

the evolution of a screenwriter

OR HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE RUSHES

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periods of discussing, arguing, throwing things and more writing with George in Montreal. I was becoming progressively more frazzled by the week, sleeping on a friend's sofa or a lumpy mattress on my brother's floor when in Montreal, and making the 180-mile trip back and forth in a car that quaked at the mere sight of Highway 401. Now, more than two years later, with *U-Turn* in the theatres and actually drawing thousands of paying customers, I'm still stuck with the same car, and it still breaks down on 401. In fact, at the moment it's broken down in the laneway. Peter Bogdanovich doesn't have to put up with this sort of thing. I just know he doesn't.

Although I had written several television plays, I had never written a film script before, and each day had its own lessons. I learned that a film script is never finished. Indeed, revisions on *U-Turn* continued right on into and through the shooting. Even the night before the final day of filming, George and I sat up discussing a new little scene which could be shot if we finished early the next day and had a couple of free hours left before the production had to be wrapped. I learned that a script is never so good it can't be improved. I think "embellish" was George's favourite word. A script is never so tight, it can't be tighter. If a novel has a boring section, the reader can always skip it. If a film does, the captive viewer can do little but suffer it through, and so "cut" was George's second favourite word.

In the fall of '71 the so-called "first draft" of *U-Turn* (actually about the fourth) was at last completed. I can still remember my feeling of immense relief the day we "finalized" the script. The 140 pages I handed over to the typist weighed a psychological ton. I was in such a state of relief and euphoria that I promptly went home and got married. Little did I know what lay in store (in either Canadian filmmaking or Canadian marriage.)

The script was nicely typed up, quickly "embellished" here and there yet again, and sent to New York for professional duplicating and binding. (There is a company there which specializes solely in duplicating scripts for films and plays. I wonder what infinitesimal percentage of these are ever actually realized on stage or screen. A writer who intends to go on writing is probably better off not knowing.)

After we got the scripts back, there was a brief and foolish period when I felt as if the job was done. The piles of scripts looked terrific with their bright yellow covers, my name in gold lettering. I would actually carry one around and show it to people, patting the cover proudly as if it meant something. Soon enough, however, it became apparent even to script-struck me, that although the script was finished, the problems had scarcely begun. Writing an unproduced screenplay is something like learning to juggle — difficult sure, but useless unless you can market it.

The projected budget for *U-Turn* was approximately \$500,000 — modest enough in film terms, but not the sort of sum one is apt to find forgotten in the coin slots of public telephones. Or anywhere else. With no help to speak of, George Kaczender undertook to raise the money. He was optimistic at first and, since I didn't know anything about it, so was I. \$500,000? Didn't *Ryan's Daughter* cost \$13,000,000?

First, blithely, we tried the majors — Paramount, United Artists et al and, not surprisingly, got nowhere. Then we tried the mini-majors, the minors, the mini-minors and the back of a

Dustin Hoffman might be interested.

Rumours like this are as rife in the film business as promises in a political campaign. And considerably less reliable. During the two years I was involved with the making of *U-Turn*, one of the many lessons I learned, some human, some professional, was that, although such rumours should be taken with a large grain of salt, they should not be ignored. In the precarious world of Canadian feature filmmaking, exploration of even the remotest possibility may spell the difference between a film actually getting made or remaining a glint in the author's eye.

The idea for *U-Turn* had floated around in my head for months — the story of a man obsessed by the memory of a beautiful girl he had seen only once, fleetingly, at a remote ferry landing and his attempts, several years later, to find her again. I finally sat down and wrote a ten-page description, which I padded out with quotations of rather tenuous relevance from famous authors and labelled, rather pretentiously, "Thematic Outline — Untitled".

I sent this off to director George Kaczender in Montreal, whom I had never met, but whose work I knew and admired. He liked the idea, took me to dinner at an expensive Spanish restaurant, and dazzled me with tales of the sights, sounds and starlets of Cannes. We agreed that I would go ahead and develop a draft screenplay based on the outline. We also agreed that I wouldn't be paid anything.

Over the next several months I alternated periods of writing alone in Kingston, Ontario, where I was living at the time, with

Volkswagen camper – all to no avail. Simultaneously, the script was sent to agents who specialize in packaging films – a package being a script, director and one or two stars, preferably “bankable” stars, all tied up by the agent and submitted to the studios in a nice neat bundle. It was around this time that the Dustin Hoffman rumour, fostered by some agent no doubt, died aborning. He went to Italy instead.

So we didn't have a package, and as the refusals started coming in slowly but inexorably, we got deeper and deeper into a winter of discontent that didn't look like it would ever be made glorious summer by a sun from anywhere. The son of one of Hollywood's legendary moguls did send us a letter, however, several months after we had sent him the script. (The letter should have been the tip-off. In the film business good news comes on the phone, not in the mail – and *never* in a brown envelope.) “I find *U-Turn* very well written,” his letter said, “even, at times, profound.” A millisecond of hope. “Unfortunately, the filmgoing public is not interested in profundity at this time.” When the script came back under separate cover a couple of days later, it looked suspiciously untouched. Perhaps he could tell it was profound by the cover. Yellow is profound, isn't it?

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Around this time I learned another lesson. Potential investors don't read scripts. Their twelve-year-old daughters do. You've heard of shooting a scene two ways. Well, a screenwriter who seriously wants to sell his scripts might do well to write them two ways – one to be hidden away until shooting, and one to be read by twelve-year-old daughters.

The days of that winter of '71-'72 all run together into a depressing blur now. Mostly what we seemed to do was wait, for the mail, for the phone, for one of the many stones unturned to yield up an angel. We would sit around George's apartment with our ever diminishing pile of scripts (we eventually went through more than 100), scheming, composing letters to possible investors, trying to conjure up any money-raising scheme within the bounds of the law. (There was a story in the news not long ago about a filmmaker in France who was caught robbing a bank. I know exactly why he did it.)

One day the answering service had a message that a Hollywood agent named Dan (let's say) had called. We had only sent him the script a few days earlier, so such a prompt reply must surely mean that he loved it and at the very least was about to set up a deal with MGM. George called him immediately and their conversation went something like this – George: “Dan, how did you like the script?” Dan: “Uh?” George: “The script. *U-Turn*.” Dan: “You what?” George: “*U-Turn*. The one I sent you last week.” Dan: “Oh yeah. I don't think I got that one. But look, baby, there's a dynamite opportunity here to do a little black film. Right down your alley.” George: “A what?” Dan: “A little black film! It's not locked right in yet, but it really looks copacetic.” George: “Well, that's . . . uh . . . terrific, Dan. But would you mind checking on *U-Turn*? You should have it by now.” Dan: “Your turn! Righto. What colour is it? Blue? I got three blue scripts here . . . two red ones . . . a two-tone beige . . .” And so on. I'm still not sure what a little black film is.

One should not be left with the impression that we only submitted the script to Americans. By this time we had also approached most of the established and some not so established Canadian producers. Some were enthusiastic about the project and some weren't, but they all had one thing in common – no money to invest in it.

It was now almost six months since the script had been completed and we seemed to have made no tangible progress whatsoever. While George continued to look high and low for money, I spent my time revising *U-Turn* yet again, trying to write the first draft of a new script, spending the few dollars

left from my already stretched-thin Canada Council grant, and wondering why I had abandoned the eminent sanity of law school for the utter folly of writing for a living – especially writing for *films* for a living. Ever present, though almost never mentioned, was the nagging feeling that maybe the film wasn't *ever* going to get made, and the months and months of work and worry would have been for absolutely nothing.

The first breakthrough came at the end of April when the CFDC finally gave its conditional approval to *U-Turn*. I was actually afraid to answer the phone that day, for fear the news would be bad. All day it rang and rang, until I finally figured no one with bad news would be that persistent, picked it up and learned that the CFDC was willing to put in \$200,000. By this time we had lopped \$100,000 off the budget, so we now needed not \$500,000 but \$200,000 and suddenly the whole thing seemed feasible again.

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The go ahead from the CFDC was all the impetus we needed to start preparing for the actual filming. *U-Turn*, although a relatively simple story, was a very complex film to schedule and shoot. As the core of the story was a search, the script called for some 40 different locations, interior and exterior, urban and rural. All of these had to be found within as small a radius as possible, and yet look as if they were miles apart.

Our biggest location problem was to find the “quaint, remote little ferry landing” which plays a pivotal role in *U-Turn*. We soon learned that ferry landings, what few of them are left, are neither quaint nor remote. They tend to be dirty, cluttered places down by the coal yards, much more apt to be frequented by stray dogs than by the beautiful woman in the story. We finally found one which, after a magical transformation by the art director Wolf Kroeger, was just right. But don't go looking for it. It's been transformed back.

By now it was July and we had rented offices, and were hiring crew, and scheduling, and holding screen tests, and negotiating for permission to block traffic and do a u-turn on 401 (try that sometime), and I knew then that we were really going to make the film. We still didn't have all the money but, by God, we had momentum.

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Although preoccupied by now with casting and the overall planning for the production, George finally managed to raise the rest of the money, bit by labourious bit – some through a lab, some from a production company, Briston Films of Montreal, some from private investors. The final financial contracts were not signed, however, until the afternoon of August 8. We were scheduled to start shooting August 9. It is a very real problem in Canadian feature filmmaking that so much time and energy both physical and nervous is required to raise the money and set up a film, that those involved are apt to be flirting with exhaustion before the shooting even begins.

Our first three weeks of filming were in the Smiths Falls area, 50 miles south of Ottawa and George and I drove down from Montreal as soon as the contracts were signed. I didn't get much sleep that night, but I was wide awake when I walked onto my first film set at 8 o'clock the next morning. It wasn't long until I heard the assistant director Scott Maitland say for the first time, “Roll 'em, gentlemen.” Music to my ears.

A year and a half after it had all started, my script was finally becoming a *movie*.

Eat your heart out, Dustin.