

Monkey Business

January 2009

Monthly musings from
Emmy-winning screenwriter...

...Jeffrey Scott



Lessons From the Trenches of HOLLYWOOD "A FILM THAT WILL LIVE IN INFAMY"

This past December, a milestone was reached in movie-making history. And not a good one! The animated feature film, *Delgo*, had the worst wide release ever, earning a measly \$511,920 despite a budget of \$40 million! Some Hollywood pundits say its poor showing was due to its being produced completely independent of Hollywood majors such as DreamWorks and Pixar. But the hit film *Slumdog Millionaire* out of India proves once again that independents can make box office bucks and reap worldwide acclaim as well.

No, it wasn't "independence" that killed *Delgo*, it was its story. You might think that borrowing some elements from classics like *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Dark Crystal* would help make for a good story. Wrong! Borrowing from other films, even the most successful ones, makes a picture feel stale and uninteresting, leaving the audience with the feeling they've seen it all before. Then there was the fact that there were six credited writers. It's bad enough to have too many "cooks" trying to find the right "flavor" in a film, what makes it worse is that none of these six artists were professional writers.

And therein lies the rub. The single most common error independent animation producers commit is thinking they can make up for the lack of a professional screenwriter with pretty animation. It doesn't work. Never has, never will. So if you're a producer, protect your investment by first investing in a great screenplay. Your battle cry must be **STORY! STORY! STORY!**

Jeffrey's Latest Monkey Business

My ghostwriter, Hunt N. Peck (pictured above), had a busy year in 2008. He developed bibles and pilots for two animated series for Cartoon One in Rome, Italy: *Galactik Kid*, the comical adventures of an adolescent boy who is swept through a wormhole to become defender of the Donut Galaxy...and *Robot Arpo*, about a deadly Terminator-like robot who is reprogrammed to be a household nanny.

Mr. Peck also finished writing and story-editing the final episodes of *Little Krishna*, BIG Animation's award-winning animated series about the adventures of young Krishna. Production of the first 13 episodes was recently completed and will be released soon.

2009 is shaping up to be another feces-flinging year for Mr. Peck. Stay tuned (and don't forget to get your rabies shots)!

HOW TO WRITE FOR ANIMATION

This month's excerpt from Jeffrey's highly acclaimed book

Writing a story is similar to building a house. When you build a house you know you're going to have bedrooms, bathrooms, a kitchen, garage, and a family room. These are the basic elements of any house. A story has its basic elements as well. These are the scenes, or as writers often call them, story beats. Just as you decide on the rooms you want before you build your house, you work out story beats before you start writing an outline. A story beat is simply a short description of what a scene will include. For example, in the opening scene of *Star Wars*, a description of the beat might be as simple as "Vader captures the princess while C-3PO and R2-D2 escape." This gives the writer enough information to have a conceptual understanding of the scene, which is all he needs to know in order to begin stringing scenes together to form a coherent whole.

Now, how do we come up with all these story beats? To the novice writer this may sound like an overwhelming question. You look at that ream of paper or blank monitor, and the thought of filling pages with meaningful words sends you spinning. There's an infinity of ideas out there. Where do you start? What do you do?

Relax! The answer is simple. All you have to do to start the process is ask yourself one question: "**What are the scenes that must be there?**"

You'll find the rest of this article in Chapter 5 of
How to Write Animation

