

the Market Approach

By Thomas Hernadi

Techno & Opera -- A New Cinema Project With Aggressive Market Orientation From The Onset

Normally, it all starts with a unique idea for a fascinating character whose story needs to be told, a hilarious plot with a potential to hook a big audience or a strong theme that needs to be expressed through cinematography. This is when we feel the urge to sit down and write, when some inner voice wants to be listened to and to be expressed through the keystrokes of our PCs. This is when we write our truly original and personal stories. If we manage to sell them and see our work on the big screen we are in writer's heaven.

Unfortunately the standard jobs for most of us are as remote from this creative realm as they can be. Producers knock on our doors asking for re-writes, adaptations of previously published material, polishing of screenplays, or they invite us to dash off a quick exposè about what they heard might be of current interest for a TV-station.

It is even worse in sitcom, soap and the TV-Movie format with repetitive plot structures and highly volatile standard characters that often fit more the needs of market segments than those of drama. Creative minds feel squeezed into a corset of fixed rules that take away their creative breath. No wonder that many writers complain about a lack of opportunity for self-actualization. Frequently, everything not originating from their own hearts is considered mechanical work -- just good enough to make bucks for a decent living. Some writers even become rather cynical about their jobs, especially when they have been stuck in soap business for years.

Having said all this, I probably hooked a couple of my writer colleagues and gave them a reason to identify. However, to my mind, the above is nothing but a pretty stereotyped and somehow rather pathetic view of what it really means to be a writer.

I have never believed in a writer's heaven, or in cynics. Writing is a process, working in a team but also a professional attitude towards film industry and besides, it is a job we do with great passion but also in view of an audience.

Face it, this is nothing but market orientation at the end of the day and there is nothing wrong with that. Even calling a screenplay "a part of an audiovisual product" should not hurt when spoken out aloud in public, because this is what we produce. In fact, market orientation is the only way to make ourselves heard, to externalize the inner voice that drags us into writing. Naturally it is also about making money and about making a career.

I have done re-writes for a couple of years and producers have thrown hundreds of story ideas at me asking me to work out new concepts. This is standard procedure.

Techno & Opera, my new cinematographic adventure, however, goes even one step farther. It is a classic boy meets girl story that I usually refer to as a Shakespearean classic in contemporary clothes. Just replace Romeo's world with the universe of the cyber and techno generation, think of Juliet as someone from the world of Opera and you come pretty close to what the movie is all about -- this is my standard pitch for everyone with less than 10 seconds to listen to.

The movie is also a portrait of the young generation, a story about those who have all money can buy but who have



lost their dreams, their motivation and above all, their vision of what to do in life. It is also a trip into the world of cyberspace with sophisticated special effects animating three dimensional chat rooms and virtual replicas of actors.

What makes it really special and quite unusual for me as a writer is the fact that the movie is just a part of a highly diversified product portfolio. *Techno & Opera* includes live

events, side events, merchandising, the development of a three-dimensional chat software enabling the cinema audience to do exactly what the hero will be doing in the movie, video games, a novel and music business.

The event-line of *Techno & Opera* will take-off at the pyramids in Cairo (Egypt) at New Year's Eve this year celebrating the true Y2K and sending *T&O* on a mission all around the world.

In order to establish the brand name at an early stage a couple of side events accompany pre-production this year. One of them was an exclusive pre-production party during the Film festival in Cannes. Potential investors, opinion builders and press were invited to get a taste of the entire project. A live *Techno & Opera* performance especially composed and arranged for the evening expressed the essence of the movie's love story in musical opulence. People liked it very much; investors saw that the project was well on its way.

From an investor's and producer's point of view such a strategy makes sense as they can profit from strong market synergies. The portfolio with a very attractive horizontal and vertical diversification policy creates confidence and high expectations of returns from the various market segments. Trust is the basis for raising film development finance which, in the case of *Techno & Opera*, originates from equity investors, silent partnerships and a media fund that will be inaugurated in August this year.

These strong product synergies triple the project's market impact but they also triple the challenge for the writer. All of a sudden the job is not just about writing a great screenplay but also about synchronizing it with the activities

of other project divisions. Whereas the movie expresses theme through character arcs, plot and subtext trying to reach subconscious levels of the audience, the events express theme through music and abstract stage choreography playing out the emotional impact of music to a full extent. The forthcoming novel will explore the characters thoughts, attitudes and emotions in more depth than any movie could ever achieve.

At first glance, the project seemed to be a mission impossible but after a while the collaboration with the creative staff of the other divisions opened up new doors and became a very rewarding learning process. I remember exhausting brainstorm sessions about how to synchronize event and movie and thereby avoid producing two similar products that would not make sense. Whenever the event division asked for my input I felt completely lost as all I had to offer was the visual strength of a screenwriter.

My scenic proposals for the events were far from being perfect. I reached the limits of my imaginative skills and had to smash inner creative barriers that come with the specialization in one chosen format. Expressing the same theme, transporting the same message and bringing across the same emotions in music and on stage would have been far easier for me if we had to create a theatre play or a musical, but a stage show combining *Techno & Opera* Music using high-tech laser and animation techniques has different laws and forces you to think in more abstract terms.



Naturally, there is no point in trying to do the job of your associates. You don't have to be a composer or a choreographer to contribute valuable ideas for a field you have no expertise in. All you have to do is to know your job, your characters, your story and what you are going to do. Actually, this is more than enough, especially if the original story idea is someone else's brainchild. There are ways to deal with that situation, though.

The first step towards project and team competence is overcoming the fear of the unknown (in terms of characters and theme) which automatically builds mental barriers and sometimes leads to an attitude of rejection—needless to say that I have never been involved in the Techno Scene before.

The second step is extensive research, observation in real life and digging inside your own personality to uncover character traits that will help to explore and add psychological dimension to the characters of the movie.



Samantha Podeu and partner rehearsing their performance in Cannes.

Reading articles about the techno and cyber generation, plunging right into the techno scene quickly opens up a new universe of people who had been living as stereotypes in your mind until the day you start writing this new screenplay. Desk and field research provide a feel for and an insight into sociological and demographic aspects of the characters. This is needed to explore the theme and to add color and texture to the story. Specific research, interviews, however, is far more important. It is a unique and efficient source for the creation of character profiles. Only personal talks give you an idea about the very core of your protagonist.

Based on experience I never ask people what I actually want to know. Naturally, it all depends on the kind of person you are dealing with but as a general rule, people tend to close up if you attack them with direct questions about their life, about rather intimate things, about their psychological constitution. I usually talk about anything not related to my story or my characters.

After an initial and vague story pitch we talk about anything that comes up, from weather issues to pricing policies for diapers in supermarkets. With this simple strategy I get anything from them I want at the end. Not only do they give me inspiration for paradoxes, imperfections, idiosyncrasies, but I also learn a lot about their values, attitudes and emotional qualities. I need to understand their beliefs, concerns, philosophies and, of course, about the way they talk.

During this process I never take notes! I'd rather let the information sink down to the bottom of the subconscious which does a better job than my rational mind anyway. After a while, a true miracle happens. The characters come to life. I have become a part of new story universe, begin to absorb its laws and start to like the characters to such an extent that I cannot even imagine any more that someone else had blueprinted them.

Having been at almost all big international media conventions and film festivals for the past ten years, both as a producer and as a writer, I know there are countless new screenplays and story ideas around, year after year. Especially the young writers almost drown in piles of new project proposals that are submitted to investors every week. Therefore, I doubt that a negative attitude towards market orientation holds any good. It does not make sense to write exclusively for own pleasure as those stories rarely find their way to the big or even the small screen.

Writing for any format in film industry undoubtedly improves personal skills, adds valuable professional experience and creates important contacts that are likely to lead to new attractive jobs closer to a writer's heaven. The adaptation of a novel, a re-write or working on a third party idea provide an opportunity to express our thoughts, visions and creative skills as any truly original personal material.

Writing such screenplays is a tremendous challenge since the writer has to explore new inner and outer worlds. He is on a journey leading him to new insights into the very essence of life. The latter is pure luxury and, in fact, to me and many of my colleagues, it is one of the reasons why we engaged in the big adventure of writing a screenplay.

You can visit *T&O* online at www.technoopera.de **ST**

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