers to resent story notes, and it's definitely normal for them to resent uninformed ones. But a good development person isn't someone who merely tells a

writer that his or her script lacks gravitas or panache, then heads for the latest trendy eatery. A good development person can spot and argue for promising movie material, and a superior one can see it through to its fullest potential.

A great movie like the Wagner-produced "Petulia," greenlighted on Feldman's watch at Warner Bros., is testament to the talent of screenwriters Lawrence Marcus and Barbara Turner, director Richard Lester, cinematographer Nicolas Roeg and everyone else involved, including the cast.

A clever development guy or gal might watch that 1968 pic even now and say, "Hmmm, subject matter rooted in 1950s, kitchen-sink realistic American theater married to a post-Resnais visual scheme" and come up with a script for our times that's

hugely exciting. Surely there's still room in the global biz for this type of invention and building on past achievements, with all due respect to the current emphasis on the mythologies of popular toy lines.

"Shampoo," for example, is said to have influenced some who worked on "Up in the Air." This ability to absorb and make arresting use of movie benchmarks is gained in abundance by working in story development, and that skill can help transform development people into vibrant filmmakers.

Or take Meyers, who most recently wrote and directed

"It's Complicated." She never makes anything less than the movie she has set out to make. And that movie usually makes a lot of money. One of her secrets? She started as a development person.

In short, story development isn't, at its best, guesswork or gilding the lily: It's a key component of moviemaking.

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