

10 TIPS TO AVOID EMBARRASSMENT IN HOLLYWOOD

by Tim John

I can certainly vouch for Hollywood being tough to navigate. I spent seven years there. It's a bizarre place. Quentin Crisp referred to LA as "New York lying down". Many call it "Sodom-on-sea". Pauline Kael called it "the only town where you can die of encouragement."

I'm not a well-known writer, but I have sold eight original movie ideas from pitches, (mostly to Hollywood studios), and had several commissions for book adaptations, re-writes and production polishes, (generally the sort of script doctoring that rarely gets your name on screen or on imdb, but still pays the mortgage).

Here are a few lessons I learned the hard way...

1. BE CONFIDENT BUT NEVER COCKY.

Never be "Too smart for the room". But don't be self-effacing either. Many "El Laysians" just don't get irony.

I once went to a meeting at Disney with a writing partner and when we got there the main executive said "Great to meet you. We're looking for some funny writers" to which I replied, self-effacingly, "Then you should meet the guys I play tennis with, Dick Clement and Ian Lafrenais. They're really funny."

Not only could the man not see that I was joking, but as I left the meeting, his assistant took me aside, handed me a business card and whispered "If you keep having self-esteem problems, call this number. She's my shrink and she's really good"!

2. NEVER GET COMPLACENT.

"Writer" is only one letter away from "Waiter."

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3. LEAVE THEM WANTING MORE.

Never pitch your entire story, just the feel of it. Act out the trailer. And if you find public speaking tough and you choke on your words, pretend it's because your story is so moving. As a senior Disney executive once said to me, "Nobody ever walked out of a movie because it was too emotional."

4. MAKE SURE YOU STAND OUT.

But don't be remembered for the wrong reasons. I made the classic mistake of taking along a prop to a series of pitches – a human prop – a ventriloquist. It seemed like a good idea because the story was about a kids' entertainer. But I'd forgotten that whenever you show a performer an audience, they automatically perform, even when you don't want them to. I'm still haunted by this guy's puppets constantly interrupting me during my pitch to show off funny voices, tell jokes and yes, even sing a duet! Even more scary was the moment I gestured for the ventriloquist to stop and he replied "Don't blame me. It's them!"

5. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE.

Hollywood is not about making movies, it's about marketing movies. Even Indie producers need to know which audience will pay to see your picture.

6. HOLLYWOOD IS LIKE McDONALDS.

People go to McDonalds, in their millions, every week, because they know what they are going to be served. It's something they like, it's reliable, it doesn't disappoint. It may not be the greatest thing they've ever had, it may not be something to sing and dance about, but it's enough to satisfy them at that particular point. That's what millions of people want from the movies too. Sure, if you can throw in a little something extra, a nice surprise like a little toy or extra side dish,

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great – but a lot of film makers think they can take America by storm by presenting an entirely new kind of meal with only a token bit of McDonalds thrown in. That hardly ever satisfies the American appetite.

7. DON'T TRY TO PLEASE EVERYBODY.

ON THE OTHER HAND, while there is no surefire recipe for a hit, there is certainly one for a flop – trying to please everybody.

8. KEEP IT REAL.

Draw on real life for your writing, not just movies.

9. ENJOY THE PROCESS.

Enjoy coming up with a great line of dialogue or fixing a single scene. Don't let your only measure of "success" be seeing your name in lights.

10. DON'T LOSE SIGHT OF WHO YOU REALLY ARE.

That's so easy to do in a place where the lines between reality and fantasy can get very blurry, and, as a writer, you are always putting yourself in fantasy situations, (in your work at least).

I admit I was definitely tempted by the American Dream lifestyle, but I learned, via some hard lessons, that anything called a dream is something you will one day wake up from. I don't mean to be at all pessimistic here. I definitely think any decent writer can still find success in Hollywood. All I would say from my own experience is that you can have all the things you want in life, but you just can't have them all at the same time.

And a bonus tip, for those over-achievers!

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GET A TEAM BEHIND YOU.

Don't go it alone. Get to know some producers and advisors who really know their way around Hollywood.

WHY WE LIKE TIM JOHN

Tim tweets daily about the film business using @TIMJOHN1.

"ADVENTURES IN LALA LAND", Tim's refreshingly frank memoir, is packed with words of wisdom from the stars, plus funny and poignant anecdotes about Tim and his English family trying to make it in Hollywood. It's out now on Amazon.

THINK HOLLYWOOD

THINK HOLLYWOOD connects undiscovered writers with producing teams that specialize in developing and championing unrepresented projects.
