

Striking silver in Hollywood Writing duo may see their work on the big screen; [FINAL EDITION, NW]

Sally Ruth Bourrie.. **Chicago Tribune (pre-1997 Fulltext)**. Chicago, Ill.: Dec 6, 1992. pg. 6

Full Text (2379 words)

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Fade in: 1978-suburban Chicago. High school buddies Wayne Beach and Dave Hodgin quit college to make movies. Soon after, they incorporate, figuring it'll take a couple of years to get established.

Cut to: Valentine's Day, 1991-a hotel in Santa Monica, Calif. Beach gets a call from their manager; their agent sold their script "Ex." It's the team's first sale.

Dissolve to: Fall 1992-Beach's antique-filled home near the Fox River in St. Charles. Though at ease and confident, the struggle's still fresh for the two screenwriters. "(You're) always thinking that it's just around the corner," said the energetic, articulate Beach, 34, two years younger than Hodgin. "But then it's just a matter of the demon giving you enough rope so that you just keep tying it around your neck."

Today the two alums from Lake Park High School in Roselle have earned their way into the elite club of working screenwriters, only a handful of whom live in Chicago.

"Ex" is in development in Hollywood and they have two other scripts on the market. Beach teaches screenwriting courses under their corporate banner, Twelvetrees Films & Entertainment Ltd., headquartered in St. Charles, as well as at Northwestern University in Evanston, where he was invited to become an adjunct faculty member last spring. He also has just completed a term as president of the Midwest chapter of the Independent Feature Project (IFP).

"'Ex' was a high profile sale," said Delle Chatman, professor in Northwestern University's radio, TV and film department. "(Beach) has earned a position in the industry and his own body of work will be interesting to producers in the future."

Curtis Burch, senior vice president of creative affairs at Daybreak Productions ("Unlawful Entry"), corroborates that view: "I loved 'Ex' and followed (Beach) and his partner's writing from that point on and was really impressed with how diversified their talent is. These guys can write thrillers and high-concept comedies and screwball farces, and that's something that's very rare."

In general, it's the production companies-they actually make the movies-that find the scripts. Their next step is to request that a studio-they're the ones with the money-purchase it for them to develop into a film.

J. Paul Higgins, vice president of Leonard Goldberg Productions ("Sleeping With the Enemy"), reads 900 scripts a year. "We give only 3 percent of those 900 to the studio," Higgins said. "Wayne would be in that category."

As front man, Beach makes the necessary trips to Hollywood to "take meetings" pitching stories

and discussing script revisions with studios and production companies.

"He's so much better at it that I stand in the background," said Hodgin, who lives in Itasca. "I look like a bodyguard or something."

Beach's enthusiasm and eloquence spring not from gregariousness but from a deeply rooted love of film.

"Orson Welles once called (film equipment) 'the greatest toy train set in the world,' and I think that's what captivated me," Beach said.

By the time he reached high school in Roselle, Beach was compiling his own film encyclopedia and making movies. He'd get odd jobs so he could rent professional film rigs during three-days-for-the-price-of-one specials. Teachers and friends spent weekends of 16-plus-hour days acting in them, "invariably choosing a day when the wind chill was 20 below," he said laughing.

"I can remember when Wayne would be doing those films," said Mike Dice, Lake Park drama teacher. "His mother would be holding a microphone or a clapboard or something. When I think of 'family,' I think of Mrs. Beach and her three children."

Beach's late mother was widowed before Beach was born. A New York dancer, she was a seminal influence on Beach's free spirit, said Dice.

Wayne isn't the only Beach filled with the follow-your-bliss spirit. Brother Warren, 44, is a successful independent commodities trader who lives in Barrington with his family. Sister Wendy Everham, 45, and her publisher husband have recently moved from Evanston to Mineral Point, Wis., to become organic farmers while she finishes her dissertation for a Ph.D. in history from the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Besides expressing his creativity through writing scripts, Wayne Beach also paints chairs, each leg a different color or multicolored. The painting provides immediate creative gratification that you don't get when you're working on a script, which can take a year or so, Beach said.

But it's neither painting nor writing that is Beach's ultimate career goal. With each movie, Beach has become more certain he wants to be a director.

"It was a cold, calculated thing to say the best way to direct is to learn how to write," said Beach. "I saw the examples of a lot of writers who were able to become directors on the basis of their screenplays-(Francis Ford) Coppola, (George) Lucas-and then I fell in love with writing."

Still, it's the chance to direct that keeps him going. Though they ultimately chose film careers, both Beach and Hodgin had been successful in their award-winning high school theater program.

"Dave's performance as the stage manager in 'Our Town' is one of the finest performances that I remember a student having," said Dice. "And I've had a lot of excellent, excellent performances."

Beach turned down an acting scholarship at Illinois State University, Normal, where the future members of Steppenwolf were studying. By the time Beach entered film school at Columbia College, he discovered that his high school films had not only taught him the fundamentals of filmmaking, but also put him ahead of his peers.

Though he was allowed to take advanced courses immediately, he grew increasingly frustrated.

He turned to the person with "the best film sense of anyone I knew": Dave Hodgins.

Hodgins, a senior at Illinois State, had discovered an autobiography of a Soviet defector that the two felt had great film potential. At the end of his rope, Beach suggested they "just jump in the deep end," quit school and make a movie of "The Persecutor."

Despite being only one semester from receiving a bachelor's degree, it was too big an opportunity for Hodgins to pass up: "If I'm going to blow a few years, I'd better do it when I'm single and I'm young."

Little did they know they'd begin more than a decade of, as Beach puts it, "doing whatever it took to stay alive to try to break in."

Hodgins "shuffled envelopes" at a computer center and worked at his father's Servicemaster franchise. Beach worked at a secretarial service, sold shoes at Carson Pirie Scott and worked room service at the Whitehall Hotel.

They watched "The Godfather" more than 200 times, with and without sound. "Our real film school," said Beach.

They developed their routine of working both face-to-face and over the phone. To keep costs down, they lived with their parents.

Hodgins said, laughing, " 'Wayne's World' always goes through my head: If I ever get out of my parents' basement. . . . "

Beach said, "We've both had very supportive families."

"That continues with a very understanding and supportive wife," added Beach.

Like when he and his wife-to-be, Marcia, went to Milwaukee to buy a wedding ring on a day he was scheduled for a conference call with Los Angeles. As the appointed hour approached, Beach learned that there were no pay phones in the neighborhood.

"So I'm in this poor man's jewelry shop behind the cash register for a half an hour pitching possible story lines to these executives in Los Angeles, and saying things like, 'He doesn't have to die. We'll kill her instead.'"

"Customers are looking up like, 'Do we call the cops now?'"

Marcia, who works in a St. Charles book store, said: "I realize that this is a career that takes a long time laying the groundwork, and that's the most important bit. I guess the nature of the business is somewhat tenuous, but I have a lot of faith in the guy."

"(Success) will be by his standards, not whether or not he sells a \$7-million script, but whether the script fulfills all his expectations, a script that he would want to go to see if it was made into a film."

Beach and Hodgins spent three years trying to adapt "The Persecutor" for the screen.

The story of the spiritual journey that led to the man's defection, "The Persecutor" remains the

most personal of their scripts.

"We realized the project, to be done the way we envisioned it, was something we would have to bring forth after we'd scored brownie points (in Hollywood) by selling other projects," said Beach.

What script then, would be their sacrificial lamb, as they call it, to Hollywood and start them on the road to brownie points?

"Summer Whites," they hoped. A comedy about two kids on break from college who decide to pass themselves off as movie producers in Hollywood, it won the Houston Film Festival's New Script Competition in 1981.

"That was our first ticket in," said Beach, "past receptionists and so forth, getting some agents to take our calls, and everybody said the same thing: 'It's wonderfully written, but we can't sell a comedy about Hollywood. They just don't sell.'"

Though they continued writing scripts, it wasn't until 1989 that they determined again to write a screenplay tailored to Hollywood's tastes and needs, roles for stars, for instance.

"Ex" was based on an idea they'd come up with 10 years before: A wealthy Chicago attorney seizes the opportunity to play hockey from life when, unbeknownst to the world, he's the sole survivor of a major plane crash.

When an agent in Los Angeles agreed to meet with Beach about "Ex," they were thrilled, except for one hitch: They hadn't finished it. Beach had a use-it-or-lose-it airline ticket, so the two worked 'round the clock. Beach boarded the airplane with three-quarters of a manuscript and the task of finishing "Ex" before his meeting.

The agent loved "Ex." On the same trip, Beach met Judy Friend, a Hollywood manager who advised him to shop around and offered to help him.

"Within a couple of weeks, we had the top five agencies wanting to represent us," said Beach. "After not being able to get past receptionists to talk to an agent or even get the name of an agent to get a script to, suddenly they're calling you like every 24 or 48 hours.

Ninety percent of the producers who read "Ex" wanted the studios to buy it, but the script didn't sell.

They all had the same problem: One of the two main characters disappears from the movie for 25 minutes. A superstar wouldn't want to play a character who's off-screen for so long.

"They told us, 'It was a damn good read, but politically we would not have been able to cast that character,'" said Beach.

Though the script was dead, "Ex" had given the pair visibility in Hollywood. They were invited to meet with the studios the following week.

"Ex" "very much broke the rules that most of the movie business lives by," said Curtis Burch. "Those of us that work in development tend to see stories that are structured in familiar ways. 'Ex' took some surprising turns, and that's satisfying for someone who loves scripts."

But on Beach's flight back to Chicago, reality hit: How was he going to survive? On top of that, he

was getting married in two weeks. He had booked a honeymoon at the Plaza Hotel in New York.

The newlyweds settled for Washington Island in Door County. Hodgin and Beach spent the winter of 1989 rewriting "Ex." In Los Angeles, manager Judy Friend stood by them.

"I believe tremendously in their talent," said Friend. "Sometimes what an agent may do is, if things don't sell immediately, (agents) are on to their next script or they're on to their next project. I don't believe in that. 'Back to the Future' took 10 years to get made."

In February 1990, "Ex" hit the market again. In the meantime, the team had pitched "The Lost Episodes," the concept of a television that mysteriously releases its characters into the real world. Studio executives loved it. This, thought the two neophytes, would be their second ticket into the Hollywood mainstream.

Two weeks before they were to turn in the script, their agent called.

"How fast can you finish 'The Lost Episodes?'"

"Why?"

Another script with a similar concept just sold for \$750,000. "The Lost Episodes" was dead before it hit the water. Two heartbreakingly near misses. Months later the big break arrived, the fateful Valentine's Day phone call, almost a year to the day "Ex" had hit the market for the second time.

The purchaser was Cinergi Productions ("Medicine Man" and "Total Recall"). They've received \$70,000 in what ultimately will be a \$300,000 deal.

Beach and Hodgin spent the last year ushering "Ex" through the development process and wrote two more scripts that are currently on the market.

Though they admit not living in Los Angeles causes them to lose out on much of the rewrite work that is the bread-and-butter of screenwriters, neither plans to move there.

"I like it here," said Hodgin.

Beach credits Chicago with being a supportive place to develop. "You need a state of grace in which to grow, and I think Chicago provided a state of grace while we were getting good at our craft," he said.

"I think too many people go out (to Los Angeles) before their talents have matured, and it really derails a lot of young screenwriters," said Beach. "It lures you into thinking that the business is about taking meetings and building a Rolodex, whereas I think you can basically live in Nome, Alaska, and if you write a spec script that they want, you will have an automatic Rolodex, you will have access to every office you've ever wanted to get into."

"So all the years that people spend trying to meet someone," Beach said, "they should spend those years trying to write the best possible screenplay that they can."

CAPTION:

PHOTO: Screenwriters Wayne Beach (left) and Dave Hodgin have breached Hollywood's wall

with a script called "Ex." Tribune photo by Michael Budrys.

CAPTION:

PHOTO: Beach (left) and Hodgkin discuss details of a new project while Beach's wife, Marcia, takes a break.

[Illustration]

PHOTOS 2

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Column Name: *Northwest Next Door.*
Section: *TEMPO NORTHWEST*
ISSN/ISBN: 10856706
Text Word Count 2379
Document URL: