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SCREENWRITERS: THE GHOST WRITERS OF TV AND FILM

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The barks of sea lions and the squeals of dolphins are perhaps the last sounds one would expect to hear in the workplace of a screenwriter. Atop the stage in the sound booth, Dallas McLaughlin scribbles notes as he observes the Sea World shows whose scripts he now manages.

“My favorite part is watching people watch it,” said McLaughlin. “I like writing a dumb joke for a sea-lion to do and seeing the people laugh. It’s fun work.”

For many years, McLaughlin wrote screenplays for studios like Disney and Universal and for television networks like Nickelodeon, KPBS and The Hub. However, he received little to no credit for his work on Disney or his earlier shows for Nickelodeon. Now, the wet walkways of the park exhibits are McLaughlin’s red-carpet and the giggling children and their families in the splash-zones are the adoring and applauding fans of his work. McLaughlin still writes for Nickelodeon’s *Sanjay and Craig*, freelances sport segment scripts for *Tonight in San Diego* and is working on season two of KPBS’s *Film In Diego* as well as developing a pilot with San Diego Film Consortium’s Jodi Cilley. The pilot will be for a show called *Get a Job* and is planned to air on KPBS.



McLaughlin, who describes himself as “a man who looks like he should be herding sheep,” said he has always wanted to stay here in San Diego despite the vast expanse of the entertainment industry in Los Angeles.

“It’s why I’m working at Sea World and for networks like KPBS and Nickelodeon,” said McLaughlin. “It allows me to be creative without selling my soul.”

But the life of a screenwriter is no walk in the park, according to McLaughlin, especially when it comes to getting credit for what one writes.

“I have a three-year-old daughter who just starting loving Nick Jr.’s show *Shimmer and Shine* and I just think, ‘ugh, she’ll never know I worked on it,’” said McLaughlin. “It’s upsetting.”

McLaughlin also created the pilot and wrote a number of episodes for Nickelodeon’s *Yo Gabba Gabba*. But while he was paid handsomely, the writer never received credit for his work.

“I did a lot of writing for the show and I was paid. Now, I go to a Nokia center and I see tons of kids dancing to a song I wrote and I’m like, ‘I wrote it! I wrote the song!’” said McLaughlin as he mimicked pointing to himself and looking around the coffee shop. “But they’ll never know that.”

In other cases, McLaughlin created pilots of shows like *Gravity Falls* and *Thunder Beards* for Disney but the shows never made it to TV. He even pitched an idea to Animal Planet many years back for a show centered around the rescue and rehabilitation of animals, starring Winter the dolphin. But it was never picked up.

“Animal Planet’s response was ‘Where’s all the violence?’” said McLaughlin. “They wanted tiger attacks and just more action in general. Of course, now all the animal planet programming has switched to rescue and nature conservancy.”

Years after the pitch, *Dolphin Tale*, a film about Winter the dolphin’s rescue and rehabilitation, was released into theaters starring world-renown actors like Morgan Freeman and Ashley Judd.

“It was extremely frustrating,” said McLaughlin. “But there was nothing we could do.”

According to McLaughlin, plenty of screenwriters make their living off of shows that never air or ones they simply don’t get credit for.

Los Angeles screenwriter Ben McMillan is the writer of shows like Comedy Central’s *Border Patrol* and Nickelodeon’s *Max and Shred*. While both were successes in television, McMillan also has experience, like McLaughlin, writing shows for networks like NBC, CW, Paramount, ABC Family and numerous others that never made it on television.

“It’s the most challenging part of the job,” said McMillan. “To finish and put your blood and sweat on the page and wait for the network to decide your fate.”



In McMillan and McLaughlin’s opinions, the problem for screenwriters is not so much getting paid, as getting credit. They said that the studio will pay a screenwriter in segments such as \$30,000 for an outline, \$50,000 for the first draft and so on. The catch is, while the money is substantial, so are the risks and the emotional toll the business takes on a writer. The more writers a studio or network hires for rewrites, the less likely the original screenwriter will get credit.

“Let’s say a business hires you to write a script,” said McLaughlin. “Even if it’s your script that you came up with, once it’s finished there’s a great chance that you will never have a part of that movie ever again. You give them the script, say ‘bye movie!’ and then you’re done.”

While McLaughlin says this process may be more true in film than television, the chances of the screenplay’s original writer having any sort of creative control over the script in film or television is slim to none. In their book, *Writing Movies for Fun and Profit* (with “Fun” being crossed out in red), Robert Garant and Thomas Lennon write that being fired is just as much a part of the screenwriting process as writing.

“If you’re working for the studio, there’s a 99 percent chance that you will be fired off of EVERY SINGLE SCRIPT YOU EVER WORK ON,” writes Lennon and Garant. “The technical term for this event is, ‘fresh eyes.’”

Lennon and Garant go on to say that there is a 55 percent chance a writer will be re-hired if they handle the initial firing with grace and poise.

“A lot of it’s relationship with directors, producers and even the actors,” said McMillan. “If you’re a writer they don’t know, they may go with someone else even if it’s your script. There’s a couple chances in your contract where you get to try and rewrite for them but if you don’t get it right they will hire someone else.”

Producers are ultimately the people responsible for hiring on writers and assembling the whole of the filmmaking or television production team. Producers help develop the story, work with the finances, assemble a production team, find the talent, collect crew members and are responsible for being a strong advocate for the film after its release. However, this control over the development process does not mean producers are not on the writer’s side.

Asher Goldstein is an executive and producer for Broad Green Pictures. He says that while some producers might hire new writers to make changes to an original script, he prefers to keep the original creator as the sole writer for as long as possible. This is a more common preference among producers with a less likely reality.

“Most studio executives believe it is ideal to have the original writer writing the script all the way through,” said Goldstein. “It’s just commonly not the case. As a fact, other writers come in to rewrite more often than not.”

According to Goldstein, there are countless reasons why studios often don’t stick with one writer thus lessening creative control. However, he believes the main problem in the relationship between writers and the rest of the production team is lack of communication on a vision.

“Either no one has clarified on what the vision of the film or show should be or no one is agreeing on it,” said Goldstein. “I see people get caught up in spending millions of dollars on the script rather than the film. I do think that working on the screenplay is one of the most important parts of the process, but the end result and the overall vision should be the north star in the writing process and well as for production.”

With as much control as producers have, they are not the ones responsible for deciding who gets the writing credit for a film or a show. That falls into the hands of the Arbitration Committee for the Writer’s Guild of America. In their book, Garant and

Lennon explain that once the final script has been approved and the shooting process begins, if multiple writers have been hired onto a project (of which there's a 99 percent chance according to Lennon and Garant) then each writer has to convince the WGA that they should receive writing credit. Each writer sends a statement to the Writer's Guild Arbitration Committee saying why they deserve screen credit and why the other writers do not.

"Make no mistake," writes Lennon and Garant. "This is war."

This year at the Oscars, Kenneth Lonergan, screenwriter for *Manchester by the Sea*, expressed the need for there to be more protection over screenwriters' creative control in the production process of their work. "I know there's a lot of complicated ancillary rights issues, especially nowadays," said Lonergan in an interview with *Deadline*. "But the creative control issue is still pretty much the bottom rung it could be for a working screenwriter...it would be nice if someday that was able to change."

Last Week, the WGA started negotiations regarding new television and film contracts for screenwriters. According to an article published in [LAist](#), the WGA hopes to reach an agreement by May 1, but in light of the decline of screenwriters' income and the rise in production companies' profits, writers who are members of the WGA have threatened to strike in order to get their dues. If an agreement cannot be reached, writers are prepared to fight for the rights to their writes.

"I do think it's why screenwriters end up doing a lot of other things like producing and directing," said McLaughlin. "A lot of screen writers want to write something they can claim as theirs. That's why independent films are so popular, you get complete control, even if it's for a lower profit."

Destin Cretton, a screenwriter and director in Los Angeles, made the choice early on to establish himself as both a writer and director in order to, as he puts it, create his own chance.

"A big reason why I had to write and direct was because I wanted to make a movie," said Cretton. "No one was handing me scripts to make so I had to make my own. The only thing this industry is about is what you've made."



Though he says most of his films were failures before they were successes, Cretton has been able to make a name for himself with the release of his films like *I Am Not a Hipster* and *Short Term 12*, both of which Cretton wrote and directed himself. He recently helped write the screenplay for *The Shack* and he is now at work on his next film, *The Glass Castle* starring Brie Larson and Woody Harrelson.

But the success of Cretton's screenplays are not what keep him going in this "crazy mess of an industry," as he puts it. His drive comes the love of writing.

"As a writer, it doesn't cost you any money to sit down and write something," said Cretton. "If you find satisfaction in that, then you can be a happy person. The icing on the cake is when you can see what you've written on the big screen."

McMillan says that during the screenwriting process, it's important not to let the fear of being rejected, fired or rewritten influence the work one writes.

"Don't worry about what anyone is going to do to your work. Just write," said McMillan. "If it doesn't sell or if someone rewrites your work, it doesn't mean you have to give up. You just do better work and keep trying."

Aside from his hope to become "an Oscar: buff, tan, and lovingly held by a successful actress as a trophy," Jordan Hill, a senior at Point Loma Nazarene University and aspiring screenwriter, says that optimism is a requirement for all writers and ultimately is what will get them through the day.

“Just like any profession, I’m sure there’s room for improvement in the system,” said Hill. “But the fact that I have a shot on one day paying my rent by imagining words for people to say is exhilarating.”

This is the work that McLaughlin does every day at Sea World. With each line he creates for a trainer and every stage direction he imagines for their animal stars, the ultimate goal is to inspire and bring joy to the faces of those young people in the stands.

“A lot of writers will tell you it’s the worst thing you could do,” said McLaughlin. “To work with animals or kids because they’ll ‘never do justice’ to what you write. But I see it as a fun challenge.”



For a screenwriter, nothing is ever guaranteed except the here and now. And for now, these creators continue to write, not for profit, but for fun, with the hope that someday they will walk down that red carpet, no longer the ghost writers of the industry but as the dreamers they are every day.