

# 50 60! Screenwriter Survival Tips

## London Screenwriters' Festival

Friday 26<sup>th</sup> October, 2012

Panel: Danny Stack, Daniel Martin Eckhart, Mark Pallis,  
Richard Dinnick, Micho Rutare, David Varela

### 1. Rejection is good - suck it up, learn from it and always keep on writing

(Daniel)

"Good" rejection, the one that gives you constructive feedback, will give you the chance to improve as a writer. But even the most stupid and downright malicious feedback has its plus - it gives you a chance to grow as a human being. Learn to accept it, learn to make sense of it, learn to not take it personal.

### 2. Rejection is the normal state of affairs (Richard)

Right from the get-go, you're going to be rejected. No one owes you a living! If you can't handle rejection, this may not be the job for you! I keep all my rejection letters in a folder. They're a motivational tool - if only for revenge!

### 3. Say yes to everything (Mark)

### 4. Instead of asking "what kind of script can I write?" ask "what kind of script would I be good at writing?" (Micho)

Because that's how other people think of you. It's a subtle distinction, but it's important.

### 5. Find your genre (Daniel)

Initially, writing as much as possible matters most. Crank out romantic comedies, psychological thrillers, family dramas - whatever makes you happy. While you do that start looking for your favourite writing genre. You can be successful in different genres - but, especially as a fresh writer, a producer will have more faith in you if you can show that you've been honing your craft in one specific area.

### 6. Write because you want to write (Richard)

This is not the X Factor. There's very little instant fame and fortune to be found here. Of course, it happens, but in the main, it's a long, hard slog. So, make sure you love the writing. For that is its own reward. And when it becomes a blockbuster, your success will taste all the sweeter.

### 7. Get over yourself (David)

Never feel that you're somehow demeaning yourself by writing for media outside film & TV.

### 8. Diversify or starve (David)

The more revenue streams you have, the less likely you are to suffer a sudden drought.

**9. Start your story later** (Daniel)

Invariably, when reading stories - you realize that the writer's jumped in too early. When reading scripts I often find that a story should start with the beginning of act 2. Starting later in the story energizes it instantly.

**10. Don't be afraid to try new areas, genres** (Mark)

**11. Be your own worst critic** (Micho)

After all, you're already your own worst enemy. Turn corrosive fear and self-loathing into a positive: edit your script like a tax return.

**12. Overnight success may happen - after you've braved the hunger years**

(Daniel)

In acting, they call them the hunger years - the years you need to put in before becoming an "overnight success". Those are the years where you write one script after the other, on spec, unpaid, unwanted and regularly rejected. But these years of continuous writing grow your writing muscle - they prepare you for that moment when a door to an agent, a producer, a network opens up.

**13. If you haven't got an agent, don't worry** (Mark)

**14. Be the grown up** (Richard)

You will meet many different people being a writer. Some of them are the nicest people on the planet. Other most certainly are not. Some are childish or diva-like or downright mean. Always maintain your cool. Do not (as I have seen done) copy and paste your private email conversations with someone into a forum - even if that person has driven you to distraction. Be professional; be the grown up!

**15. An ounce of behaviour is worth a pound of words** (Daniel)

Constant reminder by one of the greatest acting teachers, Sanford Meisner. It greatly applies to screenwriting, too. Always think about the actor, what activity can you give them - words are never the strongest choice.

**16. Find a buddy** (Micho)

Some people benefit from writing partners, others work better alone. If you like working alone, cultivate a few people who will give you honest feedback. It's even better if they are producing or directing the film, or if they're your manager. It's good to have someone who has a material interest in seeing you succeed.

**17. Make yourself indispensable** (Mark)

**18. Take an interest in who you approach** (Richard)

As noted, the industry does not owe anyone a living, so know who you are talking to and why. If you're emailing a production company out of the blue, research them. What are their latest projects? Successes, failures, top people? Have something to say to them about them - and why you fit with them - not just about you!

**19. Read up on CI - the Commander's Intent** (Daniel)

In the army, the CI is a clear, plain-speak single sentence across the top of every order. It insures that ever soldier knows the overarching goal - look for that one sentence in your script and post it above your monitor. It'll be your guiding light, it'll steer you right and it'll be most useful also in conversations - one clear sentence.

**20. Build your own crew** (David)

Make friends with web designers, DoPs, makeup artists, actors, game producers, directors... There's a lot of talent working in other media.

**21. Assume that the person giving you notes is right** (Micho)

Because they probably are. And even if they're not, they will like you more and hire you again if you follow instructions well and don't project defensiveness.

**22. Know your industry** (Richard)

This is your life now. Know who the movers and shakers are. Find out which companies are the ones to follow. Read Broadcast and Variety. Get online! There's a host of online blogs; there are loads of writers, producers, directors on twitter. There's a lot of expertise out there for free these days, Use it!

**23. Pick up those "How to" books** (Daniel)

There's a lot of crap out there - but as a beginner, reading half a dozen of those "how to write the great screenplay" books is useful. As you read them, you'll learn where the gurus are posturing and where they agree. Mark everything the books have in common - ignore the "unique" wisdom the gurus claim to possess.

**24. Look overseas** (David)

Australia, Scandinavia, Canada, Ireland, the US - you can work remotely for a bunch of international clients.

**25. If your brain gets woolly, try Occam's razor** (Micho)

Other things being equal, a simpler explanation is better than a more complex one. This applies to writing as well as science.

**26. Want to keep your sanity? Separate!** (Daniel)

At some point you get hired - you write for money, you collaborate. Separate the first draft process mentally from the second draft. The first draft is, and will always be, yours. It goes onto your shelf and will never be messed with. Then make a mental switch and look at the second draft as a new story. That way the collaborative process won't be an attack on your first draft - but a powerful journey forward.

**27. Do favours / help others** (Mark)

**28. Help someone out** (David)

Do a freebie for someone, if you've nothing else on. That favour will be repaid when you least expect it.

**29. Network** (Richard)

The LSF is an awesome networking event. I came with a hit-list of people I want to meet! Not just here, but at whatever event, you should be making new contacts; making friends (it should be the same). Go for beer, coffee, pizza. Other writers are excellent people to know. Especially more successful ones! Getting a commission is like borrowing money: you're more likely to be successful with someone you know, rather than a complete stranger.

**30. Why screenwriting competitions are useful** (Daniel)

They give you deadlines. They force you to test yourself and deliver on time. They may give you insights into how others perceive your work - and good results may help you connect with agents and producers.

**31. Kickstart yourself** (David)

Check out crowdfunding options and start your own projects.

**32. Make your female characters smarter than your male characters** (Micho)

This is harder for male writers, but it's a good way to stand out from the pack -- your scripts will be fresher and more sophisticated.

**33. Don't be snobby about short films** (Mark)

**34. Know when to stop** (Daniel)

Writers sometimes find it difficult to get back into the groove. They stop writing late at night, the next morning getting back into it just doesn't happen. A simple solution is to stop in the middle of a scene. Force yourself - don't write to the end of the great scene you're working on - instead stop and walk away. You'll see, when you continue, you'll have no trouble getting back into the groove.

**35. Call it research** (David)

If it makes you feel better, pretend that this advertising gig is research for a media satire.

**36. Be seen; be visible** (Richard)

A bit like networking, your profile is a very important part of the package. What events other than this will you be attending? What about BAFTA or BFI events? Do you write a blog? Do you tweet to other industry professionals? Have you got a decent website where you can showcase your talents or portfolio? If someone's heard of you (in a good way - see 'Be The Grown Up') they're more likely to work with you or give you a commission.

**37. Don't be a dick** (Mark)

**38. There's never just the one - don't put all your hopes in one script** (Daniel)

It ever so often happens that fresh talents write their first story and then fiddle around with it, shape it and reshape it - always hoping for this one script to become their big break. Well, 99.999(keep counting)% of the odds are against that ever happening. If you rely on the one, you're doomed. Write it, put it aside, write the next one - repeat.

**39. Don't get hung up on one idea** (Mark)

**40. Don't put all your expectations in one project** (Richard)

By all means plough your heart and soul into a piece of work. But don't be suicidal if that baby never flies! Have another one up your sleeve; or even better: another three!

**41. Avoid SKOAJ dialog** (Micho)

As in: *"This must be some kind of a joke!"* -- words and phrases that only appear in movies, not in human speech.

**42. Read "Die Hard" and you'll see what makes producers happy** (Daniel)

Reading and analyzing scripts is a must for every newbie - one of the all-time best for many reasons is "Die Hard" - crisp, not a word wasted, expertly structured - a producer's dream.

**43. If you're making an 'issue' film, don't make it about the issue, focus on relationships/character** (Mark)

**44. Look for the Third Way** (Micho)

A lot of story problems stem from false dichotomies (e.g. character- vs. plot-driven)

**45. Refresh your brain** (David)

Writing for the same medium for too long can narrow your mind. A change of scene can be good for all your work.

**46. Don't plot your stories to death** (Daniel)

Before you get hired you write your specs - never plot them endlessly. Plot some of it, sure - but then write. Crank them out. Plotting too much can kill your passion/weirdness/oddity/originality. Get the main points clear - then dive into that world, hold on tight and enjoy the ride!

**47. Don't be precious about writing** (Richard)

Many famous authors have the one place - the shed, office, garret or hotel - where they say they have to go in order to write. That may be true of them, but don't let it be true of you. Personally, I think it's a luxury established writers afford themselves (as god knows you don't get many on the way up!) You should be able to write anywhere. Here, on public transport, at home, in bed, in the doctor's surgery - anywhere you have time.

**48. Sometimes clichés are okay** (Micho)

There's a reason it's been done before. Whether it is predictable story beats or trite expressions, if it's authentic to human experience, don't dismiss it out of hand.

**49. Keep your receipts** (David)

Claim for everything, but don't be an MP about it.

**50. Think of screenwriting as a craft, not as an art form** (Daniel)

Thinking of it as art can mess you up as it sets the bar way in the clouds. Think of it as an art form and you might end up cutting off your ear. Think of it as carpentry and you'll be making chairs ... and yes, you won't go nuts.

**51. Be open about what you love and your people will find you** (David)

Share your enthusiasms. Be a fan.

**52. Don't panic if you get stuck** (Micho)

Sometimes, we're our most creative with our backs against the wall.

**53. Take time to think** (Richard)

Ok. My luxury! I can quite often be chained to my desk for weeks. And not in a good way! So, I give myself the luxury of taking "ideas days". I go away somewhere, have nice food in a nice place and think up new ideas. I just open my mind and scribble down whatever comes. You don't have to go away, but do give yourself mental time. Often writers go for walks.

**54. Feel free to steal - but make it your own** (Daniel)

Just as every musical note's been played a countless times, one may well argue that every genre, every scene, every moment and every emotion has been written, too. Don't stop writing because an idea's already out there - it's not about your story - it's about YOU writing it. Keep working your muscle - and you'll find two identical ideas from two different writers always end up as entirely different stories.

**55. Don't worry about anyone stealing your story** (Daniel)

If you have a great idea, don't hide it - use it! It'll help you build your networks, it'll help you get noticed. Register your work, sure - but don't worry about it - your script will not be stolen. Hiding your idea hinders your chances at having a career - use everything you've got.

**56. Don't become a hermit** (Richard)

As Benjamin Franklin said: "Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing". If you're always sitting at a desk, you will never experience life. It's the real dichotomy of full-time writing. It's generally a solitary affair but you're meant to be writing about the human condition. Don't let life pass you by or the human condition happen only to other people!

**57. Get out of your cave** (Daniel)

50% of writing is selling - you need to get out physically - conferences, seminars, workshops, meetings - and virtually - social media. Be there, talk to people, engage in conversations, drop your name, your ideas. If you're shy about it - learn to overcome it. Nobody wants to work with a recluse - producers look for reliable partners they get along with.

**58. Stay alive!** (Richard)

When you're getting a writing career off the ground, it can be difficult to keep food on the table, too. If you have a day job, don't give it up until you are certain the bills can be paid. If you want to maximise your income from writing, diversify: write a book, a comic, audio scripts, journalism. I've done all of these and still do! There are many panels this weekend on writing for these media.

**59. Read lots of scripts/Watch lots of TV & film** (Danny)

It's the only way to learn.

**60. Just do it** (Mark)