

BOOK REVIEW

“I Liked it, Didn’t Love It,” 3rd Edition Screenplay Development from the Inside Out, Los Angeles, ESE

(Edwards Skerbelis Entertainment by Edwards, R. & Skerbelis, M. (2016))

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First an explication of the title. Even for those with some knowledge of the complex business of Hollywood screenwriting, it can be a confusing world. “I liked it, didn’t love it,” is basically a phrase that is the kiss of death for a screenplay in the extremely competitive world of top-level screenplay development and filmmaking. “Like” just isn’t enough to propel a screenplay through the formidable obstacles to make it to production. Like “good in a room,” another Hollywood industry phrase that means someone who is entertaining, memorable and charismatic in their pitching skills, “I liked it, didn’t love it,” is basically a pass, a rejection of the screenplay at this point in its development. Wishful thinking wants to focus on the “like” part but more attention must be paid to the words “didn’t love it” because this describes a screenplay that doesn’t pass muster, for whatever reasons, in the high stakes game of judging screenplay material.

The book is primarily focused on screenplay development Hollywood-style which is the template for so many other film businesses around the world and there is certainly much to be learned from the way filmmaking and storytelling evolved there. In an increasingly global marketplace, knowledge of how feature films are developed, written and made in Hollywood is crucial even if it is not the model that always works for other countries and cultures.

The Hollywood system has many critics as well as many fans. For more auteur filmmakers, the “indie” world is where real art is made and studios focus more on commercial fare for the global mass audience. However, it’s becoming less simple as in the new world of Netflix, Amazon and Hulu, the borders that used to exist

are in the process of being replaced by these global streaming services promoted by social media and films which once were barely seen in their own country can now reach a world audience.

For this reason alone it's important to know how Hollywood does it, though the sophisticated and expensive infrastructure of the studios and film companies there are not really replicated anywhere else in the world right now. The rise of China will certainly change that, but the unique history and practices of 'Tinsel Town', as it's affectionately known by cognoscenti, are one of a kind.

Because Hollywood is the template imitated in some way or other by the rest of the world, it has come to be the model for how a film should be made. The life cycle of a feature film has been developed to its most complex level in the studio system and the indie system of American film production. It used to be when you said movies, you meant Hollywood but today with the rise of China's box office might and the globalization of the film business combined with the disruptive changes in distribution and technology, the era of Hollywood's dominance is being re-visited.

Still there is much to learn about how films are brought into being by many hundreds of people, incredibly skilled in their art and craft and in chapters like, "The Story Department" and "Agents and Managers and the Deal," we are taken through the arcane and invaluable inside knowledge as to how a film comes together. A careful balance of history, anecdote, exercises and summaries and a guide among other things in how to procure a job as a story analyst and which jobs will help the neophyte screenwriter, the book manages to inform, inspire and educate. If you are a writer wanting to perfect your craft, find out how current best development practices came to be or explore jobs to enhance your career as a writer, it is covered.

Split into 3 parts, "I Thought Movies Just got Made ... Don't They?" "Too Many Platforms, Not Enough Devices," and "Apps Gadgets and Websites, Oh My!" the encompassing overview takes in both film history and the resources to navigate the increasingly fractured and complex landscape of today's filmmaking world. To be sure there are many more opportunities for filmmakers now but with them come the need for more complex skills. Today's filmmaker must have mastery of the entire film cycle from development to production and most importantly, distribution. This book serves as a manual for such a demanding world.

The third edition of "I Liked it, Didn't Love It," Screenplay Development from the Inside Out," has been considerably updated to incorporate many of the rapid changes and upheavals in the business, and it seeks to equip the reader with all they need to know to turn "like" into "love" and be successful in the glittering mirage underpinned by talent, hard work and a huge amount of luck that is Hollywood, the movie business is its most industrialized and complex form. As noted, the lessons apply wherever you are located and there is a wealth of information apart from breaking down the hard work of writing a really first rate screenplay.

Having that screenplay in hand however is only the beginning in the challenging world of connecting with those decision makers and financiers who can get it made. The book serves both as a bible for the screenwriter seeking to find out how to get their script to screen as well as many other subjects like how to compose a great resume, what coverage is (summaries of screenplays with detailed breakdowns of what works and what doesn't) what agents, managers, producers and other key industry figures actually do and how new technologies are changing the very nature of storytelling.

The often-paradoxical world of the film development process takes place in a hierarchy which is laid out clearly in many helpful charts. This world has its own language including slang and passwords, which the hopeful screenwriter and filmmaker tries to break into for the Holy Grail of filmmaking – production of a feature film. It always comes back to the screenplay. Renowned director Alfred Hitchcock noted you need three things to make a great film, script, script and script. A great screenplay can attract name talent and that in turn, attracts theatrical distribution, an increasingly difficult target to achieve as more films are made every year so as everyone involved in filmmaking will tell you, it always comes back to the script.

The now fast-changing world of visual storytelling has expanded vastly from the 90-minute feature film that plays in darkened movie theaters. Today think cable, TV and the newly breaking forms of storytelling, VR (Virtual Reality), AR (Augmented Reality), and hybrids of both for which we are still struggling to find language. Increasingly the audience is being brought into the story world as a character in it. The formerly passive viewer is now more like the author of the story in immersive environments, which are more akin to games than the movies with which we are familiar.

The rapid pace of change is why this book, a detailed and well respected guide for writers of the screen, small and large has been updated to better reflect the constant change and reinvention of a business itself only a little over 100 years old. We have to always remember it's called "show business" not "show art" though without art in the business, the stories will never capture the imagination of the audience and do what no other art can do, engage millions in an imagined universe for they pay upfront to sit in the dark and be transported to other worlds, other realities. And it always starts with the story.

The subtitle says this book is "Screenplay Development from the Inside Out," and now that we know the first part of the title is one of the most commonplace utterances writers will ever hear in Hollywood, what does this mean, to develop a screenplay from the inside out? Taking an idea and putting into words, which then become images, is a form of writing that turns money into light. Filmmaking is the most expensive art form and its final product has been, up to this point, projected onto a huge silver screen.

The written words have become images, shot by the director, and the images projected large are the final stop in a journey that is often known in Hollywood as

development hell, ” for the many voices giving opinions and seemingly endless rewrites. While the playwright’s work is legally protected so that not one single comma can be changed in a play, screenplays are often the work of many and indeed the role of the screenwriter is to balance their own original voice with what the market wants. There is an endless process of notes, rewrites and more notes where the resulting script may seem to be the work of a committee rather than an original piece of writing. We are mainly talking here about scripts that go through the development process with a studio, network or experienced indie producer. Because a screenplay is a work of art but also a business plan, it’s the only form of writing drawn from imagination that also acts as a directive as to how many speaking roles there are, what they wear, where the scene takes place etc. Screenwriting, despite the fact that so many attempt it, is one of the most difficult and challenging forms of writing, demanding art as well as technical expertise.

Edwards & Skerbelis really do go deep inside both the history and the many steps taken to get from idea to screen and it’s a complex and unpredictable journey showing that for all the negative spin on script development, it’s a required part of a production process to ensure the best possible film. These films in the Hollywood system are expensive business propositions with a very high degree of risk so anything that be done to predict a successful outcome, will be done. The idea of so many voices being part of the creative process may grate on the more independent minded of filmmakers but film is the most collaborative medium and art and the team approach was established in the very beginnings of Hollywood and movie making. Also, all that Edwards and Skerbelis describe and analyze is not only relevant for the extremely prolific and competitive world of Hollywoodscripts, but has relevance for all screenwriters wherever they may be working.

It was Hollywood, then called Hollywoodland, that concretized the development process for purposes of producing films in the vast quantities the market demanded. In the early days of the studio system, before their monopoly on talent was broken up, the entire production team was under one roof, under the studio roof and under the control of such visionaries and demanding studio chiefs as Samuel Goldwyn, Walt Disney, and Jesse Lasky. This absolute control resulted in many masterpieces of world cinema but like the advent of sound and more recent groundbreaking changes in technology and distribution models, the business and art is always undergoing multiple and complex changes where the old must give way to the new and unimaginable ideas become reality. If you told most Hollywood studio bosses ten years ago that their foreign box office would today vastly outstrip their domestic box office, you would have been laughed off the studio lot, but this has indeed come to pass and faster than anyone imagined.

The authors take us behind the scenes of all the steps of getting a film made, much as you can walk behind the “flats” or painted backdrops of a studio set and realize you are not really on a New York street, but in the bright sunshine

of California. Understanding the power hierarchy, how things are done and why they are done a certain way, sets us up for section 3, "Apps, Gadgets and Websites, Oh My!" where the changes are not only described but elucidated by the comprehensive list of resources which can be used to manage these changes and for the screenwriters to take their place in the new world of apps, downloads and transmedia projects.

This is knowledge that is hard to find in any one book. The world of movie making is a very closed system, although it is changing now with the interconnectivity of social media but it still presents formidable barriers to entry. While it is easier to make a film today due to changes in technology, there is much more product and it's therefore harder to find an audience. The information and advice given by Edwards and Skerbelis are encouraging but with a sharp dose of realism. When they tell us that many tens of thousands of scripts are registered each year at the US Writers Guild of America, it gives some sense of the competition, a note the authors sound throughout the book – this is not an art or business for the faint of heart.

It's possible to succeed but not guaranteed and it is a very demanding profession. Information is summed up usefully at the end of each chapter and nailed home with exercises to expand screenwriting and networking skill sets. Combined with the many tips, tricks, connections and strategy, Edwards and Skerbelis take us through not just the history and current practices of the film, television and in fact the visual media business, but educate as they ask questions about its future. Dense but readable, the style is bracing, humorous and informative.

With the film business becoming ever more global at a greater speed and the shifting power bases from the West to East, what relevance we may ask, does this book have outside the very specific world of Hollywood and US filmmaking which is more production line than the perhaps kinder, gentler worlds of say European filmmaking with its state subsidies of the arts?

Hortense Powdermaker's seminal book, "Hollywood, the Dream Factory," (1) shows the denizens of Hollywood as a tribe with its own gods, shamans, sacrifices and ceremonies. From this tribe we learn that the lessons learned in Edwards and Skerbelis' book are indeed relevant worldwide. Powdermaker's study has never been more relevant even as the book has gone out of fashion. Her name alone seems like the creation of an imaginative screenwriter! "*Liked it, Didn't Love It*," explores the contemporary tribe of many thousands who run the Hollywood dream factory and its imitators – those who write the stories they hope will become successful films of tomorrow.

One of the key strengths of "*I Liked it, I Didn't Love It* 3rd Edition Screenplay Development from the Inside Out" is to put in context this vastly sophisticated system of turning an idea into a movie. Starting with chapters which scope out the early years of Hollywood in a history that enlightens us about Frank E. Woods, considered to have written the first feature-length motion picture scenario. He was relatively unknown name in the glamour roll call of actors, directors and

the like, but someone without Woods, the screenplay as we know it today would not exist. How the “scenario” of early Hollywood became today’s screenplay is a fascinating story in and of itself but Edwards and Skerbelis do not linger there because there are 13 other chapters to cover the vast trove of cinema knowledge in this 365 page how-to manual combined with history, sociology and some gripping anecdotes all of which make this a must-have for any serious screenwriter and filmmaker seeking to perfect not just their script but how they go about getting it made.

I didn’t just “like” it, I loved it, and it succeeds as a guide to bringing ideas to life as words so that they may become visual images and render through the magic of film, a great story on screen.

1. Powdermaker, Hortense (1950). *Hollywood The Dream Factory*, Little Brown and Company, New York