

## **Fact into Drama: Writing Screenplays based on Real Life Events**

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Everyone in Los Angeles tells you they want stories, great stories. What they really want is a great story they can already read. A book, a play, or someone's real life, something they can see and understand without too much trouble.

Most Oscar winners of past years have been books. Producers like books because they already exist. They can see the story in a book or an article without using up what little imagination they have, plus, more importantly, they can sell it to whoever actually writes the checks.

The writer's first problem is finding something to adapt. Writing what you do best is critical. Don't waste time looking at war stories if your strong point is light comedy. Pick a property you'll write beautifully, and, pick something you can actually option. This means finding what Hollywood has missed.

Imagine floors of people hunched over desks like Bob Cratchit, combing through endless heaps of books, and you'll have an idea of the competition you're up against. However, things do get found. Stanley Kubrick discovered FULL METAL JACKET by pulling books at random off bookstore shelves.

While it's not always necessary to option a property to write a treatment on it, the rights must be available. You can then write pages, give them to a producer saying: "These rights are available if you wish to proceed" If they're not available, don't waste your time.

I did two screenplays based on true life stories: LEGIONNAIRE and 104 DEGREES, as well as a treatment based on a nonfiction book: Longitude. All three are different, but with striking similarities.

LEGIONNAIRE began as an Englishman's diary of five years in the French Foreign Legion during the 1960's Algerian revolution.

104 DEGREES is an original screenplay based on my research into the fall of Saigon.

As late as the 18th century, because they knew only their latitude, sailors couldn't venture out of sight of land. Solving the gigantic puzzle of longitude was the scientific discovery of its time. The book, Longitude, tells the story of the man who did it.

The rights to 104 DEGREES were easy because I invented characters based on real events. LEGIONNAIRE rights were simple because the producer controlled them. For LONGITUDE, I called the book's agent in New York and asked if the rights were available. When he said they were, I wrote a treatment.

Always keep in mind the writer must squeeze the source material down as tight as possible, throw out as many of the true events as possible and get on with only the story that is left. You must figure out what that story is.

First, decide who your hero is and who his opponent is. Oddly enough, the bad guy is almost more important than the good guy, because without a strong, fascinating, complex bad guy, your hero will be less interesting because he doesn't have a worthy opponent to battle. He can only be as strong as his enemy.

104 DEGREES has seven characters. Each has own bad guy to fight, so there is no one over- arching opponent. In LONGITUDE, John Harrison's opponent is Nevil Maskelyne, a super intelligent priest who has much to gain if Harrison failed, and seems to have all the power in the universe at his disposal. Maskelyne is a solid opponent. With a weak opponent, you have no story.

As the underlying material for LEGIONNAIRE was a diary, all drama had to be created. For the opponent, I plucked one wicked sergeant out of the first year, and stretched him over five years. I gave Simon, the hero, two friends who started with him in training and stayed with him for five years. In real life, they had been friends only for six months of the final year.

After choosing the hero and his opponent, you must decide what part of the story you will tell, and how much of the main character's life will be the movie.

It's a clean, but not simple, decision.

Root out the period of the person's life that works as a story, has dramatic structure, and functions easily for your purposes. Take that slice of the entire pie and turn it into your movie. Don't attempt the grand spectacle, the "I am born, I live, I grow old, I die." Pare away until you find the essential nugget that reveals the truth about your character and expand it into a two hour screenplay. Find the searing moment in her life and tell your story about that and nothing else. Lock onto the shortest period of time where your character struggles through a white hot crucible and comes out the other side a new person. When you discover the defining instant in their lives, the period of most intense conflict, that is where your story lies.

Even epics, like LAWRENCE OF ARABIA, focus on a man with a small, intense problem, then lay it and his personality against the immense backdrop of the setting. Lawrence's story is simple, understandable and kept in the foreground. The big events follow along.

My script, 104 DEGREES happens over the last seven days of the Vietnam war. The action is compact, squeezed together, and there's no time out for anything other than the story.

In LONGITUDE, I threw away the first three fourths of the character's life. The "story" starts when he begins to build his last chronometer, the crucial one. The treatment focuses on his fight with his arch enemy, a cleric who created mathematical equations based on movement of the stars. The story becomes a struggle between the good guy watchmaker and the bad guy priest -- over as short a time as possible.

LEGIONNAIRE, however, lasts five years. I violated my rule because a tour of service in the Foreign Legion lasts five years and I wanted that sense of loneliness brought on by passing time. Were I doing it over, I might concentrate on a critical two weeks out of the character's tour of service. My advice: Begin and end your tale during the critical time of upheaval, period.

Once you have your hero, his opponent, and the timeline established, you must decide how they will meet in the climactic battle in the end. It is this final battle that will determine how the hero uses the knowledge he gained in previous skirmishes with the opponent. This knowledge has improved his own character to the point where he can use his newfound strength to best his foe in battle. It could be a courtroom, a breakfast table, or a desert stronghold... but the hero and opponent must meet in a face to face fight for total domination of the world as we know it.

The nature of this battle will further influence the creation of the hero, her problem, her opponent, and what they are questing for.

The writer must also establish the stakes. Partway through the story, things must get worse. The stakes must ratchet up. And again. And again. Whatever game they play for at the beginning becomes more and more intense as we march through the story. Finally, they must be playing for all the marbles. If it's not about world domination, it's not about anything.

In 104 DEGREES, the stakes are life and death as the characters struggle to escape Saigon before it burns down around them, but, as it becomes more difficult for each person to get out, the stakes go up. In LEGIONNAIRE, at first, the hero's just trying to stay alive. Later, he fights to save the entire Legion. In

LONGITUDE, he begins by fighting to win a prize, then, finally, he struggles to hold his family together.

When adapting real life, the largest, and most difficult hurdle is making a true story identifiable to the audience. A story's universality must reach out and grab readers by their heartstrings. The reader is desperate to hitch their emotional wagon to your characters and their story, but you must provide an avenue.

In LEGIONNAIRE, I highlighted Simon's love story as everyone can see themselves in the man who leaves a woman because he felt inferior to her. As Simon grows in strength, he returns to recapture that woman.

In 104 DEGREE's seven stories, each character has a particular problem that anyone can relate to. A man trying to find his wife, a prostitute desperate to leave Saigon before it collapses, a journalist with a secret she dares not reveal.

The most difficult of the three was LONGITUDE because it was impossible to connect emotionally with a cold, distant watchmaker who had such zeal for perfection that he twice turned down the prize money because he didn't think his amazing clock was accurate enough.

What eventually made the story accessible was the relationship between the watchmaker and his son. Parents and children generally lead to conflict. I gave John Harrison and his son a turbulent relationship. As they fight Maskelyne, they discover their love for each other. This catharsis is only reached via conflict with the priest. Harrison and his son grow closer because of their passage through a fire brought on by Maskelyne.

This is the key element of exciting, well crafted "real life into art." The hero must become a better person because of the difficulties heaped on her by the opponent. When one turns a true story into drama, this simple question must be answered: does the bad guy cram the good guy through a fiery furnace which anneals the hero into the person she always needed to be?

In the beginning of a good drama, the hero has a hole in his personality which is filled as his character grows through the course of film. If the opponent isn't there to push his buttons, he's never going to change. You must find this in your real life story. If it's not there, you will have to invent it.

Tell a good story. Never let "what happened" or "the truth" get in the way of a tale well told. Simply because it happened, just because it was exciting when it happened, doesn't mean it's dramatically interesting or correct for your story. If you slavishly reproduce life, your piece may not work. If it doesn't work, no one will buy it. If no one buys, you've wasted your time.

A screenplay is not like poetry, where reading fulfills the life of the poem. A screenplay only comes to life after a Brobdignagian amount of money is lavished on it. If you don't solve the problems, you've wasted your time. You may learn something, but after a while "learning experiences" get tiresome.

Speaking of which, when I finished my treatment for LONGITUDE, I sent it around and got a phone call from a producer in England. She told me Channel 4 in London was already doing LONGITUDE. My heart stopped. I called back the New York book agent, and he said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I made a mistake. The rights weren't available." Poof. Two months wasted on another learning experience. Even when you're careful, sometimes you can't be careful enough.

In closing, the Rolling Stones gave the best description of a character's motion through a drama: "You can't always get what you want. But if you try sometimes, you just might find, you get what you need."

If you find a book or play or true life story, and you love it well enough to devote a precious year to writing the screenplay, keep in mind the above guidelines. If the property you have found won't bend itself the way you need, find something else to adapt.