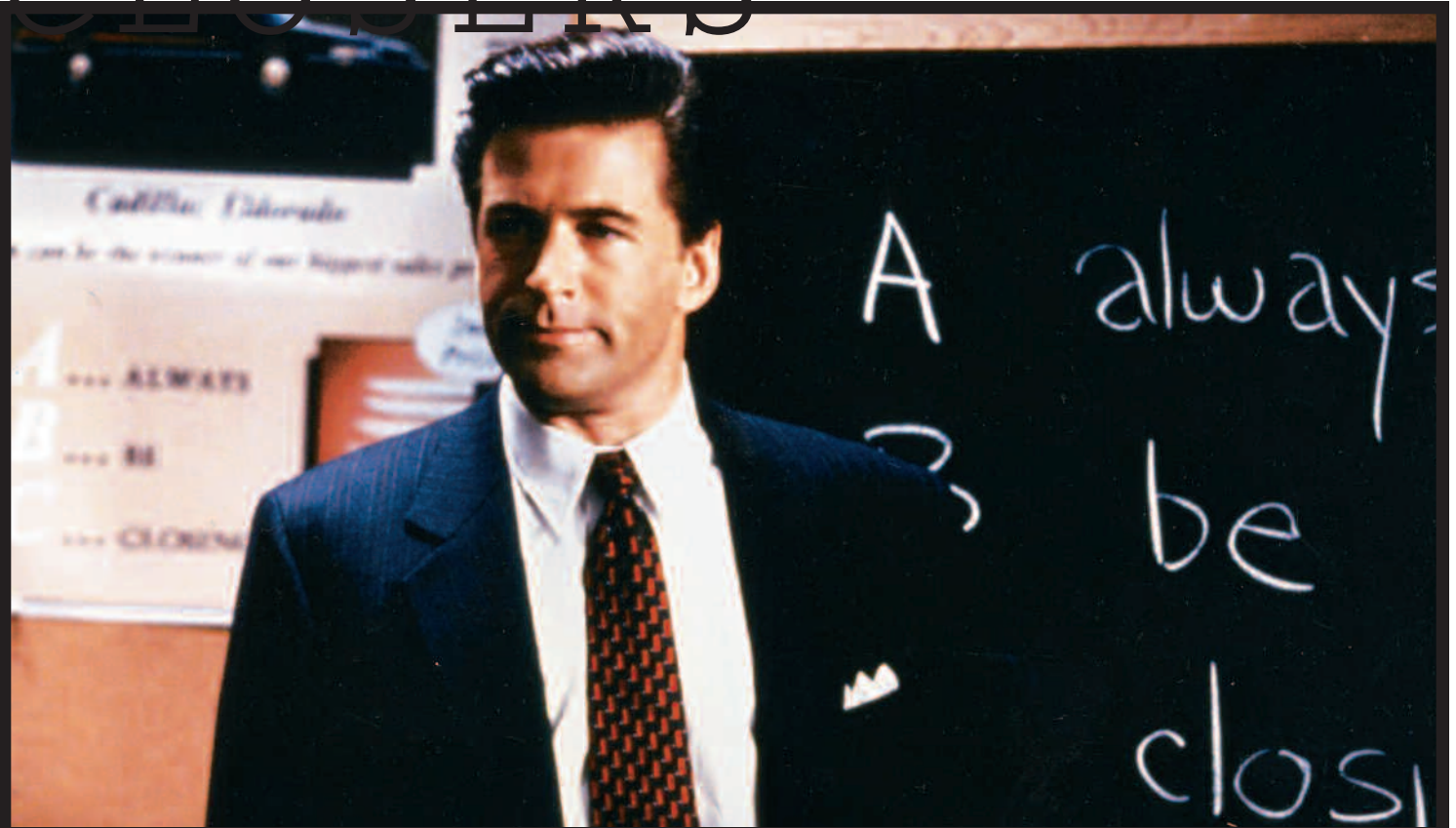


CLOSERS



HOLLYWOOD'S SCRIPT GUNSLINGERS ARE PAID BIG BUCKS FOR A FEW INTENSE WEEKS OF WORK, AND RARELY GET CREDIT. MEET SOME OF THE HIGH-PAID WRITERS WHO ARE BROUGHT IN TO GET THAT SCRIPT TO THE GREEN LIGHT, OR GET THAT GREENLIT SCRIPT FIXED BEFORE IT'S SHOT.

— BY TOM MATTHEWS —

Here is what you will find on the desk of every top production executive in the industry: the day's trades, a perpetually regenerating stack of scripts, a voodoo doll for every film scheduled to open against them. And *The Phone*. It is encased behind glass, with a sign reading "Break in the event of script distress." Also on the exec's desk? More than a few shards of glass.

On the phone are some buttons, never more than ten or twelve: Zaillian, Roos, Wells, Frank, Khouri, LaGravenese, Hancock. When a button is pushed, one of the town's prestige screenwriters will rush to the hidden passageway behind the bookcase which houses every single issue of *Creative Screenwriting*, slide down the Prose Pole to the Act Break Mobile, and race to the scene of a screenplay in despair.

In as little as a week's time, they will polish or significantly refurbish a script that is

racing toward production, earning as much as \$250,000 for their efforts. They will then disappear into the night, often unheralded by a grateful citizenry unaware of their heroism, to stoically await the next cry for help. Or as stoic as one can be, having just earned a quarter of a million dollars in a week.

(Say, this is some pretty good writing. How do I get my name on that phone?)

They are The Closers, an elite band of artists whose high-stakes, pressure-filled rewriting work has quietly elevated some of the industry's most critically and commercially successful films, from tentpole summer flicks to nuanced character studies. Working in circumstances far different from the months-long rewriting process common to a project stuck in development (they do plenty of that work as well), these screenwriters earn both top dollar and the praise of nervous filmmakers and production executives

for quickly taking a script that was great enough to earn a green light, and making it just a little greater.

Some would prefer that you not call them "closers": "That's what a lot of producers call it, and I think studios use the term. But I've never heard that expression among writers, because it would be kind of arrogant for us to say that," says Shane Salerno (*Armageddon*, *Alien vs. Predator*) who, like all writers consulted for this article, insists that great deference should be given the original writer whose work they will be enhancing. "I would hope that everyone is highly respectful of the person who laid the foundation, set the story, and established the characters."

Don Roos, at the top of every studio's list when great work is required at a critical time, has a similar aversion to another term. "I never use 'script doctor' to describe what I do, but in a way it does describe the process:

there's something wrong with the screenplay, and you're called in to diagnose what's wrong. They'll say, 'We're having trouble with act two,' and then you'll come in and say, 'Well, that's not really the problem. Your main character doesn't really want anything, or the obstacles for your main character are not significant enough.' You give a prescription for what you would do, and then you do it." So while script doctor is a very accurate term, Roos continues, "I think people don't like it because it's kind of highfalutin', as if to say, 'I'm the guy who's going to rescue your failing project.' It just doesn't sound very respectful of the previous writer or writers."

Whatever it's called, this inside-the-crucible rewriting work is not new (think of Robert Towne's masterful spot work on *The Godfather*, or the chain of writers responsible for *Tootsie*). And while the prices for such work have skyrocketed along with everything else in Hollywood, the reasons for bringing in a new writer in pre-production or once the cameras have started rolling remain the same: the original writer has reached a creative impasse with his bosses. A director or star has a favorite writer who can instinctively tailor the material to their needs. Or the studio, having not yet secured a director and/or cast, needs to go out to the town in a serious way, with a "star" screenwriter attached.

"Sometimes you have a writer whose specialty is a certain level of storytelling," observes producer Michael Shamberg (*Erin Brockovich*, *World Trade Center*). "You may have great characters but the story needs a little more clarity to it, or maybe you have a good story but there are a few gaps in the character's arc, so you need a couple of new scenes. We always try to stay with the original writer, but if another writer is brought in it's to enhance the original writer's work, not to unravel it."

"You have to go in with a surgeon's care and be able to pick out those things that need to be done," says Jack Leslie, president of production of *Donners' Company*. "You also have to understand that there's always a ripple effect, so that if you're changing one character or changing dialogue, you're conscious of other things in the script that will also have to be changed as a result."

"One thing that has worked for us is that we're able to make wholesale changes in a short period of time," says Cormac Wibberley who, with his wife Marianne, has done critical rewrite work on *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* and *Bad Boys II*, among others. "It can be hard for the original writer to be on a project for a year and be told that things

need to change, when they really feel like things are pretty close as they are. A writer coming in cold might be able to break down the whole story and see where there might be a problem."

WHAT LIES BENEATH

Writers who have proved themselves in the high-stakes rewrite game are constantly in demand, and therefore can afford to be picky. Roos also directs his own films, so he tends to do only about one rewrite a year as his schedule allows. He states that his big-money rewrite gigs allow him the financial means to write and direct personal films like *The Opposite of Sex* and *Happy Endings*, which



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—Shane Salerno

have earned critical raves if modest returns. (John Sayles, whose uncredited work on *Apollo 13* is the stuff of industry legend, survives the same way.)

Top rewriters read a lot of scripts, turn down most of them, and are sometimes astonished at the subpar writing coming out of the development machine. "It's surprising how bad many of them are," laments Roos. "The producers will say, 'We're very close on this script, we just need a little help with the dialogue.' Then you read the script, and not only do the people not sound like human beings, but there aren't really any characters, there's no plot, the hero or heroine is not in jeopardy." Sometimes there's

not even a decent ending. "Every problem you see is a result of committee writing," he continues. "By the time I get it, the story has been so beaten and flattened and burnished and polished that it resembles nothing with any taste or bite to it. So the biggest thing that a good rewrite person will do is take the committee out of the script."

"It's surprising how many times development execs or producers simply lose their way," says Marianne Wibberley. "They forget what they used to think was good and throw it out. In trying to fix what's broken, they'll fix what isn't broken as well...and then everything becomes a big fat mess." What the closers are often hired to contribute are the nuances and complexities that were lost or were never there in the first place. In many cases, it is a creative process of addition by subtraction.

"If a writer knows what he's writing about, he can omit certain things; in stripping the story down to its essence, he strengthens it," says Salerno, who stresses that he is relatively new to the production rewrite game and still a rookie compared to the veteran scribes that have been doing this for many years. Hemingway, he points out, compared writing to an iceberg, where seven-eighths of it is underwater and all you see is the tip. "Every time you leave out something on the surface that is not essential, it strengthens the iceberg from below," says Salerno. "That is also a terrific explanation of great screenwriting, whether it's from the first writer on a project or the last writer."

"It's *always* dialogue which doesn't sound like it's overheard," sighs Roos, listing the shortcomings which he encounters time and time again. "It's *always* characters who aren't specific, who seem to be taken from other movies. It's *always* main characters without any edges; too many likeable characters without any dark areas or gray areas. Uncomplicated characters. It's *always* an absence of specificity and texture to scenes and characters and dialogue."

(Note to screenwriters: Want to keep Don Roos unemployed? Post his list next to your computer and do not put a script on the market until each point has been rigorously addressed.)

(Note to Don Roos: You have nothing to worry about.)

THE TICKING CLOCK

Working under such tight time constraints has both its blessings and its curses. On the upside, there is simply no time for the dithering that is rampant when a script is

merely wedged into the development pipeline somewhere. The cacophony of contradictory notes and creative fuzziness (“What if he was a cop instead of a fireman?” “Couldn’t they have sex before the giant centipedes attack?”) is history; now everyone just wants answers, *the* answers, which will finally lock the script into place. Close it, if you will.

The best situation of all, says Roos, is when a director with clout has been attached before he is brought in. In such a circumstance, the producers and studio tend to fall in line behind their director, allowing the new writer to work exclusively toward fulfilling the filmmaker’s vision. Assuming the duo are in lockstep, the writer has the rare experience of patching his creativity and ideas straight into the brain pan of the man or woman who will be executing them in a matter of days. Even if it turns out they made an error in judgment, there is neither the time nor the inclination to second-guess.

“You have to do the same creative work that you’d do any time, it’s just that you have to do it faster,” says John Lee Hancock (*A Perfect World*), whose uncredited work on numerous studio pictures has placed him in the elite of production polishers. “That said, it’s thrilling *because* of the time frame. You know that you’re up against it and that millions and millions of dollars are on the line, and that people are waiting for you to solve their problems. I think that’s one of the things that people want from us, the reassurance that everything is going to be okay.”

That reassurance must come during the short period between the time the writer is hired and the work commences. Almost as critical as the writer’s skills is his or her ability to convey to the creative team precisely what they intend to do with the script. Without exception, the rewriters consulted for this article stressed the importance of communication, and one can only assume that their ability to clearly articulate their intentions *and* deliver on them is one of the skills that keeps them in demand.

“I was just on a project recently where there were nine producers,” says Salerno. “The project had been in development for ten years, they had a big director, and they were ready to go. So I was brought on, and I knew that there was just no way to get a consensus with nine people without elaborate conversations among everybody. So I put together a really detailed document of what I was going to do, and I got everybody to sign off on that document so we had a shared

vision of what I’m going off to execute. It worked incredibly well. Everybody was happy, and that probably saved a lot of time.”

Salerno admits this was not always his *modus operandi*. “I used to believe that the coolest thing to do was to *not* give everybody too much information, so that I could deliver something that was really surprising. There’s nothing better than making a change and showing it to someone who has no idea what you’ve done, and having them go, ‘This is incredible!’ But the downside of those surprises and that ‘Hey, just trust me’ philosophy is that if you miss and you’re wrong, it can seem like a much greater setback than it really is, especially if they’re in production or approaching production.”



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—Don Roos

Leslie recounts just such an incident. “We had an experience where a guy was just supposed to be doing a polish, but he added all these new scenes and locations. All our department heads had already figured out a lot of their needs, and all of a sudden they get this script that threw them a curve because it was for locations that weren’t scouted and for costumes and props we weren’t anticipating. That’s awfully late in the game to get those kinds of changes.”

Each situation is different, but writers who want to keep their employer’s stress level down should be prepared to be in constant contact with the executives on the

project during the actual writing process. E-mails may come fast and furious, the writer revealing an intent to zig where he had said he was going to zag, immediately causing the exec to worry that a test audience somewhere down the line will miss the zig. Scenes or whole blocks of pages may be submitted at any point during the compressed writing period, giving the creative team a chance to comment before the cement sets. Too often, production executives say, a writer will simply turn in his or her pages at the end of their contracted work period, collect their money, and move on. But the best of them—and certainly those who are engaged time and time again—are more flexible with their time and the specifics of their deal.

“I want to make them happy. They’re paying me an enormous amount of money, and I have a very elastic sense of what a week’s work is,” says Roos, talking about the service he provides. “Sometimes additional work is formalized by a new contract, and sometimes they just ask me to take a meeting with the star and take her notes. If they’re not too bad, they’ll ask me to do the work, and I’ll say, ‘Yes.’ You try to be accommodating.”

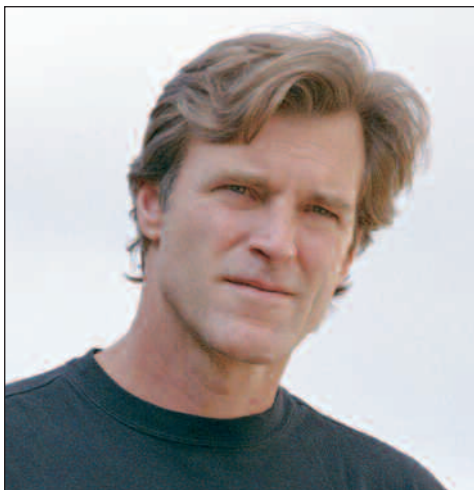
FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION

Flourishing as a closer demands nerves of steel. Imagine all of the usual demands of screenwriting—creativity, vision, problem solving—and cram them into a hypercharged week or two, during which millions of dollars are being committed for production, A-list stars and directors are waiting to see how brilliant you’re going to make them look, and hundreds of jobs are dependent on what you turn in. Sitting pensively while awaiting the muse to gently light upon your shoulder to whisper her magic is a luxury left for spec writing; when you’re a closer, you tie the muse to a chair, grab a razor, and turn on *Stealers Wheel*, à la Michael Madsen in *Reservoir Dogs*. Because if she won’t give it up—right now—a whole lot of powerful people are going to be unhappy with you. It is work best suited for adrenaline junkies and, with the exception of the *Wibberleys* (who say they prefer to turn down the more frantic rewrite work, so that they have more time to invest themselves in a project), those we spoke to wouldn’t have it any other way.

“It’s the reverse of war: you actually *want* to be on the front lines,” says Salerno. “You want to be in the trenches. You want three different producers calling you up and giving three different sets of notes on the same scene, and then having the director call you

and say, 'Forget everything they said, this is what it needs to be.' And then *three* hours later, after writing the scene that's shooting tomorrow, getting a call from the studio exec saying, 'This is what this *has* to be, because we've already shot this scene twice and it hasn't worked.' That's what really intense production work is like. It's not for everybody. It is humbling."

"It is like being a gunslinger," says Hancock. "You're hired to come into town, kill the bad guys, leave without taking any of their women, and promise that they'll never have to say your name again. And there's a mentality that goes along with that, a confidence and a bravado necessary that shows that you're ready to take this on. Because it is going



"It's like being a gunslinger. It is going to be 24/7 and you are the Answer Man. You'd better be, or you'd better *find* the answers."

—John Lee Hancock

to be 24/7 and you are the Answer Man. You'd better be, or you'd better *find* the answers."

Roos boils it down. "Your job is not to fail. You don't come back to them and say, 'You know, I've been working on this for four weeks, and I really can't solve it.'" That's not what they want to hear from their gunslinger. "They're paying you a ridiculous amount of money for your expertise. You are to solve their problems, you are to make them satisfied. That's just the bargain you make when you go into this if you want to work again."

And yet, despite the money paid and the careers at stake, the creative process is still the creative process. No matter how talented the writer, no matter how much everyone is

on the same page, vitally important writing carried out at the last minute under frantic conditions can often yield disappointment. Dean Devlin, who broke in as writer of such films as *Universal Soldier* and *Stargate* before adding producer to his credits with *Independence Day* and *Godzilla*, has seen the rewrite process from both sides of the desk.

"It's always a roll of the dice, and that's the sad thing," he says. "You can pay one of the top writers in the world and get something awful or...you can get a writer who's fresh out of film school and you could get something fantastic. And of course the more you pay for that script, the more sleepless nights you have.

"There was one script that I paid quite a bit of money for, and I was using my own money for development," remembers Devlin. "When the script came in I was so nervous that I couldn't read it until everybody else in the office had read it. If it was awful, I was just going to jump out the window. Luckily, it turned out great."

UNLIKE *CHEERS*, NOBODY KNOWS YOUR NAME

The issue of screen credit is a vexing one for some closers, fueled by what many see as the WGA's inconsistent arbitration process. With significant residual money and their industry profile on the line, those writers who come in to do brief but sometimes critical work often see their efforts go unrecognized and insufficiently rewarded. Some, however, never expect it in the first place.

"I never take a credit, because I'm not doing the hard part," says Roos, who as a policy also declines to divulge the scripts he has rewritten out of respect for the previous writers. "Imagining the universe, imagining the tone, imagining the major plot elements from nothing, that is the real work. I think the original writer deserves the credit, and the residuals."

Salerno agrees, although he admits that it can be frustrating to have some of his best work go unrecognized. "It's hard when you're sitting in a theater and watching the trailer for a movie you worked on. People are laughing at a line that you wrote, or a scene that you did has become a signature image for the film, but you didn't get a credit. That's a tough thing."

But ultimately, it's the work that counts. "What you comfort yourself with," Salerno says, "is that you came on as a professional, solved core script problems, people were happy with your work, and it improved the film. Filmmakers and studios don't forget that, and it often leads to new opportunities with the people that you just delivered for." **CS**

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