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You Can Go

Home Again

by Glenn Kaufmann



It's the dream of every screenwriter. Feet up, margarita at the ready, surf crashing on the sand just a few feet away, you type those fateful words, FADE IN.

One of the first things you'll hear from non-writers when you tell them that you write is, "That's a great profession because you can do that anywhere." What they are trying to tell you is that they wish they could be a writer banging out prose, poetry, soap commercials or anything else that might pay the bills, margarita sweating beside them while their bank account runneth over.

But you're the one with his butt in the chair staring down a blank screen, trying to make a go of it in arguably the toughest writing market around. So, what's the truth? Can you really phone it in? Or do you have to suck it up and make "the move," packing up and joining the circus that is life in Los Angeles and "the biz."

The answer to this question is an easy and unqualified yes and no.

After interviewing numerous working writers, writing partners, agents, managers and producers—all at various stages in their careers—that's the best answer I can give you. There are pros and cons to both sides. Some writers swore you HAD to live in L.A. while others were downright cavalier in saying it wasn't necessary. But,

the vast majority of people with whom I spoke agreed that you should come to L.A. early in your career with your eye on a very specific set of objectives and be mindful of the very real perils of moving away.

The reasons to come to L.A. are legion, but for writers the main reason is to find advocates for their work. Finding representation (agents or managers) is never easy, and new writers will almost certainly slam into the problem of not having been previously sold or produced. Most agents/managers prefer to sign a known quantity. It's simply easier for them to push your work if you've already been proven worthy with at least one script sale. But the odds of selling anything without representation are slim. This Catch-22 is difficult and definitely not easy to overcome, but it's just the start of your troubles.

Your first step is to find a representative. Sure, you can run a query letter campaign from anywhere; and you can enter competitions from anywhere. However, when it comes to getting an agent to actually sign you—unless you're lucky enough to pen an exciting and perfectly salable draft right out of the gate—agents/managers will want to

meet you first. At the very least, you'll have to fly out and meet them.

If you live out of town, your best bet is to maximize that trip by scheduling numerous meetings while you are in town. But, the problem is these people are really busy, and schedules change at the drop of a hat. Suddenly your \$400 ticket to meet with six agents becomes a vanity trip to meet one person who might or might not sign you; and he, too, may cancel before you get to with meet him. If you live in L.A., you can take this scheduling "flexibility" with a bit more humor. Getting a call 10 minutes before your meeting saying, "So and so has decided to run off to Vancouver to check on a client. Can you meet two days from now?" still feels disrespectful but it happens all the time. At the very least, if you live in L.A., you don't have to book a flight to make the new meeting.

In addition to having greater access to potential representation, by being in L.A. you are surrounded by the business at all times. This does have its drawbacks, which I'll discuss later; but, for a writer, finding a community of up-and-comers with similar interests helps. Your greatest

ally as a writer will be a group of trusted people who will read your work and give you honest, informed feedback. The key here is that you want "informed" feedback. It's all well and good that your mom likes your script, but that and the price of a latte will get you a latte. You need feedback that honestly assesses your sense of screenplay structure, character and story. You want feedback that stings a bit when you deserve it. Better to have someone you trust give you the bad news about your script than to hear it from the man who could've written you a check for three years' living expenses.

Screenwriting is a very well-defined medium, and it demands precision. To get your writing to that level, you must crave feedback from people who work in that form and are in the biz every day. As Ron Friedman (*Brother Bear*) puts it, "Film in L.A. is like heat in Phoenix. It's everywhere." If you love film and truly want to make your living as a screenwriter, there is a huge benefit to immersing yourself in that environment, at least for a while. Not only will you begin to learn the differences among an option, a hip-pocket deal and

a D-girl, but you'll also hear about and start to meet people who have "made it." You'll begin to understand how and why they made their way when others have failed. Being around this on a daily basis will elevate your professional consciousness and start to key you into patterns of success that stand you a better chance of coming out on top.

Now, with all that said, as a writer there are some very compelling reasons to get out of L.A. when the timing is right. Don't get me wrong. You can leave L.A. at any time and still have a career, but it will be much more difficult to sustain than if you leave when the timing is right and not before.

If you've ever wondered why so many films are set in Southern California, you've hit on one of the main reasons why writers yearn to escape from L.A. Not only is the traffic a pain and the cost of living prohibitive, but if you live in Southern California long enough, you run the risk of having the film business and the beach as your only cultural references. While that may be all right for you personally, as a writer your work will grow stale unless you occasionally

infuse it with a new perspective. Discussing the reasons for her recent relocation from L.A. to Miami, Lisa Schrager (*Pay The Girl*) puts it this way, "I needed a new atmosphere. I was just getting kind of dead creatively, and I felt like either I moved or I wasn't gonna have anything to write about."

By getting out of L.A. on a regular basis, even if just to vacation, you will have new experiences and make new friends. If you don't just travel, but move away from L.A., these will be experiences and contacts that 99.9 percent of all L.A.-based writers will not share; and your work will stand apart from theirs for this very reason. These experiences and people can, and will, find their way into your work, giving it a freshness that is unique to you and who you are. This is a salable quality that you want for your writing.

By living away from L.A., you may just escape the stress and pressure that comes from being around the business all day every day. The, "Oh, my God! So and so just sold a script exactly like mine, so now mine will never sell" syndrome; and the "You've been here twice as long as she, so why did her script sell and not yours?" comparisons

(development)

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- * Leona Whitney Beatty, Director's Guild African-American winner for *Last Chair* in 2003
- * James Wong, writer/director, and Glen Morgan, writer/director, of *The One* and *Willard*
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are less likely to be a part of your life. I know it's paranoid; but if you live amongst the great unsold masses long enough, these thoughts do take hold.

Okay, let's face it, the other good thing about not living in L.A. as a screenwriter is the cache of not living in L.A. If only subconsciously, you are allowing yourself to exercise that bit of writerly fantasy that says you can work from anywhere. Remember the sweating margarita and the laptop? By living in Miami/New York/Hoboken, you are honoring your writing enough to say, "I am determined and committed enough that I am going to make this work from anywhere." There is something to that.

THE 10 PERCENT SOLUTION

Most, if not all, of the agents and managers I queried said that it was definitely possible to work from outside L.A.; but you need to come here first and then, when you've gained a foothold, think about moving out. From their point of view, this advice makes a lot of sense; and, strangely, for once the agent/manager's view of things is not all that different from the writer's perspective.

What agents and managers see in you when you live in L.A., is, well, you. They actually get to meet you and not just your query letter. They actually have a chance to sit down and hit it off with you, or not. This saves everybody time and effort. When you do find that person with whom you hit it off on a personal level, he will truly champion your work. You want this to happen. Case in point: Lisa Schrager has been with her manager, Larry Kennar of Anonymous Content, for seven years now; and the two have become good friends in addition to being client and manager. Happily, they can now watch as all of their hard work comes to fruition this year with a series of choice assignments.

Secondly, if you live in town, agents see someone who is around the business on a daily basis; and will learn to write the way this town wants you to write, a.k.a. three-act structure, something salable with an original voice. This type of writer is someone they won't have to train.

While your agent/manager would like you to be in town, what he wants most is for you to be happily productive. If you are unhappy in L.A. and your writing suffers, no one wants to read it. So, if it takes

relocating to Oshkosh for you to churn out the work, he's all for it. Emile Gladstone, co-head of feature literary services at Broder-Webb-Chervin-Silbermann, recommends that you, "Live where you can work the best—where you can write a lot. Just try to make that Hollywood."

As a side note, a couple of people mentioned that if you are somewhat established as a writer (have a sale or two to your name) and you live out of town, when you come to town, it's a bit easier to get a small rush of interest in you. As in, "If you want to meet with my client who hit it big in L.A. last year, you'd better sign up now because he's only in town from Oshkosh for a week." This is certainly NOT a reason to move out of L.A., but there are those who say it's not such a bad thing to be strategically unavailable; and living in Oshkosh would certainly qualify as "unavailable."

THEY WRITE THE CHECKS

In general, the producers with whom I spoke don't really care where you live as long as you show up for meetings; and they honestly don't care if you turn your pages in by mail or carrier pigeon as long as you get them in on time.

As for development meetings, some notes can be done over the phone; but for the big meetings, you need to come to town. If you are turning in a major draft revision, a contract milestone draft or anything that would cause them to write a check, you owe it to them to deliver it in person. However, if you are just discussing a few tweaks, generally that can be handled over the phone. As long as you put in the face time at key meetings and your writing is solid, there's really no reason to even let on that you live in Des Moines, unless you want to. Jonathan King, president of production at Laurence Mark Productions, once worked with a set of writing partners well into the development process before he found out that one of them lived in Amsterdam and hopped a KLM flight to L.A. for important meetings. According to King, it never affected the work and might easily have gone completely unnoticed.

Once your project has crawled, clawed and fought its way into production, the studio will most likely fly you to wherever they are shooting and put you up on location during production. During production, it is of no concern where you call home because

you won't be there. And, as King puts it, "Everything shoots in Toronto anyway, and no one lives there."

MAKING THE BREAK

If you've made the decision to leave L.A. or opt not to move there in the first place, what are the biggest and most common fears and concerns for your writing career?

First of all, this is a business of face-to-face contacts and personal connections. If you aren't in town, your opportunities to meet people, hit it off and make a good impression, are limited. Again, by living out of town, you will sacrifice the ability to take those last-minute meetings that frequently arise. If you send out a script that suddenly seems very popular, you will not be able to immediately cash in on the heat by meeting as many people as possible. Instead, you'll have to pencil them in for your next trip west.

You will have to make regular trips to L.A. no matter how successful you become. According to Gregory Allen Howard (*Remember The Titans*), "You can never meet enough people, see enough people or talk to enough people. You just can't. It's impossible." If you don't make regular trips for meetings and premieres, you run the risk of, as Howard puts it, "just being forgotten away."

For writers leaving L.A., other fears include losing their support group and that those they've come to depend upon for advice and creative feedback will look elsewhere for feedback on their own work, leaving you, the out-of-town writer, on the outside looking in. Writers who plan on leaving town fear, and rightly so, that they'll lose track of what new assignments are coming open and who is hiring. Because the assignment game is the true bread and butter of most working screenwriters, losing track of this end of the industry could be devastating to your checkbook. Granted, you may have an agent to look after these things; but I've yet to meet a working writer who leaves it all up to his agent. You still need to stay on top of the assignment market. If you live out of town, and, as such, aren't in regular contact with a variety of people who can give you this information, then your career will suffer.

GET OUTTA DODGE

You've identified all of the fear factors that might inhibit you from moving or ratchet

your career paranoia to unlivable heights and decided you want to leave or stay away from L.A. anyway. These factors can eliminate or at least diminish your jitters.

Probably the single biggest thing that has enabled writers to work from a distance and still be productive and in touch by L.A. standards is the vast improvement in technology over the past five years. While e-mail, cheap cell phones and laptops do make it possible to live in Des Moines and still write for Jerry Bruckheimer, the real boon for writers has been file transfer and teleconferencing. These two features allow writers to effortlessly share their work with agents, development execs and producers alike. Development notes and page changes can be embedded and shared across different versions of Final Draft. Two writers 500 miles apart can simultaneously edit the same document, watch each other do it and have a running conference call all at the same time.

Several years ago when Chris Faber (*See Spot Run*) decided to move to Berkeley while his writing partner Dan Baron (*See Spot Run*) stayed behind in L.A., the technology to work together on a daily basis was still being ironed out. Now, years later, Chris and Dan have tested products and refined their process to such a degree that frequently Chris stays in Berkeley while Dan works development meetings by himself with only a picture of Chris in the chair next to him. Despite the distance, Chris and Dan write everyday using Microsoft® Windows NetMeeting, which allows them to edit open documents on each other's computer, watching in real time as changes are made. A small video link also allows them to see each other's reactions to jokes, etc.—a real benefit that keeps writing partners honest in their feedback.

Yet another weapon in the fight to make it from outside L.A. is your little black book. The main reason people suggest coming to L.A. in the first place is to meet people. This is, after all, a people business in every sense. In a business where project partnerships can last 10 years or more, people sign on with you because of you and your personality as much as the material. Being in town and meeting people is critical. Once you leave L.A., if you have a PDA full of contacts and positive relationships that only need to be refreshed by the occasional trip to town, you've lessened the chances that you'll be forgotten.

But the single strongest career shield you can possess while working outside of L.A. is a signed deal. If you have a signed deal and are actively developing a project, you should be able to work from anywhere, come to town for scheduled meetings and e-mail/cell-phone the rest. There is nothing like a contract or sales notice in *Variety* to keep you in their thoughts, and there is nothing like deadlines and the dangled carrot of a studio check to keep you focused when you live 3,000 miles from the main office. As Greg Howard puts it, "There are only eight people who greenlight movies. When one of those people says those words ('I'm making this movie'), that means something." For Howard, it was just such a promise from one of these eight people that gave him the security to think that he could safely move back east. Later, when the deal fell through, it was Greg's own sense of hard work and commitment that kept him going and brought in the next project. But, initially, it was the knowledge that he had a deal and wouldn't have to starve to make it from a distance that gave him the freedom to relocate.

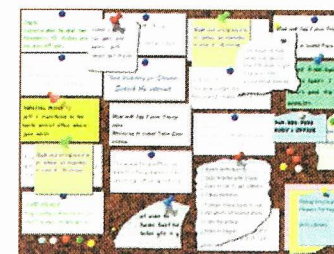
Ultimately the answer seems to be that if you want to be a working writer, you need to come to L.A. to get your career started. Once you've made some connections in the business, learned to write in a professional way, found people you trust to read your work and found representation, then you can begin to think about working from the beach or anywhere else that keeps you writing well and productively. Before leaving, you should lay the groundwork for working while out of town. Come to some sort of a consensus with your agent/manager about how often you want to come to town to keep your face and your work on everyone's mind. Make certain that wherever you move you will have adequate, reliable Internet and phone service so you can call in for meetings and e-mail the latest pages.

If you are lucky enough to bag a sale before leaving town, you can move and concentrate solely on being a steadily working writer, which is, after all, what this is all about. (i)

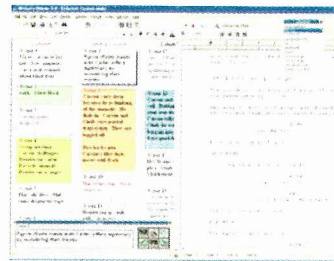
GLENN KAUFMANN is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer and screenwriter who will soon be relocating to Bloomington, Indiana. His article, "The Perfect Pitch" on surviving pitch festivals was published in November 2003 online at Scriptmag.com. Glenn can be reached by e-mail at filmglenn@yahoo.com.

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