

Scriptwriters pursue their screen dreams

Tapping technology, aspiring writers hope to break into the entertainment industry, but competition is fierce as thousands join the race.

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Los Angeles - Newly minted film school graduate Nick Naney envisions the moment "someone" asks about his screenplay, reads it, and wants to produce it. "It could happen," he says from his parents' home in Long Island where he lives while he starts his career.

Across the country, San Francisco Bay Area screenwriting hopefuls, Rick Popko and Dan West (they now have one microbudget film under their belt with another on the way), have been turned down by agents, studios, and producers. But someone at the Weinstein Company just asked for two copies of their first film, so they are "cautiously optimistic."

Fellow Californian Heath Davis Havlick continues her day job as a media relations specialist while she awaits word from the Welsh countryside, where her first screenplay to be sold "is supposed to go into production soon." The final piece of the picture, says Ms. Havlick, is for the remaining monies due to come in "anytime now," according to the director who has told the anxious newcomer that the film's budget is nearly complete and that once the final funding arrives, she will get a paycheck and the film will begin production.

All of these Hollywood hopefuls share the same "screen dream," a writing career in the entertainment industry. But, as they acknowledge, they're up against fearsome odds. The big studios are shrinking – Paramount just announced the closure of its boutique film division Vantage, Warner recently shuttered its art house divisions Picturehouse and Warner Independent, and New Line axed nearly 90 percent of its staff.

Industry insiders such as agents, producers, and studio executives, as well as 30-year veterans, all admit it may be the toughest time in the industry's history to be starting out. The sheer number of new hopefuls is just the beginning of the story – Sundance Film Festival, the grandpa of the independent filmfests, received 200 films in its first year. This past year, it was deluged with more than 8,000 entries. The 10-year-old online screenwriting website, scriptapalooza.com, has gone from 600 entries to more than 4,500 this year.

However, for some of the same reasons that the industry cup is overflowing with

"newbies" – cheap technology in the hands of young filmmakers, the proliferation of new outlets from multiple cable channels to new digital avenues on the Internet – it is also ripe with opportunity for the newcomer, most industry professionals agree.

"It's an exciting time," says Sandy Grushow, former chairman of Fox Television Entertainment Group, who heads up filmaka.com, a website devoted to finding and developing new talent. "It's probably a harder time than ever. Whoever wants to be in this business is really going to have to work hard and want it, but the opportunities are there."

If there is a single word that dominates advice from industry veterans, it is homework. "This is the last business with no credentials required to say you are part of it," says Larry Meistrich, CEO of Nehst Studios. He says his own Cinderella story (his first film, the \$25,000 "Laws of Gravity," beat out "Unforgiven" at the Berlin Film Festival 20 years ago and launched his career) is no longer possible. "It's a business, and today, nobody cares about the romance of the plucky new kid in town with his film made for nothing. Films cost a lot to produce," he points out.

Most newcomers have little sense of the hard realities of film production. For instance, he says with a wry laugh, just to get a rating on a film, without which no theater will take it, costs \$8,500. Newcomers have stars in their eyes about striking it rich in Hollywood, says Mr. Meistrich. "This is big business." The proliferation of entertainment programming that induces the illusion of access to the inner workings of Hollywood has perpetuated the notion that anyone can get access to the top echelons. "This is simply not true," he adds. "I'm not going to take your script at one of those seminars I participate in," he says, and "neither is the guy from any of the other studios."

Stone cold rejection is nothing new to Mr. Popko and Mr. West, who say their story even has an added twist. The duo attended high school with Sofia Coppola, daughter of the famed filmmaker, who took the team's first script under his wing. But, they say ruefully, "It all went nowhere, and so we actually started at the top and just went down from there." All the agents they contacted informed them that nobody in town would read unsolicited material for fear of lawsuits over idea theft. And since studios wouldn't take material without a referral, they found themselves in the classic Hollywood bind: "We can't get in without contacts, but can't get contacts without getting in," says Popko. They opted to take the entrepreneurial route, a hardscrabble one. They made their own movie on a shoestring budget and found a small company that would distribute it in DVD rental stores, such as Blockbuster. But they have been fighting with their current distributor over payments and performance.

Increasingly, technology is seen as the white horse riding to the rescue of many newcomers' screen dreams. There are some 400 screenwriting competition websites alone, many of which promise access to production companies and, in some cases, career guidance and even management. Mr. Grushow's filmaka.com is one such site, as is Edelman Studios (Edelman.com/studios), a recently launched destination that aims to exploit the interactivity of the Internet. The brainchild of ad mavens Andy Marks and his partner, David Freeman, the idea is to present a writing "assignment" that members, who

pay to join, can tackle to show their writing skill. The "jobs" are geared toward commercial interests such as Burger King and Unilever, two of the company's clients. The end product is wide open, says Mr. Marks. "It could run the gamut from a feature film that the company might sponsor if they see it fits their target audience, all the way down to a film short."

But the online world is a numbers game, as well, says first-time screenwriter Ron Rogers, who joined two sites (inktip.com and scriptpimp.com), at \$100 a pop, only to find that nothing came of it. He and his writing partner have finally taken matters into their own hands, producing a 10-minute trailer of their film "The Feud," which he hopes to shop around. He managed to cut costs on the production because, he says, "everyone on the team, from the actors to the editors and cameraman, all want something to use to show off their skills as well."

Not everyone is soured on the old model. Industry veteran Blake Snyder says there is a window of opportunity for the newcomer right now. After a bruising, three-month writers' strike that ended in February, studios are hungry for new material, snapping up 10 scripts a week, versus one a year ago, says Mr. Snyder.

But even that window is an illusion, says Stacey Parks, founder of the online Film Distribution community, FilmSpecific.com, who points out that most of the "spec" scripts are from seasoned writers who used the time off during the strike to work on long-neglected projects. Even the veterans are realizing they can no longer simply wait for scripts to sell.

"If you aren't willing to become an entrepreneur in this new era," says Ms. Parks, "you probably aren't going to have a career as a screenwriter or anything else in Hollywood."

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