**Big-Screen Scriptwriting**

**BY D.R. MARTIN**

Theatrical films typically begin life as scripts. Whether a journeyman Hollywood scribe, a lucky beginner from Poughkeepsie, or a multimillionaire screenwriter—all sit down in front of a PC and tell a story in 100 or so pages of plot, character, dialogue, and description. The script may be reworked repeatedly, with the producer, director, other writers, and actors all having their say. But, in the end, that script will be the blueprint for a film that could cost tens of millions of dollars to produce.

Large-format cinema is less a descendant of that type of storytelling than of visual effect and informational filmmaking—a kind of hybrid "thrill ride/educational experience—and that may be why the craft of scriptwriting has played a smaller role.

Whether or not large-format films will evolve into presentations resembling theatrical features—which depend on rigorously planned, script-based storytelling—is open for debate. Large-format technology is a different creature, as are its aesthetic demands and economic realities. Its visual splendors are still vital to its success. But one thing seems clear: The days when large-format films could rely mostly on thrills and chills, combined with educational content, may be passing.

Audience members still want their thrills and chills—and still want to learn. But many also want to leave the theater having made some kind of connection with characters whose lives or adventures play out up on the big screen. And that comes from storytelling, via some type of intensive writing process—either by scriptwriters, the director, or the producer.

**THE SCRIPT IS EVERYTHING**

"It’s almost been our company’s rallying call that scriptwriting in our large-format medium has to become more professional and more inventive,” says Greg MacGillivray of MacGillivray Freeman Films (MFF). “Let's get better budgets, and let's pay better attention to the written word before the photography ever starts.
“Simply because the images are so compelling and are the strength of the medium, filmmakers think, ‘Well, we can just go out and rely on great photography to pull off a great movie.’ And that’s not the case. You may get a good movie, but you’ll never get a great movie. Oftentimes, we’ve gotten mediocre or poor films.”

Stephen Low of the Stephen Low Company believes that large-format cinema got off on the wrong foot, which downplayed the descriptive qualities of character-based storytelling. Namely, he thinks the genre was derived from 1950s-style documentaries.

“It’s somehow developed into a kind of travelogue,” he says, “based on concepts and encyclopedic subject matter, rather than a story. I can’t understand why people make films without characters, without stories, with just shots of continents and so on. For me, there’s no emotion at all in that. For me, that’s a big problem.

“Character is the essence of all fiction and nonfiction. Regardless of what the characters are—animals or humans or objects—all storytelling is based on characters and relationships between characters.”

Nonfiction is not exempt, if Low is correct. One could say that large-format film—whatever its special qualities and requirements—needs character and story, even if its overall purpose is to tell a continent’s tale or recount a science adventure.

Low cites the example of Survival Island, his all-time favorite large-format film. Though not strictly character-driven, it’s about a huge crowd of animal characters, interrelating and struggling to survive in a crazy, dangerous place. They’re fighting it out amongst themselves and battling everything Mother Nature throws at them.

Quality scriptwriting is going to play a much larger role in Imax and other large-format films, says Andy Gellis, Imax Corporation’s senior vice president of film production. “I think that as the medium grows and starts to embrace different forms and types of presentations, a script becomes everything. As they say, ‘If it’s not on the page, it’s not on the stage.’”

“A good story is mandatory,” agrees Jon Corfino, vice president for production at Iwerks Entertainment. “It’s very easy to strap a 15 perforation camera onto a helicopter and get a beautiful picture. But people can fall asleep looking at beautiful pictures.”

Ben Shedd of Shedd Productions has another perspective: “[The large-format writing process] is about making sure that the sense of place also is part of the progression of the story. Because it’s not just the characters on the screen who are going to those places, it’s the audience, also. I think the main character in a giant-screen [script] is the audience. I think that singular notion is extended absolutely everywhere inside these giant-screen films. The audience is always traveling on a magical adventure. And, along the way, the story needs to not only get the progression of emotional moments right, but also to maintain the appropriate scaling—size and shape—whether we’re in a big space or a small space.”

**THROWING OUT THE SCRIPT**

Of course, most large-format films are reality-based, and reality doesn’t necessarily bend to the will of a screenwriter or director or producer. Reality goes its own way, sometimes providing more dramatic turns of plot and character development than any writer could think of. Scripts may be written, but they evolve according to what the camera captures. That was the case with MFF’s Everest, to be released in March.

MFF begins its scripting process with six months of intensive research with various experts, then creates an outline, and hires a writer or writers. In the case of Everest, it was the team of Steve Judson and Tim Cahill. They worked on the script for months.

“How visual is king,” says MacGillivray, “you sometimes have to change directions from what your initial plan was. The Everest film is an example of that, when, right in the middle of the shoot, there was this enormous tragedy on the mountain.”

Several climbers died scaling the world’s tallest peak, right in the midst of the MFF shoot in May 1996. In fact, the crew helped in the rescue effort.

“The script has to be written before the people go there,” Cahill says, “because Imax is very expensive, and you can only do it once. People want to have a good idea of what the film is going to be.

“Well, in practice, it doesn’t work that way at all, especially the Everest film. When the
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tragedy happened, it basically threw the script
I wrote out the window. The film that comes
back is nothing like the script that you wrote—
it’s better. But then you have to work with what
has been shot, and you write it a second time.”

The central theme of the original script is
still in the movie—the quest of Sherpa Jamling
Tenzing Norgay to follow in the footsteps of his
father, Tenzing Norgay (who reached the peak of
Everest with Sir Edmund Hillary in 1953). But the
whole middle part of Everest now is about how
Jamling and three other climbers featured in
the film dealt with the tragedy.

“We had a problem with the emotional
curve of the film,” says Cahill. “How do we
get from the tragedy to our team’s eventual
triumph? We want the audience to feel Jamling’s
triumph. We want them to be happy for Araceli
Segarra, because she’s the first Spanish woman
to stand on top of Everest.

“It turned out that Araceli, with her frothy
personality and almost irresistible sense of
humor, began to slowly bring us out of the
tragedy and into the triumph. You know,

I couldn’t have predicted that. I couldn’t have
written that into the script.”

RESPONDING TO REALITIES
For Stephen Low’s film Super Speedway, the
script drafts—written with his brother Alex—
were tools used early in the process of getting
the production going. This included preselling
it to theaters and identifying subjects, locations,
and others in the Indy car world who would be
willing to participate. The script—in its succeed-
ging versions—had to reflect and respond to the
realities of the Indy car business and the large-
format film industry.

“You don’t want to write a script in a vacuum,”
says Low. “You’re constantly looking for two
things: one is do-ability and cooperation
from [the film’s subjects]. The second thing is:
What’s the story? What’s this film really going
to be about? All of this is scriptwriting in
documentary.”

Having secured the cooperation of a promi-
nent racing team, Low still had to find a good
story. Is it a young driver or an older one?
What's the conflict? Why should the story be told?

Low had the good fortune of having a certain individual interested in driving the camera car—Mario Andretti, the greatest American race-car driver ever.

“But his son Michael is now the current champion of Indy car racing,” says Low. “So that's a perfect situation for a filmmaker, because the films are about relationships. We undertook a father/son story. It was just one of those lucky things.

And, Mario is a marvelous guy and a great documentary character.

“It doesn't always work out that way. You could find your main character, and you've written your scripts and raised your money, but he/she doesn't want to do it for some reason. That's what's so complicated about nonfiction storytelling. Then you have to scramble. Who else can I make this story about? This is all scripting.”

In Low’s case, scripts cease being generated on paper. “It's the moment you've sold it and you have the financing in place,” says Low, “when the script stops getting written out on a computer and starts getting written out on napkins in restaurants. I mean, I work on it every day, but I don’t type it up and send it out to everybody.”

A KNOWLEDGE OF THE SUBJECTS

Christopher Parsons’ field is natural history, and the characters that fill its stages are generally not known for their willingness to follow a script. In fact, the one quality that can be predicted among larger animals is their unpredictability.

“To have any chance with the material, you have to have a pretty deep knowledge of the subjects and how they behave,” says Parsons, producer of Survival Island and The Secret of Life on Earth. “You have to go for natural-history behavior and situations that you can predict with a great deal of accuracy. So the way it's done is to block out the shape of a film and describe the behavior that you want and the relationship of the behavior to the story. Based on previous knowledge, you try to indicate the breakdown of shots and so on.

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But, of course, you can’t script in enormous detail.” Nonetheless, Parsons was able to get his cast of characters in The Secret of Life on Earth to “perform” on cue. A number of shots comprised microphotography, which can be carefully planned. Shots of larger animals were of a general nature, not requiring specific behaviors. Yet more shots, such as a fruit bat eating a fig, were done in controlled conditions.

*Survival Island* was a completely different situation, packed with wild behaviors. But certain factors, again, worked in Parsons’ favor: The animals could be approached closely with a camera without disrupting their behavior. And, because Parsons and company were dealing largely with colonial animals, certain occurrences could be predicted within a given time frame.

“If you’ve done your research right, and you went at the right time when seals were pupping,” Parsons says, “then there would be a very high probability that you would be able to fasten onto a seal that was giving birth. So once again, we were able to script that film fairly accurately.

“However, you weren’t ever sure of the weather. Even in spring and summer, from time to time, you get these very wintry blasts. That was obviously a nice dramatic moment that we would plan for. We put it in the script, and indeed we got it—it happened!”

**TELLING A GOOD STORY**

As the large-format filmmaking process evolves, it is likely to resemble more closely that of feature films in terms of writing and storytelling.

“I’m hiring writers from the start,” says Gellis, “working the script and ultimately getting it to a point where we’re really interested in potentially doing it. Then we’ll go out and find a director for it. Or, a director can develop his/her own scripts. But I’ve got to have a script before anybody’s going to go out and shoot.”

For example, at the time of this writing, Imax was working with Paramount Pictures to produce a first-draft script for a potentially exciting development in large-format storytelling—an Imax Star Trek yarn.

“My question as I develop projects is,” says Shed, “is that kind of a [character-driven] story a big enough emotional story within the giant screen? Or is that more appropriate in a small-screen, framed format?

“I haven’t seen Everest yet, but Everest is big enough. Tropical Rainforest was big enough. But, it’s tension between two people—when there are 300 of us also in that same group who are in the audience—it’s really a story about
302 people, as much as two people on the screen. I’m sure there will be a bunch of [character-driven films] done, and I’m sure there’ll be a lot to learn from them. And I do think a new kind of filmic language is going to have to be used from the writing and production points-of-view."

Whether or not feature-style storytelling itself will work on the giant screen—artistically or economically—is indeed a big question. Parsons raises some interesting points: “[Feature] product has to do what it can in the cinema and then go on to television. Directors have been forced to look at those two media together. Now what interests me is that if it’s really going to work in Imax, it’s got to be shot for Imax. I’m not sure where it goes from there. Because if you took a film that works incredibly well in Imax, and you print it down for the cinema, you’ve got a different aspect ratio. I don’t know that the two are compatible.

“And, I’m not sure anyone has cracked [large-format drama] yet, outside of Stephen Low. I don’t think normal film drama can be transferred directly to the Imax screen. It may be that you have to form it in a different way—wider, longer shots. You may have to accept that it’s halfway between the cinema and the theater. But you still need some of the glamor and conventions of the cinema to carry the thing along.”

“I guess a lot of audiences still want to see the vistas,” says Low. “They don’t want to be distracted by story. Maybe that’s right, and I’m wrong. It’s possible. But if I’m wrong, then Imax ain’t going anywhere, in my opinion. It’s just going to die.”

“The audience is very smart,” says McGillivray. “When they bring their families, and it’s a $30 to $40 expense, they’re going to want a lot from [a large-format film]. It’s only 40 minutes long, but it’s quite an investment. We have to remember that as filmmakers all the time. And, we better be darn entertaining and inventive and creative, and we better tell them a good story. We’d better weave them some magic.”

That audience need for “some magic” can be seen among a number of commercial and destination theaters, according to Corfino. Some of them are beginning to exhibit theatrical-release films and are happily filling theater seats.

“We have to tell better stories to keep the format intact,” says Corfino. “Unless you’re capturing [the viewers’] imaginations and causing them to think and wowing them with the sheer scope and technical prowess of the format, I think you’re missing the mark.”

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