

The Inside Story

How to Make it in Hollywood

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By

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additional contributions by Dick Chudnow

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INTRODUCTION

Hollywood, the “Dream Factory,” is a tough place, and it’s getting tougher. The road to a career in entertainment is a rocky one. It’s filled with ruts, boulders, road rage, hijackers, and amphetamine-amped truck drivers. It’s a war zone. But, hopefully, by following a few rules, learned from others whose journeys have survived this obstacle course, this test of will and talent, you just might find out how to make it in Hollywood. Or . . . you could be Kim Kardashian.

To the entertainment junkies, film and video makers, aspiring screenwriters, actors, artists, comics, and anyone who ponders a career in “the Industry,” this is a story of one person’s journey through the maze that is called show business. It’s a business like no other. Though there’s truth to that old-time song, “There’s No Business Like Show Business,” the reality is not always as upbeat as the tune.

Tens of thousands of students graduate from film and video production programs annually. Hundreds of thousands of writers create screenplays. And that’s just in this country. Who knows how many come from oh, let’s say . . . Lithuania?

What very few aspirant entertainment creators and performers might obtain is a sustaining career that they love. But it *is* possible. It takes having incredible tenacity, perseverance, and, above all, character.

Most people in power in Hollywood began their career with tenacity and perseverance, but, along the way, it seems they lost all character. Some are as morally corrupt as a Taliban warlord. Others are as trustworthy as a Wall Street banker.

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Even more lack the loyalty of an NBA superstar. An entertainment lawyer friend once described movie moguls like this: "They eat their young."

In my hometown, Cheyenne, Wyoming, when someone says, "Let's have lunch," they mean they're hungry and want to eat something with you. In Hollywood, when someone says, "Let's have lunch," they mean, "See you when I need you," and there's no mention of a time and place to eat.

Hollywood is the only place on earth where *everybody* has a script. Writers. Producers. Directors. Actors. Managers. Lawyers. Accountants. Hairdressers. Pool cleaners. Clothes cleaners. They all want fame and fortune.

The movie business is like a closed corral: sons of lawyers; daughters of agents; offspring of studio bosses. They have no guts. That's why there are so many remakes and sequels. Do something risky and you're suddenly outside the corral.

I've directed movies, television, TV commercials, music videos, and documentaries all over the Western world. Some of my work has won awards.

But I never fit in. I didn't know I didn't fit in because I never knew where or what "in" was. How did it all happen? How did I think that a kid with dreams of making films could do just that without any relatives or friends in the biz?

Along the way I realized I'm still working because I'm a maverick. And here's a few rules I follow for you to consider:

RULE # 1:

IT'S ALL ABOUT PASSION

If you audition for a role as an actor, test your comedy routine, pitch an idea to a network or studio, sing or play your song, or show your video demo reel, its all about how much energy, perhaps humor, and certainly passion you put into that effort.

A good example was Noomi Rapace, a Swedish actress, who wanted to play the part of Lisbeth Salander in ***The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo***, the first film in a trilogy made from one of the best selling novels in history. Being naturally voluptuous (which she was in ***Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows*** and ***Prometheus***), she didn't have a prayer to land the role of an anorectic, ninety-nine-pound bi-sexual punk. She lost fifty pounds, died her hair ink black and styled it in a faux hawk, got tattoos and piercings, and forced the producers to give her a shot. She had the passion to win that role, no matter what it took.

* * * *

Claire Townsend, labeled one of the top seven "baby moguls" in *New West Magazine* and the *L.A. Times*, was one of the Hollywood "gate keepers." She liked my first movie, ***KGOD***, a.k.a. ***Pray TV***, and we became friends. Formerly a Vice President of Production at Twentieth Century Fox, Claire was singularly responsible for Fox making ***Quest for Fire***. I was amazed. I asked her, "How the hell did you sell a screenplay with no dialogue? Monkeys grunting through an entire movie?!" Her answer: "It was the passion of the filmmaker (Jean-Jacques

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Annaud.) He got up on my coffee table and acted out the entire script.”

Despite being one of the entitled “daughters of,” with an Ivy League education, Claire started as a reader for a hundred bucks a week for a major producer. He treated her like a slave. Although fearful of him, she wanted to write a tell-all book about Hollywood swine. Little did she know that she would soon contract breast cancer and die.

Through it all, Claire taught me a huge lesson: It’s all about passion. Making something out of nothing. Rest in peace dear Claire.

* * * *

Reminiscent of the Emmy Award–winning TV series *Mad Men*, a New York ad agency creative team, for whom I directed a TV commercial, told me about their experience pitching a campaign to Procter & Gamble.

They had to show up first thing Monday morning, at P&G’s headquarters in Cincinnati, Ohio. They entered a conference room filled to capacity with dozens of bland, white MBA males in monochrome suits. They had thirty minutes to complete their pitch, which included PowerPoint charts, storyboards, and animatics—animated versions of their storyboards.

After the presentation, with no feedback or particular enthusiasm from their audience, the creative team exited the room and flew back to New York, where they would hear if they were successful and were chosen as the ad agency for P&G. To me, this sounded like doing a comedic stand-up routine to a convention of morticians, or auditioning, nude, for a role as a swimsuit model for *Sports Illustrated* in front of a room full of blind people.

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Don Draper, the lead character in *Mad Men*, would have muttered to himself, “Fuck them if they didn’t get it. It’s the best stuff they’ll ever see.”

Think of yourself as naked. No matter how bad your body is. But be so passionate about what you have to offer that your talent and idea will carry the day.

Incidentally, the creative team about whom I spoke. did get the job, without being naked. That’s how I came to know their story.

* * * *

My writing partner, Dick Chudnow, and I completed a screenplay called *1775*, which attributes the Revolutionary War to a circulation battle between the British establishment newspaper, edited by Thomas Pepys, and the fledgling Revolutionary American rag, edited by Thomas Paine. Both publishers embellish stories about Ben Franklin’s whore-mongering with his cronies, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, et al. It was a parody of period places, people, and events—a comedic vision of history.

We met with two vice presidents of United Artists, Willie Hunt and John Tarnoff, both well respected and the only executives who survived the bloodbath of firings after the making of ***Heaven’s Gate***. They had both seen and liked our movie ***KGOD*** and were comedy fans.

We felt we were in a receptive room. We knew the script by heart and could act the dialogue. We had them laughing their tails off. Here’s a short example of a scene when Will Madison, the cub reporter for the fledgling *New Amsterdam Times*, goes to cover the Salem witch trials:

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EXT. NEW AMSTERDAM COURTHOUSE

WILL walks toward the building, stops to catch his breath. At the bottom of the courthouse steps, we see a group of WITCHES picketing, with signs that read: FREE THE SALEM SEVEN . . . SPELLCASTING IS EVERYPERSON'S RIGHT . . . GIVE ME SORCERY OR GIVE ME DEATH.

WILL registers the protestors, then mounts the steps and enters the courthouse.

INT. THE COURTHOUSE

WILL enters a long corridor to the various courtrooms. He spots a GUARD and asks directions.

WILL: I'm going to the witch trials.

GUARD: Which trials?

WILL: That's right, how do I get there?

GUARD: Where?

WILL: The witch trials.

GUARD: How would I know if you don't.

WILL: If I don't what?

GUARD: Know which trials you're going to.

WILL: Arghhhhh!

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Exasperated, WILL opens the nearest courtroom door, and a bevy of BATS flies out. He nods at the BATS then enters.

WILL: This must be the place.

We stopped our pitch after twenty minutes, feeling we were home free. Willie, relaxing after a final laugh, looked at Tarnoff, then back at us. She said, "That is the funniest pitch I've ever heard in my life." Tarnoff agreed, and then Willie continued, "We'll never make that movie."

We didn't know what to say. She continued further, with complete candor, "No one at this studio would understand it; it's a period piece, which is expensive; and, although all the characters are hysterical, this studio was built by movie stars. This is a youth movie, with an ensemble cast, and they'll never get it."

We know we gave it our all because we believed in it so passionately. It just wasn't the right place to pitch. We later had

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it optioned by a major producer, and, even though it was never produced, we never lost our belief.

* * * *

There's passion fruit, the passion of love (which you may or may not confuse with the sex part), and, according to Mel Gibson, the passion of the Christ. Use any or all of them plus props, trendy clothes and tap shoes if you can tap dance, and, above all, your soul. Because, along with that pitch, that audition, that song, that stand-up routine, or the video you show, its all about the passion you display that, more often than not, becomes infectious to those listening to you.