

LAWRENCE MATTIS

Breaking Into The Circle Of Confusion

By Karen Gordon

As I write this, a casual acquaintance of mine is having a script read by a Major Hollywood Star. Lucky boy. It turns out that an old school chum of his, now living in L.A., just happens to have become pals with the major star, and was willing to make the connection.

Hey, it happens.

However, the road for most of the rest of us starts with the search for a reputable, well-connected, agent who will go the distance for us.

And if we're really lucky, the agent is an individual who is as turned on by what he or she does, as we are by what we do.

In 1990, Lawrence Mattis was doing exactly what he didn't want to do-practicing law with a major firm in New York City. Then salvation, of a kind, arrived in the form of an old friend armed with a film degree and some experience as a reader for producers and directors.

Mattis' friend suggested they start an agency specifically for screenwriters *and* that they stay in New York City. They called their company *Circle of Confusion*.

Eleven years later, Mattis' partner has moved on, and thanks to *The Matrix*-by his clients Larry and Andy Wachowski-Mattis and Circle of Confusion are one of the hottest boutique management companies in the movie business.

Mattis talked to SCREENTALK about the development of his company, query letters, rewriting, the Wachowski Brothers and dealing with the big NO!

You're a small boutique agency, with a reputation, based on the Wachowski Brothers, as a company with an edge. Does that mean you're more approachable than most?

We're still a little bit more open than most people. We're very approachable in the sense that anybody can call and send us a query letter and we'll at least give it a shot. Although we don't say "yes" to everybody anymore, we still, I think, take more chances.

We still sniff around and think, "Well, yeah, I see why, probably, this particular script won't sell probably why the other guys in Hollywood won't want to do it, but there's something there that sounds really intriguing to me."

A lot of our clients are people who write stuff that's *pushing the envelope* a little bit. I've prided myself on that, and made my mantra "to push the envelope," and find those things that stretch the possibilities of what can be done.

There are people who want to write and who have stories to tell. Some stories are commercial movies or *close* to commercial. Some people have very personal stories or stories that are interesting to them, but not to other people. What we're really looking for is something that pushes the envelope; something that goes places that hasn't been visited before, but is still within the context of a Hollywood movie-within the genre of a Hollywood movie. And that's always been my sort-of banner that I'm trying to find.

The Wachowski Brothers are the epitome of that. Except for one studio, nobody wanted to buy *The Matrix*. It was a very strange, difficult script. It was an action movie, it was a sci-fi action thriller-the kind of animal Hollywood makes. So at least that got them. We're in the zone of the type of genre that Hollywood does, and within that, they pushed the envelope to go really amazing places. That's how I like to work.

I have a romantic comedy writer Heidi Ferrer who, similar kind of thing, sold a big script called *The C Word* to Arnold Kopelson a few years ago. You can just tell by the title that it's a little bit edgy or sexy, and that's what it was. It was a romantic comedy that Hollywood people could understand, but within that, it pushed it. It went places other Hollywood comedies didn't go.

For a lot of writers, the first approach to an agent will be through a query letter. Tell us what that should look like.

It has to be short. If I see a query letter that's more than a page, I don't read it.

You have to realize as a query writer, that the person who's going to read it isn't just going to read your query. They have thirty of them on their desk and other things to do. I'm not going to sit there reading queries for six hours.

So, short and sweet is good. At the same time, you have to say something to grab my attention-that's the hard part.

I think you have to find a way to pitch your script in one paragraph. If you have one line that really captures something about you or your script that's really interesting, use it. Or, in a paragraph-a short paragraph, quickly lay out: This is the kind of script I'm trying to send you, and this is why it's cool.

So let's make up a pitch: Say I'm a writer with television news experience who has a script about a network during a presidential election that makes a wrong call and someone commits suicide, that's enough?

Yeah, that's probably enough. In fact, I don't want the *whole* story. You should tell me the whole story in the script.

Sometimes people send the entire synopsis which I just don't have time to read. I'd rather have that one paragraph. But you'd polish it up and say, "*I've just written a tense political thriller. Give it a label up front. It's about a reporter uncovering...*" Or, if it's a drama about this person who commits suicide because it's such a devastating thing that their candidate was defeated.

Call it a *tense political thriller* or a *moving personal drama*. Different stories can be told different ways: A story about this insane presidential election that goes to the wrong person and the effects of that.

Did someone pull strings and the CIA goons swing the election, and some poor reporter finds this out and gets killed?

It could be a drama about someone in the political process who becomes disillusioned and kills himself, very poignant, you know Academy Award for Tom Hanks, whatever.

Or, it could be a comedy! A romantic comedy about two people, a republican and democrat, who meet and fall in love.

Or a comedy, where this total lunatic, Jim Carrey, ends up becoming president by accident. So you've struck on an interesting idea and look at that-I've just developed it into four different stories!!

Make the query short and sweet.

Give it a label-tense *political thriller*, *touching human drama*, or a *hilarious goofball comedy*.

Give me the quick story; don't give me the whole story. If you're able to encapsulate it into a label and give it one or two sentences, to whet my appetite, that's all I need. Beyond that, either you're going to be a good writer and execute a 120-page screenplay or you're not. That's it.

Okay. I've sent you my query and now I sit at home and polish my script and wait till you call?

Right.

What happens if you like me, and I sign with you? Do you give me notes? Should I be listening to you? What is the relationship a writer should look at with an agent?

Of course you should always listen to me! You should do *everything* I tell you! But seriously, one of the reasons I assume people sign with me is that they want my advice. And advice is advice, you can take it or not. Sometimes you do and sometimes you don't, and hopefully you find it useful.

I guess part of the assessment that a writer has to make when considering signing with an agent or manager is partly a company decision. Is the company reputable or established? That's the threshold issue.

Once that threshold issue is satisfied then the question becomes one of rapport. Do you have real rapport with the specific person you're signing with? Because as much as you can say, "Oh, I'm a CAA client. I'm an ICM client, I'm with Circle of Confusion," your relationship isn't with ICM, CAA or the Gersh agency. Your relationship is with Joe Smith, your agent! So that's where you have to have a comfort level in your relationship-to take their advice and to know they're going to give you advice that you'll find useful to some extent. You know that they are going to return your calls and going to be aggressive and push for you out there.

Occasionally, I'll sign somebody and say, "This is a good script but I don't think it's something we can send to Hollywood. I think it's an independent movie. The reason I'm signing you is that I think this is a brilliant script and we can use it as a tool to get you into Hollywood...but we're not going to have a big spec sale."

Of course, the golden goose is you do get a spec sale and either you send me a script, which I give some notes, and we fix it, or you send me a script and I say 'WOW'.

Sometimes the stars are all aligned and you write something really good and the right thing for the right time in the market. You could write the best thing in the world, and if, for whatever reason, the market isn't there, it just isn't going to sell. It's a very much random numbers just as much as it's a quality game.

Many people believe that once they have an agent they're going to conquer the world, but it's not that easy, is it?

Well, it's definitely better to have one than not to have an agent or manager, because if you don't, you're off the radar. You're off the radar until you have a representative pushing you out there. It's definitely the beginning of the game. You're not in the game until that happens.

But it's very collaborative. I say this to all my clients and I always give them tremendous credit whenever anything happens to their career because, in the case of a spec sale, they wrote a great script. Yes, I went out there and sold it and I sent it to the right people and got excitement on it and we got it sold, but it all starts with the writer coming up with something that's good.

So that's the huge lightening in a bottle which they have to do. And even with the assignments I can wave a flag-I can put them up for a million assignments, but it's a part of them having written a great script that gets them through the door.

Then you have to go into Warner Bros., do the pitch, and get the executive to realize that you're not just *possibly* the right writer, but *THE right writer*. Again, it's a combination. It's me doing my job, my sell, my PR, but it's the writer going in and being impressive about story telling. It's always hard. It's certainly not an easy business.

Most writers I've talked to talk about rewrites, and some of them have even been written out of their own original scripts. Is there ever a time where writers should refuse, or is this how writers trip themselves up?

Any time you feel like you've been given notes that don't make sense to you, you should at least pause. There are two reasons not to do notes that don't make sense to you. Either, you don't like them, and you shouldn't do what you don't like to do, but the more practical reason is that if you don't like the notes you're not going to execute them very well.

If someone is telling you to do things that don't make sense and you're unhappy about it, you're not the right person to do those notes because you're not going to make them work.

The question is, how much do you have to compromise to try to do something that you don't like to do? Writers have to find a level between their artistic integrity and their practical needs.

If the studio is paying you to write a draft based on their notes, you don't just bow down and say, "Okay." You've to go back to the studio and say, "Hey these notes don't make sense and this is why." But, if at the end of the day the studio is saying, "We hear what you say, but we're paying you." Then you do the best you can. They might say, "You didn't address our notes, thank you very much, we're going to get another writer." That's what happens in the vast majority of times screenplays are rewritten by another writer.

In the Hollywood system, nine times out of ten, until you're a big star writer, and even when you're a big star writer, you're going to be rewritten. It's very rare to be the only writer on a project, for a million reasons, including the reason that studios don't always know what they want and they just feel more comfortable if the last person on the script is a big A-list writer.

It makes them feel much more comfortable than relying on a young kid who they've just paid five hundred thousand dollars to because of the spec sale. But sometimes people can go from soup to nuts and be the only writers.

The Wachowski Brothers were not the only writers on *Assassins*-and they weren't crazy about the movie. This is a case where the studio started to give them notes that they didn't want to do and they told the studio, "Find someone else. We're not going to destroy our script that way." It was a ballsy move.

If you're really sure of yourself, especially when you're a young writer, your instinct may be to just do what the studio tells you to do. Why get the studio pissed-off at you when you're starting your career? But if you're really sure, you can just politely say this is not the script you're going to write.

And yet, The Wachowski Brothers ended up directing.

Yes, *The Matrix* wasn't rewritten. Usually if you direct your material, then you don't hire someone else to rewrite you.

So, how did they go from guys who were rewritten and had no clout, to guys who had a massive budget to direct a movie?

Well, it's a combination of a lot of things. They really are talented. Many people get a lot of places by accident. These guys are tremendous storytellers and tremendous visual storytellers. When you talk to them, you just see that they know what a movie is and how to make one. That's number one.

Number two, they're good writers. They actually had a three-picture deal with Warner Bros. and although they stopped writing on *Assassins*, it was clear, even to Warner Bros., that it was just a difference of opinion.

Warner Bros. wanted to take the script in one direction and they disagreed. So they stopped writing, but *Assassins* still got made. So they can write things that we can eventually get made. They also wrote some other scripts that made the studio say, "Okay these guys can write." And more importantly, they directed *Bound*. This was really the key. In a way, *Bound* was a test.

They sold *The Matrix* to Warner Bros. with the understanding that Larry and Andy wanted to direct *The Matrix*. And of course, at that point, they'd not directed anything, so there was no way that Warner Bros. would say, "Yeah, here you go. Here's 70 million dollars, go direct a movie." But when they directed *Bound*, all of a sudden people said, "Whoa, these people really are good directors."

It was still a huge leap to go from a four million dollar movie to a 70 million dollar movie like *The Matrix*. That's just a combination of tremendous vision and Warner Bros., to some extent, taking a risk. It turned out to be a risk that paid off in a *huge* way.

That's the perfect story, but there are many stories of people who are almost there when they're suddenly turned down.

It *is* heart breaking and the answer is: there's no absolute reason why some people get the answer, "No!" It's so close, and when the momentum stops, it's so hard to get it going again. There's so many junctures, where, for really no real reason, your career either jumps up or slows down.

Specs are one example where you can approach the market with a great script and get lucky. Arnold Kopelson sees it and says, "Wow, this is a great script! I'm going to buy it." Suddenly you're on the front page of the trades-your name means something, suddenly you have money in your bank account and you have a career.

Or, the same exact script goes out two weeks later. For some reason, the market has cooled or a script similar to your script just sold. Or, Arnold Kopelson would be the guy who would have loved

it and would've bought it, but for some reason I didn't send it to him but rather to someone else, and that *someone* didn't like the script.

So instead of being on the front page of the trades and having money in your bank account, and having a career, because now everybody wants to meet you and wants to hire you, you've got a script that a lot of people like and you have some meetings, but the studios are not going to run and hire you. Your career is stalled on the same exact script.

And similarly, you sell your script and two years later, Tom Cruise wants to do it and Steven Spielberg wants to direct, and it's going to be green lit and when that happens you're gold!

Then, you're about to do a movie that Tom Cruise has starred in and Steven Spielberg has directed and that's amazing! But suppose, two weeks before Tom Cruise officially commits to the movie, he sees another movie he wants to do. He decides to do that movie and says, "Oh yeah, maybe I'll come back to yours."

He never comes back, and Spielberg says, "Well, I only wanted to do it because of Tom Cruise." Spielberg goes on to do something else, and your movie never gets made. Suddenly, the thing that could have made you into one of the biggest screenwriters in Hollywood throws you back to square one! It's a very frustrating business.

What do you give as counsel to writers?

I keep telling them that it's not personal. It's about luck and persistence. If you are good, I can't guarantee you that next time Tom Cruise and Steven Spielberg will do your movie, but if you wrote a movie that got *close* to Tom and Steve, odds are that if you keep at it, you'll get something.

Next time it will be Russell Crowe and Ridley Scott. And you know what? That'd good enough too! Or, maybe you never quite hit that level because the odds are a little bit against you, but you will get movies made and you will have a career. If you really are that good, and you just keep pushing, just know that any one failure isn't the end of it.

The business is about saying "no." The entire machinery of the business is meant to say "no" because there's so much stuff, and you know very well how many screenplays are written ... if they tried to make all those movies ... it just couldn't happen.

So the machine is not meant to say "yes," it's meant to say "no." You have to get used to getting a "no" and not be stopped by it. You just need to keep going-especially if you find someone who believes in your vision.

It's not to say that every person with persistence is going to succeed. But if you have something-if you have a spark, a voice in your writing ... that will come through over time, and you'll get work.

Karen is a freelance writer/producer/broadcaster/ entertainment media trainer based in Toronto. Her recent writing credits include the television documentary "Phallacies," and feature magazine profiles on Susan Sarandon, kd lang and Rufus Wainwright. Her previous cover stories for SCREENTALK include Tim Robbins, Hampton Fancher, Roger Rueff, Patricia Rozema and Academy Award® nominee Kenneth Lonergan.

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