



Larry Brody has been profiled in *People*, *TV Guide*, *Esquire*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Starlog*, *Electronic Media*, and many more. He has produced thousands of hours of network television programming and written over five hundred television episodes, nine novels, and four books of poetry.

Larry has either won or been nominated for every major television award, including the Writer's Guild Award, the Women in TV & Radio Award, and the Humanitas Award. *Police Story*, which Brody produced and wrote, won multiple Emmys, including Best Dramatic Series. He has been writer, creator, and/or producer of *Star Trek: Voyager*, *Diagnosis Murder*, *Walker Texas Ranger*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Baretta*, *AutoMan*, *Medical Story*, *The Fall Guy*, *Hawaii Five-0*, *Partners in Crime*, *Barnaby Jones*, *The Magician*, *Mike Hammer*, and many more.

Larry supervised the writing on the Emmy-winning adult animated series "Spawn" and was creator/writer of every episode of the acclaimed "Silver Surfer" animated series. His own award-winning website, *TV Writer.Com*, has helped launch the careers of many new writers, and his e-books on TV writing and selling are best-sellers.

Why Didn't They Buy MY SCRIPT?

By Larry Brody
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I sent a spec script to "Friends" and they sent it back unopened. What's up with that?

Ricki Holland

My friends all think my "Jag" script is perfect for the series, but even though I was able to get it to the Story Editor it was turned down. How can this be?

Norma K.

The head of a big literary agency read my spec pilot and loved it. But every network and showrunner who he sent it to has passed. What's going on here?

Arnie

When I first began writing about television writing—as well as writing for television—the most common question I was asked was, "How do I get an agent?" Now, five years later, I realize that the question that crops up over and over, in various forms, is, "Why didn't they buy my script?"

Being inherently vicious and cruel beyond cruel (how else could I have succeeded in this terrible biz?), I'm going to answer that question right now. And I'll bet you three lifeline phone calls on "Do You Want To Be A Millionaire?" that most of you will never have thought of what I'm going to say.

That's because one of the main differences between experienced professional screen and TV writers and newcomers is that the Pros Have Actually Learned Something. We have Tricks Up Our Sleeves, which I will now—at the risk of alienating all my peers—reveal.

Answer #1: Those of you who are sending spec scripts out to television markets aren't selling them because, for the most part, TV doesn't buy scripts. As I've said before, it buys writers. Your specs are read, when they're read, in order to see if you, the writer, have that certain *something* the showrunner is

looking for in a writer for his or her series. If that certain something—which can be just about anything, depending on the showrunner—is found, voila, you may get a chance to pitch an episode.

(Note: TV movies are a different situation. Until recently, they too were "developed" rather than purchased, as I've written about in SCREENTALK before. Now, however, spec scripts are actually being bought, just as spec features are.)

Answer #2: Those of you who are sending spec TV movie scripts out which aren't being sold aren't selling them because—surprise!—*they aren't as good as you think they are*. Ditto for those of you who aren't getting called in to pitch to those showrunners.

Uh-oh, I can hear the reaction now. Disbelief. Denial. Yelling and screaming. "What does Brody mean, my script isn't that good? My mother liked it! My neighbor loved it! And my agent even sent it out!"

What I mean is this: Most spec scripts written by not-yet-pros have elements missing. Elements that non-pros don't even know exist. And most spec scripts sent out by agents are also lacking those elements, because agents aren't writers, nor are they producers, and they too don't know they exist.

The first way that most spec scripts fail is that they don't tell a story. Each of these scripts looks like a script, "smells" like a script, reads like a script, but instead of a story with a beginning, middle, complications, twists, and an end, there is just a series of events that go nowhere and mean nothing.

The second way that most spec scripts fail is that they don't tell the story the writer thinks he or she has told. Often, the writer has lived with the idea for so long that the writer literally knows it too well. He puts down only half of it, thinking it's all there. Or she puts down only the beginning and never gets beyond the set-up. Honest, this happens all the time.

The third way that most spec scripts fail is that their dialog

isn't clever or original enough. For better or for worse, most screen and television writing is judged within the Industry by its dialog. (How else can we explain how much the Biz loves "The Sopranos" and "The West Wing?") Dialog should sound realistic but be heightened to the extent that the characters speak the way you or I would speak if we had a day or two to consider each sentence—because, as writers, you do indeed have that day or two.

This deserves to be gone into further, so let me give some practical advice. As a showrunner who has rewritten thousands of episode scripts, I'm always on the look out for clichés, or for any other kind of overused phrase—so that I can take it out, replacing it with a new way of saying the same old thing. As a showrunner, I'm always looking at the attitudes of the characters, trying to make them as original and vital as possible. Trying to make sure that each character is unique, and that everyone in a given script has a different speech pattern, a different way of revealing themselves. Remember—in the Biz we pride ourselves on being clever conversationalists in real life, often sacrificing meaning for the "Great Phrase." On the page we want the conversation to be even wittier.

The fourth way that most spec scripts fail applies to series specs. Too often they are written with the "fan mentality," a knowledge of the specific series that

is so complete that only another fan can follow the action or dialog because so much of the backstory and characterization are assumed instead of presented in some interesting way.

Conversely, the fifth way that most series specs fail is a kind of "anti-fan mentality." That's where the writer writes his version of the series instead of the series itself. To cite an ageless example, I once got a script for "The Fall Guy" in which the hero, Colt Seavers, had a torrid affair with a Latin beauty. It was a good script, and a very exciting affair, but Colt Seavers in bed semi-naked, writhing with a topless babe? Not in those days!

The sixth way that most series specs fail is in missing the personalities of the

regulars. I've read "NYPD Blue" specs in which Sippowitz is all warm and cuddly, and "Law & Order" specs in which Sam Waterston's character worries about defendants' rights. Yeah, sure.

The seventh way that most series specs fail is by creating a new character and giving all the action, and/or clever dialog, to him or her. In other words, by making the guest star the lead for that episode, a situation guaranteed to have the real star of a series walking off the show. Write for "the money," gang—and know that the money is the star.

Another common problem in spec TV movies, series episodes, and pilots is a misunderstanding of what the writer's job is. A failure to communicate from the page to the readers' brain. These days, new writers seem to be getting more and more worried about how much to actually write. How much action to describe. How much of a character's personality to lay in. The result is that they describe very little action and their characters have no personalities at all.

Don't fall for this! Television doesn't have "reading scripts" and "shooting scripts." For the most part, it doesn't even have readers. Those who look over your material are those who produce the material. They—we—want to see that you can do the complete job. As Garry Marshall pointed out to me, "We never wrote a 'Mork & Mindy' script with a direction like 'Robin does his thing.' We told him what his thing was and how to do it." Similarly, every action show I've

ever produced has had the stunts and car chases spelled out in detail in the scripts. Oh sure, every once in awhile we'd get tired and write, "Stunt to be choreographed," but you'd better believe that before that scene was shot the writers came up with new pages containing the choreography. That's our job! That's *your* job!

Now that I've aggravated everyone, I'd like to sum this up in a more elevated and idealistic way. The following is, I suppose, my credo as a writer. It's the mantra I tell myself every time I sit down at the computer and start clicking and clacking away. It has worked for me for many years. I hope it'll work for you as well:

TO THE AUDIENCE

I want to express my inner truth—maybe it's THE inner truth—not just for myself but for YOU, so you can learn it and feel it and taste it and appreciate it and be moved to some kind of action by it.

Therefore, I must express that truth in a way that will get to you. A way that will stab you right in the heart and go to your soul. I cannot just write for myself. I have to write using all the tricks that will help you, the audience, be entertained and enlightened.

If I don't do that, I will fail. Oh, I will have expressed myself, but to what end? My purpose will not be fulfilled. There will be no communication. No joint experience. And, ultimately, no art.

So here we go again. Audience, this one's for YOU! ■

NEXT TIME: The sky's the limit. You name the topic and I'll do my best to answer with the straight goods. Send your questions, whatever they may be, to tvwriter@screentalk.org.

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and
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scripts."

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