

January 12, 2010  
**Mark Lund**  
Interviewing Questions

## **Background Questions**

### **1. How did you become involved in writing, producing, and acting?**

Ever since I was in grade school I enjoyed creative writing and I used to write screenplays when I was in junior high. They were always apocalyptic in nature. In regard to producing, I actually fell into the industry when I was writing and producing direct response commercials and events for a media company I used to run. The one thing I did learn many years ago is that you have to be VERY organized when you are a producer.

### **2. You have very impressive credentials. What is it like to work in television? How difficult or easy was it for you to “break into” the business?**

Thank you for your kind comment on my credentials. It’s been a lot of work. My first TV appearance was on the “Montel Williams Show” in 1994. It was right during the throws of the Tonya/Nancy “disaster.” I had just started a figure skating magazine a few months earlier and they were interested in having a reporter come on the air and talk about the sport and Tonya and Nancy (I skated with Nancy so I knew her fairly well). What started with that show turned into over 300 TV appearances up through 2007. It’s very, very difficult to break into the business. You really have to have some sort of hook. Mine was that I knew about the sport and enjoyed talking about it on camera. Producers remember you. If you do a good job and listen they will remember and ask you back.

### **3. How did you come up with the idea for First World? How long did it take you to write and produce it? How can people find it on Hulu?**

I have always loved the space program and in particular Apollo. What we accomplished as a nation back in the 1960’s was truly unprecedented. So I always had this idea about “why didn’t we return to the Moon”? Why after spending billions of dollars did we just stop going? Maybe Apollo discovered something on the Moon that we shouldn’t know about. So in First World we have the Chinese making their first trip and this global cover up rapidly becomes undone. It took me about four months to write the story and about three months to film. The actual filming took only a week. It’s the pre- and post-production that takes up a good amount of time. First World can be found on Hulu at <http://www.hulu.com/watch/71826/indieflix-shorts-first-world>

### **4. What was the process like to enter your feature length film into the California Independent Film Festival? What feedback, if any, did you receive about the film?**

The process to enter began when I started to review festivals on [www.withoutabox.com](http://www.withoutabox.com). I selected this festival as the first one to enter because I loved its focus on independent films. When I found out I was nominated Best Screenplay I was BEYOND thrilled. I was Top 5 out of 80 scripts entered. The feedback I received was that the judges really enjoyed the story, and that truly is what’s the most important. Does the reader like your story? In this case, they did.

**5. What is it like being the Drama Director at Becker College in Massachusetts? What's a typical day like? What is the benefit of getting a Liberal Arts degree? Is it necessary if you'd like to be a screenwriter?**

Being the Drama Director at Becker has been a wonderful experience. What's exciting for me, and now the producer hat goes on here, is watching something grow from nothing. That truly comes from the students' desire to do well. I am also very aware that they have a variety of other school activities they are involved in, including their classes. So the key is, as I've mentioned earlier, to be organized. When they arrive in the theatre we are ready to go. We have lots of laughs in the process, but we all know it's work. A typical day consists of blocking and running the scenes. There's a lot of stop and go. But it's understood by all and you just move along with it.

Then there is the whole technical side of things. Does the light board work (we need a new one)? Are the sound cues coming through OK? What I love about this is the many hats that can be worn. The one course I strongly encourage everyone to focus on at some point is English. Being a screenwriter means being a writer. I have seen some of the most poorly written screenplays by people that dare to call themselves "writers" and then get all bent out of shape when you call them on it. Remember, a screenplay is going to be read by an endless number of people before you even see \$1 from a production company.

**6. How difficult was it to create International Figure Skating magazine? What were your responsibilities as a publisher? Writers send many query letters to publications, what would you or the editor of the magazine look for in an article?**

Launching any new business is very, very difficult even in the best of times. But figure skating was something that I knew and I had worked in publishing before so I had a general understanding of how the business model worked. At the end of the day you have to feel your business in its marketplace. When you work for yourself you are working 24/7. There were many great moments and many difficult moments. My responsibilities as publisher ranged from editorial to operations to marketing. Basically, I managed the entire operation and eventually had key people in all the departments. I would generally come up with the ideas for the big features and assign it out through the editor to the freelance staff. As we assigned the editorial in the magazine what we would look for are concise query letters (one page) with samples of work attached. Ideally, as we were a newsmagazine, anyone that came from the newspaper industry would generally be a fit good for us. It was a great and interesting 11-year ride.

**Screenwriting questions**

**1. How do you break into screenwriting? How difficult/easy is it?**

First you have to ask yourself why you want to write and you have to enjoy writing. With the way filmmaking is going in terms of digital transmission (Hulu, etc), the barriers to breaking into screenwriting have come down considerably. The difficult part can be writing and completing a screenplay. You have to have a beginning, middle and end to your story. As for breaking into the industry, there are two tracks 1) produce your own material 2) write for others to produce. Let's go to the second track. What I did was enter my screenplay in film festivals that have screenwriting competitions. I found these have worked really well for First World and the more nominations and awards you can pick up the better. The costs range generally from \$40 - \$100. It really depends on the festival and what it can offer the screenwriter. Some have fantastic prizes and the chance at

representation. You will also want to have your script read by script doctors and/or script consultants. They will offer you tremendous feedback. Some of it you may not want to hear, but you have to hear it. And you could simply take a screenwriting course. But frankly I think there is so much free material online to learn the process (like I did), I don't see it being overly necessary unless you really want to.

## **2. What skills are needed for screenwriting?**

You have to ENJOY writing and REALLY ENJOY telling a story that others, beside you, will want to see.

## **3. What makes a great screenplay? What makes a weak screenplay?**

A great screenplay has wonderful characters and story in three acts. Act I sets up the story and the characters. Act II presents the complexities of the story with the movement of the characters. Act III wraps it all up. A weak screenplay doesn't have much of the aforementioned.

## **4. How is playwriting different from screenwriting?**

Personally, I don't see much of a difference. You are still telling a story. However, the genres are very different. By example, for stage: "Cedric walks into the room sees the gun on the table and picks it up." In film: "Our POV sees the gun on the table. We cut to Cedric walking up to the door. We cut back to the POV of the gun and see the door open in the distance through a forced perspective." It's just a matter of the description. In film you can come in from all angles. On the stage your audience is behind the 4<sup>th</sup> wall. You have to write for that.

## **5. What makes an exceptional character versus a mediocre character?**

In my view an exceptional character is one that will not do everything "in character." As human beings we all have our quirks. Characters should have that as well. It doesn't have to be much, but they should be real. Nothing is worse than when you are watching a movie or a play and you know what the characters are going to do before they do them. That's just bad writing.

## **6. How do you write characters that actors will want to play?**

A character no matter how big or small should have purpose and meaning. Actors want to be creative. They want to be engaged. A perfect example of a small role was when Beatrice Straight won Best Actress in a Supporting Role in Network (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0074958/>). Paddy Chayefsky was a truly amazing and gifted writer.

## **7. How can you tell if your story is *right* for the big, small screen, or stage?**

It really comes down to scope, but all films at some point wind up on the small screen after their theatrical debut. As so many films don't get a theatrical release, you not only have to think of distribution possibilities but the budget as you are writing. A big thing now is called reverse distribution when you are planning a film project or writing a screenplay – where do you think is this going to be released? As a screenwriter you have to be cognizant of the market you are writing for. Obviously a sci-fi apocalyptic drama is going to be different than a coming of age comedy. Each has

a place, but neither may get picked up by a distributor. Can you make back a \$5 million budget on TV, DVD, VOD and online?

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

Watch a TON of movies of all different genres. The best thing to do is have readings with actors. You want to listen to others perform your work. It will either have a rhythm or it won't.

### **9. How do you write characters that actors will want to play?**

Believe me finding actors is not a problem no matter what the characters are. The problem is finding GOOD actors. Most actors are not that good. Just as most screenwriters are not good. When I was in L.A. I heard more people say, "I'm an actor" or "I'm a writer." OK, but what are you doing about it? Are you going to auditions? Are you taking acting classes? Are you part of an acting or writing group? Are you constantly reading up on your profession? Are you working with people that are going to make you better? At the end of the day it's all about how you are honing your craft.

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

Unless you have actually been hired by a studio, director or producer to write a screenplay, it's virtually impossible to know what they want owing to the constant changing marketplace. Some years we see drama some years we see comedy. In 2009 it was sci-fi. It's pretty clear that 2009 was the year of really good sci-fi (Avatar, District 9, Moon and Star Trek). I would write what you are passionate about and target your pitches accordingly.

### **11. How do you sell a screenplay?**

There are a variety of ways to "sell" your screenplay. 1) You produce your screenplay yourself (Just be sure you aren't the only person that read it—get qualified feedback!). 2) You can use services like [www.inktip.com](http://www.inktip.com) to list your script. They are pretty good for budgets under \$1 million. 3) Use a resource like [www.IMDBpro.com](http://www.IMDBpro.com) and find films in the same genre as yours. See who the writers are and who represents them. A nicely constructed concise query letter to their literary agent introducing yourself, your project and your interest in representation (no more than 2 pages). If you going to take this route, you want to make sure that your script has been looked and given coverage by a professional(s). It certainly wouldn't hurt if you won some awards or were nominated to for some awards. Give it a few weeks before you follow up with a call. These folks get a TON of query letters and are really hard to reach. And, sadly, they often don't pay any attention to unsolicited material. It's the industry's terrible Catch 22. 4) You can attend industry conferences like <http://www.natpe.org> and join organizations like <http://www.filmspecific.com/> to gain more insight and learn about other opportunities to pitch. Finally, I would start to attend film festivals that have screenplay competitions. Talk to attendees and other screenwriters.

### **12. What is the process of entering a screenplay into a competition? How costly is it? Do you receive feedback on your film?**

It's actually painfully simple. [www.withoutabox.com](http://www.withoutabox.com) is the leading source for entering film festivals that have screenplay competitions. As I mentioned earlier, the costs vary as do the awards. Then

there are numerous contests outside of the film festival market. [www.finaldraft.com](http://www.finaldraft.com) has an excellent competition.

### **13. How do you find a great agent that will represent you and not take advantage of you?**

It is really hard to find a great agent and one that will represent you properly. It isn't that they take advantage of you, it's that they don't market you or worse don't understand your screenplay. I have a wonderful literary agent who will forward my material if I come across a qualified producer that is interested in seeing my script but requires submission through an agent. She admitted right away that she doesn't know science fiction and, rightfully so, told me that I know my market and who I want to make this story. She is qualified to negotiate and "talk the talk" if/when the opportunity comes up. See my answer to point 11. It's not impossible to find an agent, but it does take work. Nothing in this business happens overnight (but occasionally it can!).

### **Concluding questions**

#### **1. Mark, what makes Becker College different from other colleges?**

I think Becker offers programs of substance that ready you for an ever-changing world, but at the end of the day it's all how you apply your degree and your experience in getting the degree that matters.

#### **2. What advice can you give others who want a career in acting, producing, and screenwriting?**

The three P's. Patience. Persistence and Perseverance. It doesn't matter which one you want to pursue for a career (maybe all three!), but there are some things you really need to follow. You have to LOVE movies. You need to be organized. You need to have a creative mind. And read screenplays—good screenplays *and* bad. You'll be glad you saw the difference and you'll strive not to write badly (<http://www.imsdb.com/> is a good source). Finally, if you take no other course in the world, take a writing course.

#### **3. What can writers do to improve their chances of seeing their screenplay produced?**

Marketing. Marketing. Marketing. Oh, did I say marketing? Do a search on First World, Mark Lund and you'll see what I mean. You have to get your message out there. Develop an online following. If you can't afford to produce a short film version, try to produce a trailer. Put it on YouTube and Facebook. Enter contests. Have readings with actors. You could have the greatest story in the world, but if nobody knows about it you can't get it produced.

#### **4. What final advice can you give aspiring screenwriters?**

Don't look initially for the dollar signs when writing. Write because you love to write and because you want to tell the world a great story. It's important to know the industry. Take the time to understand what's going on in the world of theatrical distribution, DVD's and online. If you really want to know what's going on in Hollywood, be sure to sign up for Nikki Finke's Deadline Hollywood (<http://www.deadline.com/hollywood/>).