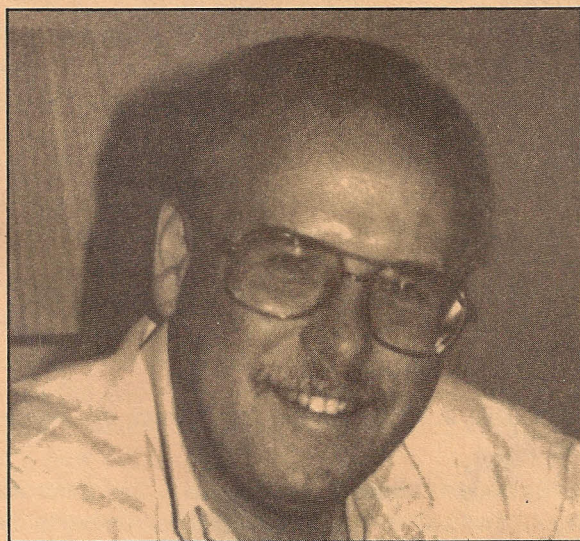


Hollywood SCRIPTWRITER®

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Holiday Double Issue

- Bruce Joel Rubin (*"Ghost, Jacob's Ladder"*)
- Lore Kimbrough (*"The Cosby Show"*)
- "Creative Coach" Rachel Ballon
- The Script Doctor: *Supporting Characters*
- Letters
- Markets . . . and More.



BRUCE JOEL RUBIN: Writing From Within, To Find The Light.

In some ways, it's hard to believe the two films could have been written by the same man. One is a sort of supernatural action/comedy romp, with good guys and bad guys and a happy ending; the other a nightmarish roller-coaster that leaves you — well, stunned. And yet, avows Bruce Joel Rubin, "Ghost" and "Jacob's Ladder" are essentially the same story, told in two very different ways.

I met with Rubin in his Paramount office. He's a soft-spoken, thoughtful and introspective man with a deep

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LORE KIMBROUGH

From Phone Lines to Funny Lines, HS Subscriber makes the Cosby Connection

Formerly a telephone operator and HS subscriber living in Los Angeles, Lore Kimbrough's interest in playwriting has blossomed into a dream assignment for comedy writers: a staff job on the "The Cosby Show." Now in her second year, Kimbrough began as a term writer, and is now story editor. How did she get there, and what's it like working on the show that many credit with single-handedly rescuing the sitcom? To find out, freelance writer Raymond Palma met with Lore at her apartment in New York.

While working at the phone company, what did you do to further your aspirations toward a writing career?

I was always writing, and I attended classes and workshops. My goal was to become a playwright, actually. But I was in one workshop where several of my classmates told me that I should write for television.

Why did they say that?

Well, there's a certain personality that's good for TV writing — people that are very glib, who can think on their feet. TV is definitely a collaborative thing. You have to be willing, and able, to express yourself in a room full of people, and just toss out jokes without fear. And people in my workshop who knew how television worked kept saying that I was a natural, and should give it a try.

Now, I started with dreams of being a playwright, a very lofty goal. And each time I wrote I found myself setting my sights lower and lower. But those people telling me I would make a good TV writer was like telling Mario Andretti he'd be a good valet parker (Laughter). I just didn't consider that to be something I wanted to do.

On the other hand, it seemed like it might be a good idea to have a sitcom script in my repertoire of scripts. So I wrote a spec "Golden Girls," and that's when things really started to happen. I wrote the script, took it to my workshop, and everybody loved it. Someone suggested I send it to "Golden Girls." I tried, and they wouldn't take it. I even called on a friend at Disney to help, but they still wouldn't take it without an agent.

So, the workshop instructor, who was a good friend, offered to take the script to his agent for a look. It actually ended up with his agent's partner, who handles comedy. He liked it a lot, and called me in for a

meeting. At the end of the interview he said, "I think we can do business. I'm going to get you a job on a sitcom." And, nine months later, that's exactly what he did.

So how does a person without your lucky streak get an agent?

You have to actively pursue one, and do everything you can to make it easy for an agent to deal with you. For example, when you send a query letter to someone, enclose a response letter. In the query, mention the scripts you've written, with a log line, a TV Guide description, of each. Then, provide a response letter, one written as though the agent were writing to you. "Dear so-and-so, thank you for sending me a query letter on your scripts," and then offer three choices, with boxes next to them. The first box says, "Yes, I'm interested in seeing your scripts, please send them right away." The second choice is, "I'm currently not handling scripts by new writers, please feel free to contact me in three months." The third choice is, "I'm full right now, but good luck with your career, and try me in a year." And then underneath all that, write "Sincerely yours," and leave a blank for them to fill in their name. Include an SASE, and send it out.

Once you're in the business, how important is your agent?

Very. You always want an agent. My agent is making ten percent of all of my earnings from writing for as long as he's my agent. The only thing he doesn't get money on is my residuals.

So everybody needs an agent.

No. Everybody doesn't need an agent. And some people function very well without one. But if you're more creative than you are business-minded, you want an agent. They're the people that go around and say, "Ah, that Ray Palma is hot, he's happening right now." They're the people who are out there, who know what's happening in the community. You may have to read a hundred trade papers to find out that Guber-Peters is looking for a young, Italian guy to write the new Sicilian picture. But your agent already knows that, and has known it for eight months because it's been happening that long. They go out and schmooze and take lunches, and find out how much money everybody

makes, how much is out there for different projects, and so on. They know all that stuff. Which means it's something you don't have to spend time researching.

How does someone get a job as a beginning writer?

They're known as "term writers." What that means is, you are hired for a specific term, a time limit. And at the end of that term they (the producers) have the option of renewing your contract or letting you go.

Now, how do you become a term writer? Well, your agent sends your work out to production companies, hoping that one of them will offer you a position. Term writers are hired for a very short period of time; on our show, it was four weeks.

What about an internship? Does such a program exist?

There are intern writers, yes. Those are writers that a program sanctions through the Writers Guild. You take on writers with limited experience who may or may not have an agent, and they work on a show. They're not involved in every aspect of the writing. It's sort of like an apprenticeship, except they get paid for it.

How involved in the process do they get?

Generally, they get to write scenes. On our show the writer interns get to do a lot, because we press everybody into service. Right now I'm involved in writing a script with two interns. They're both very young, both women, and they both offer a perspective I don't have. But as I say, we use our interns more than many other shows. Interns will ordinarily do a lot of notetaking during script note sessions, and will try to offer suggestions on angles we haven't looked at or explored.

Do most interns move into the staff ranks?

In most cases an internship is a step to either getting a staff writing job on that show, or some other show. If you don't have an agent it's a good opportunity to try and get one, because you're already "connected" to a certain degree, and the agent is able to say that you have background and experience. Sometimes they get hired by the show they interned on, sometimes not, depending on the circumstances, such as a change in staff. The current executive producer for "A Different World," for instance, started as an intern at "The Cosby Show." So, it depends. If your work is good, they will try to find a spot for you.

What was your first year like?

It was more of a learning process — learning the show, learning how television works. First I co-wrote an episode, then I wrote one by myself. Mostly I tried to learn everything I could. I didn't do as much writing

last year as I'm doing this year.

What are your responsibilities compared to last year?

Last year I just wrote one-and-a-half episodes. However, there are different people on the show this year, and it's being run differently, so this year everybody writes. We write in pairs, and then we all get together after we finish the script and go through it. There are usually specific functions that come with specific titles, but our show (this season) doesn't pay much attention to that.

With that kind of collaboration going on, who is entitled to residuals?

The person who is the assigned writer of that episode gets on-air credit. I wrote one episode back in February and I got credit, and therefore I'll be receiving the residuals. I'm writing another one now, which I'll get credit for and residuals. You receive your residuals from the Writers Guild; they're in charge of sending you your residuals and keeping track of how much you are owed.

Do you get paid per script, per episode, per week?

Staff writers get paid a salary each week. Writers with other titles, (such as Producer) also get paid for each episode that has their name on the credits. But unless it says otherwise in your contract, as a staff writer you do not get additional money for scripts (except for the residuals). Staff writers write for the staff, not for themselves — that's why they call them that. In my case, my agent happened to work out a deal so if I wrote a script on my own, I'd get paid for it. It would not go against my salary.

That's important to know.

Well, it is when your agent is negotiating for you, because if you were a term writer for a year and worked for a cheap show, they could have you write a script every other week because they don't have to pay you for it.

In the process of staff-writing a sitcom, how far in advance of production do you work?

On our show, we write for the current week. And this is why. Most shows sit down and outline the storyline for the whole season, all twenty-six episodes. So when the writers in the first year of "The Cosby Show" got together, they came up with a bible of all twenty-six episodes of the first season, showed it to Bill (Cosby), and said, this is going to be the first show, and here's the second, the third, and so on. But Bill thought it was just a list of possible shows. So he said, "Well, I like number one and number eight, but the rest . . ."

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Kimbrough...

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So, they found it was just a waste of time to try to think ahead to far, because every week when they had a meeting with Bill he often had something he wanted to do; an incident had happened to him, or maybe something he'd read about had triggered an idea, and he'd want to do a show on that.

What about the writing has made that show so successful?

In all honesty, Bill Cosby. Bill sees comedy where nobody else sees comedy. He'll explore areas of the script or explore moments in a scene — it's definitely Bill. And you can tell that's true, because the writing on the show has remained fairly consistent, even when we don't have the same people writing it.

Writing to deadlines is part-and-parcel of the sitcom process. Any advice to writers who are faced with the prospect of deadlines?

Well, I take exactly as long as I have. Meaning, if I've got two weeks, that's how long I take. I write as long as I feel I'm creating something, and when I get out of that creative mode, I'll start editing what I've already written. I may write the script in three days, but I'm not finished with it. I'll take the rest of the time I have and keep reading it, changing it, reading it again, polishing it, reading it, and slimming it down. I'll try to find other, better ways to get the same point across, or tell the joke.

Some people handle deadlines by getting done early and goofing off the rest of the time, but I can't do that. I use that time to continuously review the material. I will call other writers (on the show) and say, "Here's the scenario, such-and-such is happening in the scene and this is what I wrote, what do you think?" Or I might say, "Give me a new angle on this bit of business that has to happen." And sometimes when I go back to my office I'll think of something and call them up and say, "Don't read that, I want to change something." And I'll quickly rewrite it and give them the new version.

So it's basically a continuous process until you hand it to them.

In my case, it continues until someone finally says, "Enough already, get out of my face!" □

Season's Greetings

What Was That?...

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If you've ever read the Tibetan Book of the Dead — and I don't suppose many people have — it is in many ways a model for "Jacob's Ladder." It's the story of the journey of the soul, as it learns to let go of its attachment to life. That is a very hard process for some people, and the reason is that very few people are prepared to let go of their life. I suspect that many people don't deal on a daily basis with the concept of being a spirit trapped in flesh, I don't know when that usually comes up in people's discussions. And yet in ancient times that was a very big issue; that we are all encapsulated in this fleshy stuff, and none of us know how to get out, but at one point, sometimes a very quick point, you have to figure out how to get out. You may have ten seconds, you may have ten nano-seconds. Jacob had ten hours, and had to work it through.

I believe that time and space are totally malleable, and that ten seconds or a tenth of a second would give you the same kind of journey. You have to learn how to let go of everything you hold most dear, including your urge to breathe, your memories, your comfort in being inside this body. In some ways it's like being born. Babies don't always want to come out, they're used to that watery, warm environment.

Jacob had to understand the truth of his own death, and in his psyche, if you will; he was tapping into the larger universal mind. And in that mind we all have angelic and demonic forms. Louie comes to him as a kind of voice of wisdom and knowledge that helps free him from a lot of his misunderstandings, and Michael comes as a kind of angelic form that brings him the truth. You need to know the truth to be set free. Jacob needed to know what happened to him in Vietnam in order to make the leap to his next evolutionary stage.

"Ghost" is Judeo-Christian in its impact and philosophical approach; "Jacob's Ladder" is much more Oriental, an Eastern mystical view. Heaven and Hell are the same place and angels and demons are simply the same forces perceived in different terms. If you're afraid of the liberating forces, you see them as demons ripping you from your life. If you open to them, they become angelic forces that free you.

The mind, ultimately, is the creator of the Universe you live in. And in this philosophy, Heaven and Hell, also created by the mind, are no less real than the world we are living in now.

Plato's last words to his disciples, just before he died, were, "Practice dying." That's a fascinating idea, to my mind, and I believe an ultimate instruction to people, which is, use your life well. And part of that is learning to let go of it, because ultimately the one act you will be called upon to do is let go. Jacob had to let go of everything, including his guilt over the death of his son, in order to finally walk away from the world. And since ultimately you can't stay here, because your body comes to a point where it will no longer support your life, you have to figure out how to step away.

I wanted to write a movie about that. And it's not your everyday Hollywood movie. And I think that many people will question why this subject would lend itself to a commercial film. I don't question it, but I'm still awed by the fact that somebody dared to make it. □