

# Hollywood SCRIPTWRITER®

Issue 125 • 1626 N. Wilcox #385, Hollywood, CA 90028 • (818) 991-3096 • October 2002

## *In This Issue*

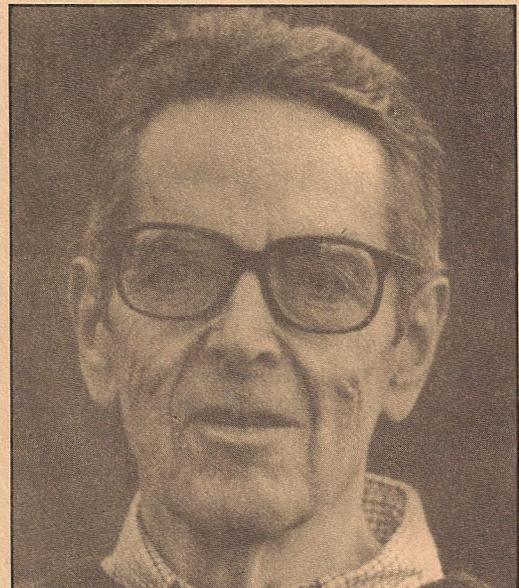
- **Ring Lardner, Jr. ("M\*A\*S\*H," *Woman of the Year*)** *Screenwriting Then and Now*
- **The American Comedy Network:** *Looking for Funny Freelancers*
- **The Script Doctor:** *Finding The Core*
- **Markets . . . and More.**

## **RING LARDNER, JR.** **Putting Screenwriting into Perspective**

On April 25, 1950, a small classified ad in the *Hollywood Reporter* under the heading, "Owner Going to Jail," advertised the sale of Ring Lardner, Jr.'s ten-room beach house. Two months later, as a member of the *Hollywood Ten*, Lardner was convicted of contempt of Congress, fined \$1,000, and immediately taken to jail to begin a one-year sentence.

His response to the verdict was calm, and his dedication to his principles remained unswerving. "There is only a minor difference between forcing a man to say what his opinions are, and dictating what those opinions should be," he said. "And when people have been compelled to open their minds to government authority, mental freedom ceases."

Prior to his 15-year stint on the infamous *Blacklist*, Ring Lardner, Jr. was a highly-successful screenwriter with an Oscar to his credit for "*Woman of the Year*," the movie that first teamed Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy. During the *Blacklist* years he actively churned out television scripts under various pseudo-



(Continued on Page 2)

## ALTERNATIVE MARKETS

# THE AMERICAN COMEDY NETWORK

*HS is always on the lookout for opportunities that might offer scriptwriters a viable, and hopefully profitable, market for their work. This month we spotlight the American Comedy Network, the biggest name in radio comedy, with over 280 stations subscribing to their service.*

*And what service is that? ACN provides comedy bits — fast-paced commercial parodies, song parodies, “celebrity” sketches, and so on to each radio station on a weekly basis. ACN scripts, produces, and packages their comedy in-house; however, they are always open to freelance submissions, and have used many in the past.*

*The ACN was brought to our attention by subscriber Raymond Palma, who conducted the following interview with ACN president Andy Goodman.*

**Let’s begin with a description of the product. What exactly does the American Comedy Network provide to each station?**

We are a syndicator of original short form comedy features for radio stations. “Original,” meaning that we have a staff of writers and performers here who create the material, very much like a “Saturday Night Live,” “Second City TV,” or “In Living Color,” might create it.

These features are designed to run sixty seconds, ninety seconds, maybe as long as two minutes, but that would be the exception. These spots are designed to be dropped into a fast-moving radio show. They will take the form of commercial parodies, song parodies, interactive sketches where someone is either calling in on the phone or dropping by at the studio to interact with the disc jockey, and so on. Basically, anything that is funny, takes about sixty seconds, and sounds like part of a morning radio show. Also, more than that, they are usually topical. We’re talking about what people are talking about that day.

**Can you give us an example of each of the categories you just mentioned?**

All right. Here’s an example of a fake commercial. There is a Chrysler New Yorker commercial featuring Ricardo Montalban, in which he introduces this elegant, sleek Chrysler New Yorker car with the elegance of a New Yorker, the contemporary look of a New Yorker, etc. The commercial goes on to mention the on-board microprocessor, that little electronic voice that tells you when your door is open, or lights are on, or whatever. Well, we wondered what it would be like if that car talked to you like a New Yorker.

So, we did a fake commercial where we leave the door open and the car’s little warning voice says, “Hey, jerk off, your door is open, you didn’t lock me up you schmuck!” That’s a commercial parody.

Now, a song parody would be based on a well-known song — take, for example, “Wake Up Little Suzie,” by the Everly Brothers. We wanted a song about the perception people have that the Japanese are slowly buying the country out from underneath us. So, we did a song called, “Wake Up Ore Sushi.” Or, we’ll do an original song, like “The Smoker’s March,” which chronicled the lament of smokers that they are being hassled and shut out by non-smokers.

An interactive might open with the disc jockey picking up the phone to call George Bush, and asking how he feels about his son Neal and all the uproar over the S&L’s. Or, a character we created called Barney, (a take-off on Barney Pheiff), will come into the studio and interact with the jock. He’s the deputy program director, and always has lame-brained ideas about how to make the morning show better.

We’ll produce what we call “show-opens,” something like a highly-produced opening that basically gets the show off to a start in a kind of Hollywood fashion. For example, this week we had Tom Brokav cutting in to say we’re going to join a George Bush conference live. George Bush is talking about what you think is the Hubble telescope: “Well, we wasted millions, total disappointment. Things just not getting done, not working. Everybody is very disappointed.” And then the off-mike reporter says, “But I thought you originally supported the Hubble telescope.” And Bush responds, “Hubble telescope? Heck, I’m talking about (station call letters), and then you’d hear the station jingle. And for the first thirty seconds, if the impersonation is good, you’ve sucked your audience in, they’re thinking, “Hey, what’s going on?” And then, boom, it’s a joke to get you into the show.

**What combination of these do you send to the radio stations?**

We send ten features a week to all our stations, in various combinations; one fake commercial, one song parody, three drop-ins, five interactives, and a show opener.

**And where do freelance writers fit in?**

Well, we do most of the writing here, virtually all of it, in fact. However, we are consuming ten ideas a week, and that starts to add up, week after week. So we’re always looking for ideas, partial scripts, or full scripts from freelance writers all over the country. We

know a lot of people who are either frustrated writers in advertising agencies, or people who are pedaling scripts and waiting for the money to start coming in, who watch TV and read the newspapers and think in the same way we do. They see the commercial parody, they hear the song parody. They think, "What would it be like to call George Bush and talk to him about the deficit, or saying no new taxes, or discuss what's happening to Neal." So, these scripts are being written in their minds as it is, why not submit them to us and have a chance of getting paid?

Right now, several freelancers that we use are faxing or mailing stuff in from all over the country. They send it to us, we look at it, if we can use it we contact them right away. And we then arrange to buy the material from them. If we can't use it, often we'll call the writer up and explain why not. Hopefully, we also try to coach them in a direction where they can start to create some useful stuff for us.

### **What's the average submission look like? In other words, do most people submit just one script, or five, or more?**

It varies. There is one guy from New Jersey, for example, who will send us five, six, seven scripts at a time, in what we call the "shotgun approach." He's just going to throw as much up against the wall as possible, hoping that something sticks. Other people will take one idea, hammer it until they think they've got the perfect script, and send that in, hoping that single bullet hits the bullseye. It's really up to the writer.

### **What is the pay scale for freelance writers?**

If someone sends us a whole script that we can use, we'll pay them \$150. If they send us a script where we like the idea and some of the lines, but maybe we want to move in another direction, we'll pay them \$100. If we just look at the script and say, "Boy, this is a great idea, but they didn't know what to do with it," we'll pay them \$50. And if we look at a script and say, "Geez, this is a lousy idea, and we hate the way they've developed it, but there's one joke in here we'd like to use," we'll pay them \$25 for that joke. And that gives us the right to purchase that material and use it exclusively for the radio through our network.

Now, if we start buying regularly from a certain freelancer, we'll bump the rates up. After ten scripts, their rate goes up to \$175 per script, and so on. We'll send a rate sheet with our information packet for interested writers.

### **How should freelance writers submit their scripts to ACN?**

By mail, or by fax. Either way is fine. One of the

most important things writers should keep in mind is that we're generally writing two weeks ahead of time; if it's July 27th, we're writing for August 13th. You have to gear your thinking to two weeks in advance. Choose stories that people care about and are talking about right now, but will still be a hot topic two weeks from now.

Also, write about events that will be happening then, two weeks in the future; say, the opening of a big movie, the beginning of baseball season, various holidays, etc. Those things that are going to happen come hell or high water. If you write about something that's really just breaking news, many times it will be a dead issue by the time we get it out, by the time we have it produced, packaged, and delivered. That's a process that takes about ten days, so always be cognizant of that lead time.

### **What guidelines or boundaries should be observed by writers while writing a spec script for ACN?**

Some general thoughts on that. First, length is important. You've got to try and keep the piece to about sixty seconds. That's about as much time as they're going to give you on a fast-moving morning show.

Topicality, we've already discussed. As topical as possible, with the understanding that you're working two weeks in advance.

Next, the script has to be something that fits into a morning show. Sometimes you'll have something that's short and topical and funny, but if it's about something that turns the stomach, remember that most people are listening to this while they're shaving, brushing their teeth, eating breakfast, getting ready for work. There are certain things that just don't lend themselves to a morning timeslot.

### **I've noticed that many of the bits ACN does utilize impersonations of celebrities. Can a writer simply call for any celebrity in their scripts, or are there certain ones to use?**

Our voice library is made up primarily of two very talented, first-rate impressionists: Ed Kelly and Nancy Parker. Any writer who does a script calling for, say, George Bush talking to Jack Nicholson or Michael Jackson, has to rely on two key elements to make that script work: the jokes have to be good, written in the speech patterns of the characters, and the voices have to be authentic.

So, we provide a list of voices to any interested writers. This is the ACN Voice Library. Any bit that's going to use these voices, we can pull off convincingly. On the other hand, someone might write a great bit using a David Letterman voice, but we don't do David Letterman. So if David Letterman has to speak in a bit,

*(Continued on Page 8)*

## A.C.N. . . .

(Continued from Page 7)

we can't use it. Writers should use our voice library as building blocks for the bits.

### Can writers also use original characters for bits, ones that don't rely of specific "celebrities" in the voice library?

Sure. They can make up scenarios using different characters, that's no problem. They can call for a gruff-sounding voice, a deep voice, a Jamaican accent, an Italian accent, we can do all of that. We're quite versatile in that regard. But frequently, in dealing with topical stories, a lot of submissions might call for someone like Roseanne Barr's voice, which we do — but if they need Dan Rather, they're out of luck, because we don't do Dan Rather.

### What percentage of material is done using celebrity voices, as opposed to original characters?

It's hard to express in percentages, but I'd guess maybe sixty percent of our stuff relies on celebrity voices, or at least recognizable voices.

### Let's talk about the actual appearance of the script, in terms of format. What are your specifications?

As I said, a script should be about sixty seconds long. Now, how long that runs on a page can vary; it has to be timed according to how long it plays when it's performed. As a writer, you should read it to yourself, determine the length, and then add about ten seconds. When a bit is performed and produced, with music mixed in and so forth, there's usually about another ten seconds there.

As for the appearance of the script, I don't care what it looks like, although double-spacing is better for reading and clarity. But really, I'm just looking for funny material. So if it's funny I don't care if it's written on the back of an index card, or on a matchbook cover if you can fit a stamp on it!

### Let's address the fact that writers accustomed to writing for a visual medium, such as television or features, will have to alter their thinking somewhat in approaching radio comedy.

Actually, I don't think it's that tough a transition, particularly when writing bits that are parodies of television commercials. Through some sound effects, some key lines, and some well-chosen music, you can "invoke" the TV commercial, if you will, using the theatre of the mind.

For example, Nissan has the fantasy series of commercials, where a guy says, "If I had a Nissan, it'd be a red 280Z, no, black. And I'd be driving along with my dog, no my girlfriend, no, Kristie Brinkley." That's

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(excerpt from "Rolling Stone Rockwear")

**ANNOUNCER:** Get ready. The bad boys of rock 'n roll are selling out, and Mick Jagger's pants are already half off!

**MUSIC:** "Ruby Tuesday"

**SINGERS:** "Goodbys, every Tuesday, Polo shirts in black and blue, Major credit cards accepted, Buy one and you'll get two . . ."

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a TV spot. And just by saying those words, I've invoked the visuals, they're in your mind. Throw in some jazzy music and sound effects, and it's basically the same spot. So, if you're a TV writer and you think visually, to write radio and use the theatre of the mind is not that big a step, really.

Now, if you're used to writing print, or eight thousand word essays, or even humorous essays, to condense that into a sixty second thought that is primarily dialogue driven — that could be a little tricky. Sometimes we'll get scripts from people like that that run two-and-a-half, even three minutes. They just don't get the idea.

### Where should interested writers submit their scripts?

The freelance coordinator at ACN is **Ed Kelly**. Scripts can be sent to the **American Comedy Network at Park City Plaza, Bridgeport, CT 06604-4277**, or they can be faxed to **(203) 367-9346**. □

### Comedy Improv Class for Writers

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Recommended by Carl Sautter  
("Moonlighting")