

FIVE EASY WAYS TO WRITE LOCALLY AND REACH THE WORLD

Oklahoma As A Case Study

By **Andrew Horton** horton@screentalk.biz

This is a simple tale about how screenwriters everywhere can write locally and reach the world. Using Oklahoma where I currently live as a case study, I am suggesting five easy approaches that can be used by screenwriters everywhere. Yes, I personally continue to work on projects in Hollywood, New York, London, Athens, New Zealand and beyond in contact with filmmakers, screenwriters, and producers. But this is my fifth year of living in beautiful Oklahoma, and I feel there is a lot in common for screenwriters here that many of you around the world share who contact me in response to my script books and workshops since I have long said that you don't need to live in Hollywood to write and produce screenplays.

My "case study" will involve my own work and that of seven local writers who I feel have a good chance to break out of Oklahoma because of their talent and because of the approaches we are pursuing.

1: SET UP AN INFORMAL SCRIPT GROUP THAT MEETS ON A REGULAR BASIS

We all need that support group we can depend on for encouragement and honest feedback! Years ago in New Orleans I taught a short script class that lasted only six weeks. The course was offered through an Arts Center and thus drew participants with a wide range of ages and backgrounds.

The result was that when we wrapped up the last evening, the group on its own decided to have monthly meetings, rotating homes of the participants. I thought this was a fine idea, but figured it would last only about two or three months.

I attended several of the gatherings and

was impressed that they really were bringing new work to read and critique and were helping each other think of where to send completed scripts and whom to contact.

Even more amazing, this original group of about 6-8 members carried on for about three years. Thus my students educated me and ever since I have been encouraging other kindred souls to do the same.

In Oklahoma there have already been several informal groups meeting at bookstores like Barnes and Noble and Borders, for instance, so the concept was already in place before I arrived five years ago. But recently I have helped start up a group to bring diverse and talented folk together. To celebrate the spirit of diversity among writers, let me briefly mention some of the members.

Jeff Van Hanken is a writer and filmmaker living in Tulsa who has produced films in Los Angeles, Texas and Oklahoma. For his Heart of Los Angeles Film Project, Jeff secured support from Universal Studios, Paramount Pictures, Eastman Kodak and Panavision Cameras. Another member, Gena Ellis, has served in the military and is completing an MA in screenwriting and creative writing at the University of Oklahoma and has already written some award winning screenplays.

Jim Butcher is an award-winning newspaper report-editor working out of Tulsa, while Kevin Mahoney is a member of the WGA and Dramatists Guild who has returned to Oklahoma after twenty years in Los Angeles writing for Columbia Pictures, CBS Entertainment and having written plays for the Playwright's Theatre (Los Angeles).

Two women lawyers in our group have also taken up the screenwriting calling.

Sarah Lee Parrish is a staff lawyer at the Oklahoma Supreme Court by day and a screenwriter by night, and Cindy Elias has trained through the UCLA Professional Screenwriting Program and is studying acting at the same time.

The only undergraduate student in the group so far is Sterlin Harjo, a Native American writer and undergraduate film and video studies student at the University of Oklahoma, who has won a Summer 2003 Sundance Script Development Fellowship. And we also have a member who has spent years in religious pursuits and as a professional hobo, Wayne Iverson.

Again, the vibrant diversity of such a group is important, for it is hard to image such a variety of folk meeting as part of our or their regular daily lives. Screenwriting is what binds us together, and in person and by e-mail, we share a lot about what we are up to and what we can do with completed projects.

2: WORK WITH YOUR LOCAL FILM COMMISSION TO LIST LOCAL SCREENWRITERS AND THEIR WORK ON THEIR WEB SITES

At a recent informal meeting of our Oklahoma group, we decided to contact the Oklahoma Film Commission to see in what ways we could work together to help promote talented Oklahoma based writers.

In Oklahoma we are fortunate to have Dino Lalli as the Film Commission Director. A well-known former television film critic, Dino was immediately responsive and helpful. So it is with his support that we are about to launch an *Oklahoma Screenwriters* section of the Commission's site at

<www.oklahomafilm.org>, which should be up and running the summer of 2003.

Pull back the cameras a bit here to realize what a coup this is for local writers.

You have to realize that in the United States, State Film Commissions have traditionally existed to attract big Hollywood films to their states. This seldom happens, of course. Therefore taxpayers basically pay for large parties in Hollywood where the Commissioners tell filmmakers and stars how wonderful their states are. Ditto, of course, for most national film commissions around the world.

Simply check the Internet and websites for film commissions everywhere to see how rare such listings are. But what if

3: FEEL FREE TO WRITE *MATRIX 5* AND *DUMB AND DUMBERER, PART 4*, BUT ALSO WORK ON SCRIPTS THAT COULD BE SHOT FOR A LOW BUDGET LOCALLY

Each member of our group has a script that could be done “locally,” for we realize that while writers everywhere dream of selling to the Big Guys, the fact is that there is a much better chance of getting a smaller film made and out to festivals and, hopefully, into distribution.

At a recent meeting of our group, for instance, we targeted a script by Kevin Mahoney as one that could easily be shot for under a million dollars in Oklahoma.

The script, *Clayton* is a 1952 small town

Think about it. In five or ten minutes you can, as in a short story, say and do a lot that exhibits your talent, interests, and potential.

these commissions began to more actively help good local projects?

That’s the question and really, it is an exciting new possibility for groups everywhere. At a time that some states are actually getting rid of Film Commissions—Massachusetts, for instance, the Oklahoma Film Commission under Dino Lalli’s imaginative leadership is gearing up to be very “proactive” in supporting local talent on all fronts.

A sample listing? Nothing complicated. We are thinking of simply short script summaries and brief bios such as the following:

THE FANADDICT by Cindy Elias

A family drama about an Oklahoma attorney, LIZ WYATT, who is addicted to sports gambling. While working for the U.S. Attorney’s office, Liz puts her baby in a daycare located in the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. On April 19, 1995, her baby dies in the Murrah bombing. Blaming herself for the baby’s death, Liz begins gambling even more to help ease her guilt. Now in her early 40’s and an associate at a silk stocking law firm, Liz is in danger of losing both her family and her job due to her escalating addiction.

Cindy Elias has trained through the UCLA Professional Screenwriting Program. Having a talent for painting pictures with words, Cindy creates fresh characters with snappy dialogue cindykayelias@aol.com.

tale about thirteen year old Eli who is orphaned by tragedy and forced to live with relatives he has never known in Clayton, Oklahoma. Over one summer, he must come to terms with his sudden loss, gain the acceptance of a new family and survive the eccentricities of a rural Oklahoma town.

Such a story has the potential of being a powerful character centered piece (do we hear echoes of *To Kill A Mockingbird*?) and I think we can all see that with no “special effects,” no need for build a set, in fact, an on location shoot could be very cost effective and dramatically moving.

In one sense *Clayton* concerns small towns anywhere and therefore could be a Kansas or Texas or Arkansas story too. But other scripts of the group are 100% tied to Oklahoma history.

Jim Butcher used to live in Pawhuska, Oklahoma where he became aware of one of the darker pages in American history: the massacre of hundreds of Osage Indians in the 20’s who owned the land with some of the best oil in the world.

His script, *Blood Sisters*, needs a larger budget as a historical film, but we are still talking about a touching film that could be made for about the budget of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*: five million dollars.

In my script workshops everywhere I do emphasize this point: do write at least one script that could be made without worrying about Hollywood agents, power lunch-

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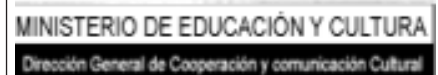
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4: HELP EACH OTHER FIND FUNDING FOR LOW BUDGET FEATURES THROUGH LOCAL FINANCING, PRIVATE AND INSTITUTIONAL/ GOVERNMENTAL CHANNELS

One of the recent jokes among film circles in Oklahoma is that if you had walked into one local bank a year ago and said, "I need five million dollars for a risky oil exploration deal" and another bank asking for five million to make *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, you would have been rejected for the film investment but given the money for a shaky oil deal.

It goes with the culture and the territory, and so screenwriters and filmmakers everywhere on any local level have a job cut out for them to educate those around them about the reasons and opportunities that film investment can open up.

Clearly having a few individuals with money to invest can help jump-start any project. But local screenwriters should meet up with bankers and investors and simply begin to open up a dialogue about what film investment means.

There are governmental opportunities as well.

How about imitating what New Zealand has done in the past for its young filmmakers. That is, what if the Oklahoma Film Commission were funded by the State Legislature to offer a number of \$100,000 "low budget" film awards each year so that a few complete Oklahoma films get made and put in festivals and theaters? We all know that New Zealand has been something of a model for attracting filmmakers and investments, but such local governmental assistance and grants have helped younger filmmakers.

Such a use of taxpayers' funds to help promote and create a local film industry can, as the New Zealand example shows, begin to bring national and international attention to your area!

5: YOU WANT TO BE A FEATURE SCREENWRITER? WRITE AND SHOOT SOME SHORTS!

More frequently these days one hears, even in Hollywood, "I don't want to read your script unless it is sent to me by an agent, but I will watch a SHORT. What do you have?"

So there is a lot to be said for feature

screenwriters also writing and shooting shorts! Realize that even to say "short" is to open the door to a wide variety of possibilities, for of the many festivals specializing in shorts around the world, the definition of "short" varies from 45 minutes or shorter at a number of locations to ten minutes or less at Capalbio Fest in Italy.

Think about it. In five or ten minutes you can, as in a short story, say and do a lot that exhibits your talent, interests, and potential. With the help of two of our filmmaking faculty at the University of Oklahoma—Heidi Mau and Gary Rhodes—we sent our first batch of Oklahoma shorts adding up to a 100 minute program this year to the Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival in France, and we plan to continue to do so each year.

Meanwhile one in our script group has already won attention for her short script we hope will be filmed this year:

ANGELA'S DECISION by Gena Ellis (short, 32 pages)

Angela Jacobs, 18, has been waiting all her life in a small Oklahoma town- waiting for BILLY TURNER to come home from the Army and marry her, waiting for her mother to sober up, waiting to see if she'll end up pregnant like most of Everly's disillusioned young women. Angela finally quits waiting and makes a decision that will change her life. An award-winning short drama. Top 25 Winner (out of 632) in the 2002-2003 American Gem Short Script Competition.

Gena is a feature screenwriter now and wants to make this a career. But her success in the short script market to date has also convinced her that she wants to continue doing shorts too. After all, don't a lot of novelists also enjoy writing short stories?!

So there you have it ... five simple ways to reach out from wherever you are living and writing! And, of course, there are more ideas, but they deserve a sequel. Meanwhile, members of our group are deciding which film festivals and summer script workshops they may attend. Write on, dear friends! ■

Andrew Horton is an internationally awarded screenwriter and a longtime SCREENTALK Staff Writer whose films include Brad Pitt's first feature film, *Dark Side Of The Sun*, and the Yugoslav hit social comedy *Something In Between*. He is the Jeanne H Smith Professor of Film Studies at the University of Oklahoma (ahorton@ou.edu) and author of *Writing The Character Centered Screenplay* and *Laughing Out Loud: Writing The Comedy Centered Screenplay*.