

## **DIRK BENEDICT**

### **A Television Insider**

*By Mary J. Schirmer*

Actor/writer/director Dirk Benedict was born in White Sulphur Springs, Montana. On a dare, he auditioned for the college spring musical and won the lead. The acting bug bit.

Benedict studied acting with John Fernald of London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts.

Since 1972, he's starred on Broadway and in films and television series, most notably "The A-Team" and "Battlestar Galactica."

He took time from his busy schedule for an e-mail interview. The frequent capitalization reflects Benedict's enthusiasm and passion.

#### **Since you've had a formal training in acting, do you suggest that new actors learn their craft in that way?**

Sadly, there are no rules by which an actor learns his "craft." Would that it were that easy. I spent four years studying acting in college and another two years in English Classical training and ended up working a lot on TV.

Harrison Ford was pretty content as a carpenter who thought it would be nice to work on TV and ended up being the biggest film star in the history of cinema (using \$\$\$ as gauge, which is how it is done these days.) It does depend on your dream.

I dreamed of being a great classical actor in a quality rep company and got sidetracked because I thought acting in TV was "just another job" -- which it was NOT because once you get any kind of fame in Hollywood, you are pretty much only allowed to continue doing whatever "kind" of part it was that first brought you that piece of celebrity.

So I say, be very clear as to what your dream is. Nowadays it is fairly certain that 90 percent of all "actors" really just want to be rich and famous as the solution to all that ails. It is a good motive, fame and money, as it is tangible and measurable. Being an "artist" is neither measurable nor tangible and certainly not a way to become rich.

Anthony Hopkins, you can bet your SAG card, only really ever wanted to be rich and famous. And he achieved, albeit somewhat late in life. Never mind that he was acknowledged to be the heir to Olivier's throne, and played most of the great parts in theatrical literature, and was the toast of the English (and American) theatre world. He just wanted to be a damn American Film Star. And now he is.

I wanted to be Anthony Hopkins and ended up being neither a film star nor having a career on the stage ... because I am "known" as a TV actor and, therefore, incapable of greatness on the stage.

#### **How much of acting is an art, and how much is technique?**

Questions about acting are difficult because I don't know if you mean acting on stage or in film, and they are a very different technique. I maintain you can make a film/TV "star" out of a can of sardines.

It is all about marketing; that is where the real craft comes in. The best actors do not necessarily become the biggest stars. And vice versa. So far as being a true actor playing Moliere, Sheridan, Shakespeare, Shaw, Ibsen, Simon, Miller, etc., all very different styles.

It takes great technique, tremendous discipline and energy and practice, and damn few are capable. Art is confidence. Technique makes it possible to achieve artistic greatness but doesn't guarantee it. The great piano artists are not the ones who are best playing Clementi exercises.

**You've worked with some of the greats -- Fred Astaire, Gloria Swanson, Angela Lansbury, Maya Angelou, George Peppard, all of the original "Charlie's Angels." What did they learn from you?**

These questions are too big. I may have to write another book to answer them.

All of the people you mention are very different. Very, very different. I'll make it simple: From Fred Astaire I learned discipline and hard work. From dear, dear Gloria Swanson (like a mother to me) I learned how to live long, happy and free of health problems. I owe her my life. Angela Lansbury -- how to make a ton of money (which I never did).

From Maya Angelou I began to believe that I too, some day, could be a writer, and I also learned how tortuous it can be to be in possession of a unique voice. I am very proud of the film I was in that she wrote, and it was not only my first film but the most artistic experience and most fun I had as an actor in films and TV. It was all down hill, artistically, from then on.

From dear George I learned to relax, enjoy whatever success comes your way and not to worry ... all things which he never did. From the "Charlie's Angels" I learned how NOT to behave if I ever became a TV star.

I doubt if any of them learned a damn thing from me 'cuz in those days I very much kept my mouth shut. I was a sponge. You'd have to ask them. If they are still with us. I'd be surprised if they remember working with me.

You left Mr. T off the list but I had more fun with him and Dwight Schultz over a longer period of time than with any other two human beings on this planet and in my lifetime. God bless them.

**Are you an actor/director who writes or a writer who also acts and directs?**

I'm a classic example of what can happen if you follow your inner voice. I was cursed with interests and some talent in many different areas. It confuses people. We live in an age of "experts" and, if you are a TV star -- which is how I came to the awareness of those in Hollywood -- it is difficult if not impossible to gain respect as a writer of the kind of books I've written or the kind of film I wrote and directed.

**You cured yourself from prostate cancer with macrobiotics (*Confessions Of A Kamikaze Cowboy*). How did that challenge make you a better actor?**

It made me a better human being. Healthier, happier, more free. It changed every cell of my being down to the depths of my soul. It is only because of that experience, and the lifestyle I now lead as a result of it, that I am in peace and harmony.

'Cuz it has not been a smooth ride. It gave me what everyone REALLY wants. No, not fame and fortune, though America thinks so. It gave me health and

happiness in spite of the material world. I am a better actor now than at any time in my life. And haven't worked for seven years!

### How was writing that personal, nonfiction book different from writing a stage play?

I have written two nonfiction books I'm embarrassed to say, the second being *And Then We Went Fishing*.

A stage play, of which I've written two great ones (the fact they haven't been produced does not reflect on their quality but other factors too numerous to mention) -- a stage play requires very different craft from a book, fiction or otherwise, and ditto from a screenplay.

The trouble with most stage plays nowadays is they are written by people who grew up not reading or seeing (or being in) the great theatrical literature of the day but watching network TV. And so they are more like TV sitcoms than stage plays.

And anybody can write a film script 'cuz it has been reduced to a "formula," which is one of the reasons they are so similar and boring. The only difference from one USD \$100 million budget film to another is which of the 12 box stars are getting \$20 million to be in it. It is marketing that makes films popular. Cross-marketing. Selling movies with hamburgers and Coke, etc.

You couldn't make *High Noon* or *The Caine Mutiny* or *Casablanca* for that matter in today's world if they were being shopped around the studios.

Age of Experts. If you write a truly original film, people will tell you it isn't a real screenplay ... 'cuz they've all gone to the same screenplay writing classes and KNOW what one is supposed to look like and what one looks like is what the Harvard Business Grads want it to look like because they run the "system" and it is like making hamburgers.

They must all have the same structure. All of this to guarantee box office bonanza, which of course it never does but that's another discussion entirely.

I enjoy writing nonfiction the most because one is limited only by one's imagination. Autobiography is tough.

### How is writing a stage play different from writing a screenplay?

Answered above. They are (should be) as different as the difference between water skiing and snow skiing, skate boarding and roller blading.

Films are about emotions. They are, for the most part and certainly in today's mainstream film world, NOT about ideas. Not thought-provoking. They are all about EMOTION. FEELINGS.

And therefore IMAGE is king. NOT the written word. The written word in films died with the success of *E.T.* Spielberg killed the written word in films because he is a genius at what he does, and what he does is make films based on a childhood in front of the TV.

Not reading Shakespeare, Miller, Williams or the great screenwriter Nunally Johnson (as one example) who once said, by the way, "Only hacks are consistent."

I agree completely. And Hollywood today is ALL about being consistent. All thinking in mainstream film business takes place in One Box.

I love writing for the stage because the word is King, will always be King, and that is the reason so few great stage plays are being written. People, for the most part, only write stage plays so that they can get a job writing for "Friends" or some other TV show. As I said, most plays you see today are nothing more than TV episodes put on stage.

**Many writers claim to "become" all their characters when they write screenplays. Do you think that experience is intensified because you're already an accomplished actor?**

Dialogue is my forte. Whether that is because I am an actor or merely talented in that regard I have no idea. Nor do I care. When I write, I always feel like I am just taking dictation -- following the characters around and writing down what they say (inside my head).

To me all writing is like music. And especially dialogue. I studied music in college; that is what I wanted to be, a composer. Acting got me sidetracked. Today I spend more time making music than I do writing. I had a Dixieland jazz band in high school and college and dreamed of becoming Tommy Dorsey or better yet, Kid Ory, my hero! Too many interests, too little time.

**How is it possible for male writers to craft screen roles for women?**

This question reflects the stupidity of the times -- that only white people can write white people, only black people can write black people, only women can write women, etc., etc.

It is now true in acting, which stuns me. When I was a young actor, it was the opposite. The more different you were from the part you played, the more talent it reflected.

If I could play a convincing black transvestite, that would mean I was one hell of an actor. Nowadays I'd be marched against by the black political groups, the transvestites and God knows who else.

So if you write that part, you have to find a black transvestite to play it. Which is why the airwaves are groaning from the weight of shows like "Survivors."

"Real people" playing themselves. How exciting.

Anthony Hopkins never would have got to play Hannibal Lecter if they could have found the Real Person. And I'm sure he's out there somewhere. It is all mind numbingly stupid, but yet one more sign of what is called Political Correctness. The death of true creativity.

I guess it means only female painters can paint pictures of women. Only men can sculpt men. Read Shakespeare. He wrote EVERYTHING and better than anybody. He'd be in a lot of trouble today. It is sad, but today Sir Laurence Olivier would not be allowed to play *Othello*.

A talented writer can write women, men, dogs, pigs. They can write old people, young people. Does a writer have to be insane to write the part of someone insane? I know he has to be insane to want to be a writer, but that isn't the point.

It is true that it is good to "write what you know," but some people know a great deal. I didn't think the men in *Thelma And Louise* were not believable because it was written by a female writer. Nor do I think Katharine Hepburn suffered in her films with Cary Grant because all her words were written by men. *The Trojan Women* is riddled with great female parts.

**People say that Hollywood has a "thing" about hiring new screenwriters over age 40. Do you agree that it's a problem to break in at that age, and what steps could a new writer take to burst through the door anyway?**

Hollywood has more than a "thing". They damn well won't hire a writer over 40 unless he made his mark when he was under 30. America worships youth. It is reflected everywhere. And because wisdom can ONLY come with age, America is a very immature, unwise country. As reflected in its films.

My films went to numerous film festivals. I was stunned at how shallow the films were and how much alike. And how politically correct. Not only did you have to be "young" but also too a member of some "minority." Teenage angst, gay, lesbian, any film about a woman as a victim. Festivals today are driven by female perspective. My film is about heterosexual men over 40. And it was very much alone.

The assumption is that if you are over 40 and still haven't "made it" then you don't have talent. I personally don't think anybody should be allowed to write a screenplay UNTIL they are over 40. It used to be don't trust anyone over 30; now it is don't hire anyone over 30. I wish I were joking. It all comes, like the obsession with plastic surgery, from a fear of getting older, which is to say a fear of death. America is terrified of the passage of time. Prozac Nation. Land of Face Lifts.

Having said all of this, still the best way to go from zero to 100 in showbiz is to write a screenplay so good (explainable in 25 words or less) that everyone wants it.

And if you are over 40, send your younger brother, sister or your kid to take the meeting. Especially if the screenplay is about people under 40, because we all know you can only write whatever age you are. The neurosis of all this ageism is that Harrison Ford, Eastwood, Redford, Newman, etc., etc., have been playing heartthrobs until they need more filters than a pack of Camels. And their girlfriends are in their 20s. But being a Movie Star changes all the rules.

**You've been a regular on two long-running, major TV series, "The A-Team" and "Battlestar Galactica." What type of input do actors have on TV scripts?**

I can't speak about anything but own experience, and I'm saving those stories for my book on *Behind The Scenes Of Making "The A-Team"*.

Generally speaking, actors are allowed NO input. Actors are dumb.

I once guested, after "The A-Team," on the series "Hotel." An actor, a very experienced character actor with endless credits, wanted to change ONE word in a speech. They said no. He didn't understand the problem with one word. We sat for 30 minutes while the Executive Producer was found (getting his nails done, I think) to okay the changing of that one word. After five minutes, the actor said forget about it, it wasn't worth all this angst, but we had to wait because it was already in the "pipeline." They didn't let him change the word, by the way.

On "The A-Team" I will only say that we not only changed words, but rewrote entire scenes and speeches. It was great fun. And made us very unpopular. With everybody. The four of us were more like the group of guys we played than anyone will ever understand. Fearless. And paid the price for it.

**On your website [www.kamikazecowboy.com](http://www.kamikazecowboy.com) you wrote that "the first 25 years of waiting in Hollywood are the hardest." This doesn't give much encouragement to new screenwriters. What would you say is the best way for a new screenwriter to get noticed?**

I wrote my screenplay for George Roy Hill in 1973, at his request at an idea I had told him. He read it and pretty much never spoke to me again. He said it was "the most disgusting thing he'd ever read."

It freaked me (I was young), and I nearly burned it. I dusted it off in 1990 and rewrote it, making it even more disgusting, I presume, and in 10 years we had the money. It was (is) ahead of its time.

The fact it is still provocative says something. If you read the screenplay (or see the film for that matter) you either have to say the guy's a genius or he doesn't know what in the hell he's doing.

In other words, it is completely non-derivative. 'Cuz I write from my imagination, not from what I've read in books or seen on TV or to make money. I wrote from an idea I was passionate about, and that would be my advice. Don't try to figure out what they want and then satisfy that. Write about something you are passionate about.

Of course, this contradicts my ranting about the formulaic aspect to all screenplays and that if you want to have great success you'd better give them what they want, but so be it.

I'm the worst person to ask about how to get noticed. It took me 25 years. At that rate, I figure I've got one more film in me. BUT, I'd rather have made the film I made (*Cahoots*) than 5 MOW's or studio summer flicks. My film will ALWAYS speak to audiences. And provoke.

If you have talent as a screenwriter, it will out. Nothing succeeds like perseverance. Never give up. And if it takes 25 years, so be it. Anyway life never turns out the way you imagine, dream or plan it to. Or hadn't you heard?

**You describe yourself as reclusive, as a hermit. How does that quality help you as a writer?**

Nobody sees you when you are drunk. I think I'm joking.

It helps to be able to be ALONE. 'Cuz writing is done alone, unless you collaborate, but I don't do that. (Ask my ex-wife.) The way I write makes collaboration impossible. The Voice that speaks to me won't allow it.

If you can't stand to be alone, you are in a lot of trouble as a writer. Best go for that job being staff writer for John Ritter's next TV series. Or Ted Danson or whomever. Sit in a room and toss ideas, lines, quips, doughnuts around.

My favorite thing is to be alone in a room with a blank paper in front of me and the time to fill it. Finding the "time to fill it" is the real dilemma.

**It seems that a writer/director would have the best shot at preserving the original voice and vision of a movie script. Would you please discuss that briefly?**

There IS no "original voice or vision" in films today. They are all done by committees. Groups. Co-writers, even co-directors, and then of course the studio changes it all anyway.

If you want to have something to say about the voice or vision of a film, go to Harvard Business School. Become a Studio Exec. But don't become a writer. Or director for that matter.

It took me 25 years. That was the bad news, but the good news was very good news and makes me a member of a very elite club. Because, in the making of *Cahoots*, from beginning to end I had complete control. Not only Final Cut, but I got to make the coffee the way I like it.

It was truly in the auteur tradition in a way that is almost completely dead and gone. Cassavetes would have been pleased with me. Truffaut, too, I think.

I was the final word on everything. I wrote and directed. Complete cast approval. Every piece of music. Every edit. Every ... every thing. Which means I pissed off a lot of people. When you make a film, the thing you must remember is that everyone is very quickly making "their" movie, not "your" movie. So you have to fight, and very hard, to make sure it is your vision.

The DP, the prop girl, the makeup people, the stunt coordinator, the producer -- the ACTORS! -- all start making the movie the way they want it to be. So you can never tire, never wilt -- and become half tyrant, half psychiatrist, half madman, and half dead to get it the way you want. Which I did. And it almost killed me.

BUT now I can sleep at night. Of course, the film is full of things I wish I could have done different, over or had more time but I can live with that because for 24 hours a day I never compromised. I don't mean to say I didn't ask for and get input, but it was always my decision in the end.

[Please tell the readers about your celebrity cruise on Jan. 11-18, 2003  
www.swainworldcruises.com. What seminars will you lead?](http://www.swainworldcruises.com)

Another aspect of my life. I did one cruise, and it was very successful and so have decided to do another.

My book about surviving cancer has been in print for 15 years. In the course of those years, there are hundreds of people who -- written off by Modern Medicine -- were told to go home and die.

Instead, they read my book and took the Kamikaze Cowboy Trek, and so they are a little interested in meeting me and having discussions, sharing stories.

Some day I would love to publish the hundreds of letters I've received from people around the world telling me their stories of having stumbled into my book and taking it to heart, to soul, and recovering from their illness. Amazing stories of recovery.

So I hold seminars and share my life experience with regard to how to get the doctors out of your life and the vitality back in. A lot of laughter and tears. And I take my two sons, that I am raising in Montana as a single parent, and we have more fun than you can imagine.

By the way, that is what my real passion in life is now and what my next book might be about, being a single father with custody and raising my two sons in my log cabin in the woods of Montana. Wood cookstove and all. And raising them free of McDonald's, Coca Cola, Burger King, Pizza Hut ... all that food that America stuffs their bodies and the bodies of their children with. No ice cream. No sugar. No dairy food. No kidding. People think surviving cancer is tough, or surviving a divorce, but NOTHING compares with fighting with American Culture when you want to raise your kids free of junk food.

Read *Junk Food Nation*. A Great book.

**Is there anything else about your acting, writing, or directing career that you'd like the readers to know?**

If anybody reads this who has seen any of my efforts and appreciated them, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Life has never been easy. Nor is it meant to be. It is a matter of being joyous in the face of sorrow.

If we wait until our lives are free from sorrow or difficulty, then we wait forever. And miss the entire point. I consider my life one long string of failures, but all of the failure has made me more grateful to be alive, more joyous in the moment and more appreciative for every day I have.

I have no idea if I will ever be allowed to act, write (be published) or direct again in this lifetime. Statistically, the odds are against it, given I am over 40. But it doesn't stop me from being creative and sharing the sorrow while spreading the joy!

Much success to you!!

(Originally from [www.screentalk.biz/int014.htm](http://www.screentalk.biz/int014.htm))