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Interview with Barry James Hickey

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Background questions

1. How did you become involved in screenwriting?

A: I started writing short stories in college. While water skiing in Colorado, I had my first idea for a screenplay; Joe Morgan's Mermaid – about a divorced gas station owner in a small Colorado town who catches a mermaid in his fishing hole and marries her. It took me a year to write and by then I was living in L.A.. I had my SAG (Screen Actor's Guild) card and was more focused on my acting career in the beginning. I toyed with the script, told people the story. Everyone thought it was new and different... but I didn't have a literary agent... Then Splash came out and took the wind out of that sail. People still think of Splash as "the mermaid movie" so even now it would be hard to pitch in Hollywood.

2. What was it like to work on a script version of Mario Puzo's novel Fools Die? He's a well known and beloved author. Was it intimidating to work on a script for Fools Die?

A: I didn't find it intimidating at all. First of all, I was writing for a German producer/director on spec with a possible \$400,000 payoff if the deal went through. I wrote eight drafts, always too long, too long.... trying to get the story under 120 pages. It is a dark story... And yet, I feel Fools Die was closer to Puzo's life than his other stories. As far as I can tell, Mario Puzo was a degenerate gambler, often writing in the wee hours of a hot Las Vegas night on the felt of blackjack and roulette tables... How the writing deal went down was like this – Ulli Lommel had some guarantees for financing in place based on his optioning the novel. He negotiated with Bert Fields (Puzo's agent) for a film adaptation option on the book. Ulli Lommel brought me in, I read the novel. We took a trip to Vegas to grab the "atmosphere" and I started pounding away a few days later. I had a great time writing it, visiting Vegas every two weeks, digging into the seedy side of it. I had already spent a month in Vegas starring in my first movie (Las Vegas Weekend) so I knew my way around. In the end I thought we had a dark but electrically-charged human story based on the book which is all about degenerate gamblers and lonely casino owners... After the eighth draft, Ulli ran it around to investors. I went off to Globe, Arizona to write and produce Down Time, a comedy spec script for some guys in Phoenix. They thought they had the money to shoot a feature. While I was there, Jerry, my L.A. casting director for the film had a heart attack. I drove back to see him at Cedars Sinai hospital. While nurses changed his catheters, I started talking to a producer in the hallway who was also waiting to see Jerry. "And what are you working on?" I asked. "Fools Die," he said. "A mini-series." After I saw Jerry I called Ulli and told him he had a problem. As far as I can tell, Ulli confronted Bert Fields about selling the rights to other

parties. Fields' response was that we were doing a feature film and the other guys were doing TV. "No conflict of interest," he was told. Ulli's investors had forked over several thousands to Puzo. You might ask why Puzo didn't write the script himself since he adapted a few of the Godfather books and scripts for Superman and The Cotton Club, to name a few. Puzo was having major health issues and just wanted the money... Not my first rodeo where money supersedes art... Needless to say, I was out a \$400,000 payoff and neither the movie nor the miniseries was made... After that, I used Fools Die as a writing sample for ghost-writing, spec scripts and as an introduction to producers. While I worked in the Story Department at the Disney studios, I managed to pull the coverage I received on the script from when I submitted it to Chip Diggins, a vice-president of production at Hollywood Pictures. The reader HATED the dark story. She thought no one would ever want to see a dark and disturbing movie about degenerate low-lives in Las Vegas... If anyone reads the book, I recommend you watch Martin Scorsese's Casino and then watch Leaving Las Vegas. Tell me there aren't elements of Fools Die in them. Tell me that maybe Ulli Lommel and I might have been on to something, beating the market.

3. How difficult did you find it to work in Hollywood?

A: I struggled, scratched, and scraped for fourteen years there as an actor, writer, producer, director, line producer, hack, singer. But I also had a ball. I moved there when I was twenty-nine from Colorado. I had lived a journeyman's life as a steel worker, elevator operator, canoe guide, lumberjack, electrician, TV and stage actor, print model, rock singer, pop singer, country singer, Elvis impersonator, limo driver, singing telegram, all kinds of bizarre jobs over the years. In Hollywood; the parties, the egos, the distorted sense of living, the narcissism, the depravity, the desperation, I tasted it all. It is often comical, when you have the audacity to remove yourself from the drama, to watch people on a set, even the grips, gaffers and production assistants. Everyone seems to be copping an attitude all of the time. Or sitting in a waiting room to see an executive for a pitch. They sweat you out, play psychological warfare with your fragile ego. Always have an excuse for why they're running late. It's ridiculous and ultimately boring. Hollywood taught me to move fast. In my short life I've moved 61 times if that tells you anything... Getting any kind of job in Hollywood that pays is tough. What an outsider doesn't realize is that the major studios are factory operations with several safeguards in place to protect their investments. They examine the creative process, weigh the value of the picture, test it, market it, put it through the ringer, bank on proven talent with hits behind them, put their development executives through the ringer... I met several creative executives with stints at Disney, Touchstone, and Hollywood Pictures that never had a picture made on their watch. As for me, I was more or less trapped on the independent side of Hollywood as a writer and actor. Lots of foreigners with vague ideas and unfinished scripts hustling to shoot when they could afford film. "Stand over there by the tree, look through the binoculars and act like James Bond..." They'd hand you fifty or a hundred bucks and you'd never know what came of an hour's work. There's always something to do as talent in L.A.. Getting to the big dogs, the studios, the people that matter, now that's a whole new universe. 95% of people in Hollywood don't even get to play in that sandbox.

Screenwriting questions

1. What makes screenwriting appealing to writers?

A: For me, it's creating a universe all my own. Characters, settings, tone, a message or two in the telling, characters I love and hate that I marry or birth or kill. It also keeps me sane in the real world.

2. How does a person get their foot in the door with screenwriting? How difficult/easy is it?

A: There is no one door that you need to open. It is your door, your creation. First comes the script. You need to research, write, and be willing to take constructive criticism. After that, if you don't have a Jewish brother in the business, you better be able to pitch, network and schmooze. Without a hot agent or manager "in play" you won't have much of a shot at a career anyway. Sure, there are hundreds of agents that are "lit" but they don't sell any sizzle. They just send your project in with a cover letter and you go to the bottom of the pile. The real agents are talents themselves. They're fire-breathing dragons for their clients. They know what talent has what deal at what network or studio. They know what a certain producer needs to keep his housekeeping office on a lot. I can't tell you how many thousands and thousands of screenplays are out there now in studios, networks and production company hands, just sitting there, almost forgotten, shopped to death but optioned on and often advanced against. It's like a real estate portfolio, a blend of good houses with distressed properties. A hot actor today is not a good investment tomorrow. A good example I ran against was a script I wrote called *The Aluminum Knight*. (A Nebraska farmer discovers he is the long lost heir to the throne of King Arthur). I pitched it to a studio exec friend of mine. He told me to use his leverage by saying he was going to take a weekend read. I called six executives at six studios and told them he was reading it. Five wanted their own weekend reads. I didn't have an agent. I had a small window of leverage. I was playing them against each other. It wasn't my story they were interested in, it was their *not having my story* when others did that enticed them. It was a poker game between the competition that they bought into. I was working as an underpaid assistant to a President of Production at one of the studios at the time so I used his couriers, his Xerox room, to distribute my screenplay to the studios. I saved \$200 using studio funds. Now what happens on Monday? I don't have any offers. It turns out that over the weekend, one of the studios buys screenplay rights based on a New York Times bestseller for seven figures. The subject matter? An American and the Holy Grail. Richard Gere loves the project, etcetera. Now I realize that I was being played, too. There are many ways to play the Hollywood game. Most of them are unsuccessful. Often it is the quality of the writing, the instability of the writer or agent or manager or the true abilities, guts and persistence of writers, agents, managers and producers. You have to have thick skin. But the biggest obstacle to overcome that I find is lack of access. And there are so many bullshitters in the game... So many egos on all sides and fronts. It takes longevity and deep pockets to survive, even as a writer... And you'd better be willing to pick up a telephone and sell yourself and your ideas to anyone and everyone without being annoying. I do think that class and civility and chivalry still hold a place in the scheme if things with some of the players, as evidenced from the many handfuls of actors, writers, directors and producers that I have met and admired. If you can design

yourself a web of up to maybe a hundred people in various occupations in the business, without ever leaving your house in Kansas, you just might succeed. Many prominent screenwriters do not subject themselves to the voracious insanity that Los Angeles and New York offer.

3. What skills are needed for screenwriting?

A: Understanding the manufacturing of a good script and what it contains. It isn't a program you buy to punch in words. It's what to show the viewer, it's setting up mood and tone, dead-on description, precise dialogue. It's knowing who you intend as an audience. It's offering up something original in many cases...

4. How does a college or university degree make a difference in a writer's screenwriting? Is a degree necessary?

A: A degree doesn't give you jack unless you went to Harvard, Yale, or Columbia and some of your sorority or frat members are in the movie business. College teachers don't make movies. They don't put ten million dollars on the line. They don't know the real machinations of the business. Now a film school might help a writer rub elbows with a someday director... A different animal. And yet, you'd better have a fantastic grasp of the English language if you really want to grab a story by the balls and present it in its best light.

5. What makes a great screenplay or teleplay?

A: Taking the reader to a place they never imagined and then they can't put it down.

6. What makes a weak screenplay or teleplay?

A: Obvious. Been there, done that. Wordy. Stereotypes.

7. What are the mechanical differences (teaser, tag, length) between a screenplay and teleplay?

A: Well, a teleplay should run closer to 90 minutes. You have to account for commercial television. You have to account for language. You always have to account for the appetite of a telefeature budget (Under 4 million). As for the rest, there are general rules that apply to both. In today's screenplay, don't offer screen directions such as CLOSE-UP, etc. That's for a director to envision.

8. What is the page limit for a feature film screenplay?

A: The norm is max 120 pages. Yet, there is always an exception such as Forrest Gump, Gandhi, Avatar, Titanic, Gone With the Wind. But those are pictures with heavy hitters. You as the unknown? The hired reader from the story department at the studio or network

looks at the last page count and decides if he'll even get around to you. The same applies to first-time novelists, by the way. Shorter is better

9. How can you tell if your story is *right* for the big or small screen?

A: It's not my job. My job is to write a great story and let the pieces fall where they may. I'll let agents and actors determine the rest. Of course, sometimes a script reeks of Hallmark and the small screen or needs to be thirty feet tall with Lucas Sound and 3D.

10. What is the key element to writing solid dialogue? How do you know if you have excellent dialogue?

A: When it sounds real coming from characters that the writer (and then the actor) makes us believe in. I find this is the biggest challenge for most writers.

11. How do you write roles that actors will want to play?

A: It might make a difference in low-budget productions but then you often get low-budget talent. It really shouldn't be your concern. Just write the best script you can. Often in my career, a director will hire someone totally inappropriate for a role from what I as a writer envisioned. It can be most disappointing.

12. How do you write screenplays that will get you noticed by movie studios, directors, and producers?

A. Be different in the genre you choose. And be commercial, but fresh.

13. How do you sell a screenplay?

A: Most of the time, you never will. But for the few and the fortunate, it will be through your agent or manager. There are union minimums that affiliated studios, networks and cable must pay. They are available online. Just go to WGA.com. (Writers Guild of America). Don't expect a huge financial commitment from a producer if you are an unread author. A smart agent can get you backend, points, sequel rights.... In today's market, you might want to work with packaging agents. You might contact an actor with a production deal directly. I submitted six screenplays to Kevin Costner's production guys. They read them all and always passed, but at least I had the shot.

14. How do you get an agent? What makes a great agent?

A: Getting an agent is easy. You call or write them, tell them you will send them all the postage and return postage and envelopes and that you have the contact person at the production company's name and address and that you will write the great cover letter, logline and query using the agent's letterhead. All they have to do is sign your letter and mail it in. One year and three thousand dollars later, you'll be bitching at your birthday party in Detroit that Hollywood wasn't ready for you... Now getting a *good* agent is

almost impossible. I have hundreds of query letters returned by legal departments at ICM, William Morris, Triad... "Returned unread, not solicited...." The best recommendation I have is to try to get a sympathetic producer who actually likes your work to recommend you to an agent and go from there (If the producer balks, they really didn't like your work after all or they would have tried to option you).

A great agent is someone that returns your call the same day. That cares about YOU and your family.

15. How do you write a screenplay for a specific audience, i.e. children, teens, young adults, women 18-30, action adventure junkies, etc...?

A: Research, research, research. I am blessed with an enormous imagination. If I'm writing about teens, I go to coffee shops, talk to them, see how they have evolved from me. I taught high school. With children, watch them interact at the library, school, etc. Every few years, the dialogue among the young changes drastically... On and on. Identify the audience and the real world they live in... But also realize that action-adventure, horror and sci-fi junkies are looking for an escape. They want something new that they have never seen before. They may accept a Halloween rehash provided you know when to punch in the terror and how to build suspense.

16. How do you know who to “trust” in the business to give you honest feedback and one who will not steal your ideas?

A: I don't worry about my ideas being stolen. I have too many. If they steal it, it was probably a bad idea to begin with and in their hands, the outcome will be worse... Honest feedback... This is a tough one to answer. I have read hundreds of scripts gratis for others and given my honest feedback. I have lost friends over it. I don't do it anymore for screenwriters. As I mentioned earlier, there are too many hacks writing today. Heck, you might read my work and think I'm a hack... That's okay, too.

Concluding questions

1. What can writers do to improve their chances of seeing their screenplay produced?

A: Persistence and a solid game plan with key players is essential. You need to know WHO is in the business today. Subscribe to the Hollywood Creative Directory, Hollywood Agent and Management Directory, Distributors Directory, The Hollywood Reporter, Variety, Baseline, IMDb.com. Join an online group like Hollywoodtribe.com. You MUST align yourself with real decision-makers and players in the marketplace. Not the cousin of an animator who worked at Disney twenty years ago. This is a business, after all and time is precious.

2. Many screenwriters join screenwriting groups. What can they do to protect their ideas from group members?

A: Just register your materials with the WGA or copyright with the Library of Congress. Once a year, I copyright all of my new work for \$20 as a compilation.

3. What makes an inferior screenplay and how can you avoid writing one?

A: I have written many terrible ones and a few jewels. Unfortunately, you can wear producers and agents out with all your bad writing before you write your opus. It's like someone who is tone deaf that shows up on the stage of the New York Metropolitan Opera. Who would have believed it possible?

4. What final advice can you give aspiring screenwriters?

A: I love the creative process. I have discovered that my screenplays have become excellent launching points as outlines for my novels. Don't take too long writing a script. I had a neighbor in Hollywood. He was still writing a western thirteen years in the making. After gaining his trust, I asked him if I could read it. He said, "It's not ready yet. I'm only on page eleven." Hollywood – go figure...