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# 'til Death do us Part: SCREENWRITING PARTNERSHIPS

by Glenn Kaufmann



A lone man or woman sits in a room. Music blares from somewhere. The room is stuffy and a bit dark. The only light comes from one window and the pasty glare of a computer screen with nothing on it except the words FADE IN:

For many of us, this is the image of the writer in Hollywood—a solitary, almost ascetic figure hammering away at his story, alone. But, for many, the idea of working with someone else seems to lift the gloom, and blow fresh air through the stuffy cloister of the writing room. But, "Writing Partner," what does that mean? How partner? What partner? It's half her story, half mine? What if my half is *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and her half is *The Last Starfighter*?

Not to sound like a corporate recruiter, but work in Hollywood is all about teamwork and partnerships of various sorts. If you meet with success and plan to have a career of any length, you'll need to work closely with a small army of people. As a writer, you have the distinction of meeting and interacting with people at every level of the business. But, before all of the business and production collaboration, you get to enjoy the fun part—the writing. And writing in Hollywood presents you with a veritable buffet of partnerships to choose from.

## FEATURES

When writing as a team on a feature film, it's very often just the two of you in a room, coffee shop, or perhaps an electronic linkup between computers that are 500 miles apart. In this partnership, you have the benefit of bouncing ideas off of an equal, or at least

someone who shares your interest in this one story. If you do your homework before picking your partner, this arrangement can

be among the most satisfying working relationships in Hollywood because you'll develop a partnership and a friendship at the same time. However, if things go poorly, this arrangement can also be among the most painful pairings in all of Tinseltown. With this arrangement, there is no buffer between you and the other person. In the same way that you can become fast friends, small transgressions may become cutting personal slights. You'll need to weigh the good with the bad and choose your partner carefully to succeed in a feature partnership.

## SITCOMS

On the other end of the spectrum of writing teams sits the television sitcom "writers room." With this arrangement, you get to collaborate with as many as eight to 12 other writers in a room that may function with carefully metered efficiency, or may degenerate into stock-exchange madness as each writer fights for his ideas. As an up-and-coming writer, this arrangement works against you in that you may have to win over the senior writers before your ideas gain any real traction in the room.

While the writers room can be a difficult environment in which to work, once you make your way "in" it can be a very comforting and supportive environment for collaboration. One way for new writers to give their stories greater exposure in this environment is if they get hired as a writing team within the writing staff. If two sketch comedy writers get hired as staff writers on a sitcom,



PAGE 60: Pete (John Turturro), Delmar (Tim Blake Nelson) and McGill (George Clooney) star as chain gang escapees in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, screenplay by the writing team of Joel & Ethan Coen. PHOTO: Melinda Sue Gordon. © Blind Bard Productions. All Rights Reserved. ABOVE: Ed (Bruno Kirby), Mitch (Billy Crystal) and Phil (Daniel Stern) in *City Slickers*, written by Lowell Ganz & Babaloo Mandell. PHOTO: © Columbia Pictures. All Rights Reserved.

though they'll have to split the fees, they now have two voices to champion their ideas in the room.

According to Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandell (*Fever Pitch*, *City Slickers*), early experience in television helped them immensely in developing their working style on features. In particular, they feel that their ability to work quickly and effectively—rapidly turning development notes into precise, well-crafted changes—is a by-product of experience in television.

To succeed in this environment, you'll need to choose your opportunities wisely and make sure that you are comfortable with all of the personalities involved and are self-confident enough to stand your ground in the mosh pit of sitcom development.

## LONG FORM: MINI-SERIES

With the advent of more and more cable-generated long form programming, one of the growing arenas of Hollywood writing is the television mini-series, which offers some of the good and bad of both feature and television partnerships. Working on multi-part productions, such as *Rome*, *Band of Brothers* and *From The Earth to The Moon*, gives writers the opportunity to go off and work on their own, writing their script for an episode that is part of a much larger story.

In this format, the collaboration is mainly between the writer and the executives who have developed the overall story structure for the series. Again, the downside here is that your work may be rewritten, and that you are but one voice in a committee of writers (one or more for each episode) and executives. With this arrangement, you have neither the collaboration of the writers room nor

the freedom of story development to construct an independent storyline. Here again, you'll want to closely examine the personalities involved and make certain that you have the give-and-take necessary to collaborate without getting steamrolled.

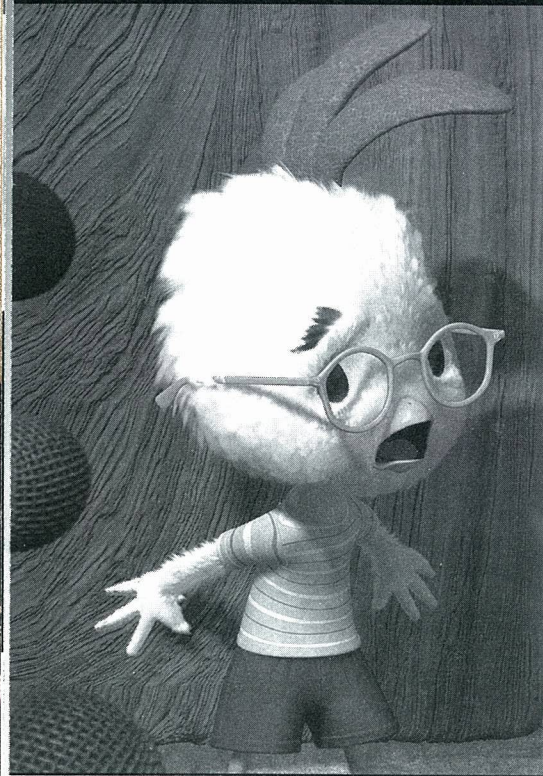
## LET THE GAMES BEGIN—FINDING A PARTNER

First and foremost you've got to ask yourself why you want a partner. Why not hash out this story yourself? Do you want someone to bounce ideas off of? Are you looking for someone to bring new ideas to the table? Do you want someone with whom you can really exchange ideas and interact creatively? Do you secretly think it's "easier" working with a partner? On the dark side, are you looking for someone to work only on your ideas? Kind of crass, but, okay. It's better to admit these things now.

Next, focus on your work habits and your likes and dislikes. What kinds of movies do you like? Are they the kinds of stories you also like to write? Are you any good at writing that kind of story? If not, are you better suited to other kinds of writing? Perhaps you like to watch comedy, but your sense of timing and phrasing are not that good. It's no big deal—if you've got a sense of plot and suspense, you can write a different genre instead. These are all things you should know about yourself before you go shopping for a writing partner.

Once you know who you are, next you have to decide what you are looking for. Do you work best with someone who is not your identical twin, whose differences will challenge you? Or do you work best with someone whose viewpoints are as close to yours as possible?





**Chicken Little** in Disney's *Chicken Little*, on which Ron Friedman & Steve Bencich received screenplay credit. PHOTO: © Disney. All Rights Reserved.

If you are at all interested in screenwriting, chances are you are already meeting people who write and who are approaching the craft in a manner similar to your own. If you are involved in a writing group, have been to a pitch festival, or are taking classes and workshops, you've probably met someone whose writing speaks to you.

Or, perhaps your partner is even closer to you than the nearest workshop. When you look at major, long-standing screenwriting partnerships, a recurring theme floats to the surface. A high percentage of the most enduring and successful writing teams are family affairs. For resolving the trust issue, if yours is a close-knit clan, it's a no-brainer to rely on your family. With the trust hurdle out of the way, and knowing that both of your interests in film were fired in the same creative kiln, looking to your close family members for potential writing partners makes more and more sense. And, with teams such as Joel and Ethan Coen (*Fargo*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*), Delia and Nora Ephron (*You've Got Mail*), Allen and Albert Hughes (*Menace II Society*), and Andy and Larry Wachowski (*The Matrix*)

working together, it's clear that there are some very special dynamics working that favor familial writing teams.

### MAKING IT WORK

Now that you've found your partner, it's time to put butt in chair and begin writing. Exactly how and where you go about doing this is up to you and your lawfully wedded writing partner. It seems that there are nearly as many writing tactics out there as there are partnerships. But there are a number of commonalities in nearly all writing teams.

While not every team writes every day, most do. More importantly, when a writing session is called, both partners show up. Technology has found its way into most partnerships in one form or another. That said, for it to be effective both partners must share a comfort level with whatever technology they've chosen.

Veteran scribes Ganz and Mandell work "nose to nose" in their shared office. As they read lines back and forth to one another, they get a feel for what works and what doesn't. Once they both agree that a piece of writing fits the script, they write it longhand on paper. At the end of the day their assistant transcribes these handwritten pages onto a computer and prints it out. When Ganz and Mandell come in the next morning, they review the previous day's work.

Ron Friedman and Steve Bencich (*Chicken Little*, *Brother Bear*) work at a coffee shop with their laptops back to back (Battleship-style). They use a system known as VNC (Virtual Network Computing), which allows them to work on the same document, and simultaneously see and make changes to a document on the other person's computer. Though it may be a bit embarrassing, they've been known to talk their way through scenes right there in the coffee shop, acting out lines to see if they work.

For Chris Faber and Dan Baron (*See Spot Run*) the notion of showing up for a writing session is a bit different. Baron lives in Los Angeles and Faber lives 400 miles away in Berkeley. For years now, the two have experimented with various VNCs, including Windows NetMeeting and MSN Messenger, which allow users to simultaneously work on the same document but also have the ability to play real-time video and

audio of the other person sitting at their computer. As long-distance partners, the benefits for Baron and Faber are clear. If your writing partner's joke is a dud, it's harder for you to spare his feelings if he can actually see your expression and hear your inflection.

The common thread seems to be that thriving partnerships find a pattern of working, both in time and in technique, that is comfortable for both of them, and not just for one person. All of the partners I spoke with agreed that working together is far preferable to working alone and then trying to fit scenes together. It's much livelier and far more dynamic, and, as Bencich puts it, "When we set a time to write, we both HAVE to be there. There's little to no procrastinating because the other person's livelihood depends on you showing up. It's like a checks-and-balances thing that keeps me from playing Minesweeper constantly."

Additionally, both partners in thriving teams tend to share duties equally. Not only do they both write equally, but one person might maintain their e-mail and computers, while the other person publishes their schedule on a public server so that both they and their representatives have access to it. For most working partners, the idea of equal responsibility on paper also leads to a sense of shared interests and complimentary strengths when they go to market with their ideas.

Friedman feels that, "When we're pitching, it's always best to go back and forth. Having two voices overlapping is more interesting than one droning on and on." While it may be the case that one writer feels a bit stronger about one particular story and takes the lead on a particular idea, the other writer will certainly keep the dynamic alive in the room and may take the lead when pitching the next idea.

All of these considerations speak to a crucial element in the business of writing partners. Both members must be present and contribute to the best of their ability. Not only is this an imperative for working functionality, but it is also an imperative of perception. If the partnership seems one-sided or ill-suited, the guys and girls who write the checks will be less inclined to invest in a partnership that probably won't last.

### A GOOD REP

Good or bad, as a writer or writing team in Hollywood, you cannot make it alone. You are going to need an advocate or advocates for your work. Generally, these come in the form of an agent or a manager. Finding good representation is difficult regardless of the circumstances and involves a set of skills all its own. However, just as some producers may like to hire writing teams, it appears that some agents and managers like representing partnerships for the very same reason—it's a two-for-one deal. As an agent or a producer, with a team you have two people to work with and not one love-starved ego to assuage. You've got twice the creative power to throw at a script.

Additionally, if you are an agent trying to help get a script in shape to go out, you want to work with a writer who is honest and objective about the work. That's not so easy for most writers working alone. Ryan Saul, an agent at Metropolitan Talent Agency, sums it up this way: "When you're writing solo, you depend on yourself to edit yourself. When we evaluate ourselves, we're not always objective."

### THE HALF-PRICE BIN

People in Hollywood like getting something for nothing. To a producer's eye, that's what they get when they hire a writing team. They get two writers for the price of one. That's right—there are no double fees or special perks just because there are two of you. Unless you've already established a name, the fee is for the work, not the literary muscle behind it. Rates are, in very general terms, figured as X amount for a feature script and X amount for a sitcom script, etc. If you sign on to a sitcom or long form series as a team, it's assumed that you'll work together on each piece. At least that's how they'll pay you. But secretly they are hoping, and have been around enough to know, that they are getting twice the creative muscle for one fee.

For many teams the trade off is that producers may be more eager to hire two for one, so the increased work is reward enough. Ganz and Mandell have always maintained that, "Together we'll be so good that we'll make twice as much as if we worked by ourselves."

### KEEP IT FUN

In the end, what I noticed first and foremost in all of the long-term partnerships that I studied was a sense of genuine connection. They all seem to get along really well and have a terrific playfulness about them. They seemed to feed off of each other's sense of humor/timing (a trait that helps when pitching). It's true that there are many more long-term writing partners in comedy than in drama, but I think it's more than just genre. These partnerships last because working together is genuinely enjoyable and they like each other.

I'm not saying that you have to take long, soulful strolls in the park or trips to Cabo with your partner. But overall, if you don't enjoy spending time with this person, he may not be the right partner for you, and your writing will suffer. (i)

**GLENN KAUFMANN** is currently working on a collection of stories about filmmakers who have financed their films using personal credit. He can be reached through his web site: [Glennkaufmann.com](http://Glennkaufmann.com).

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