

**Tales from the Dumpster:  
Hollywood Goes Diving for a Screenplay**

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**When we learned of Project Greenlight, the idea seemed simple enough: It was an on-line screenwriting competition in which the competitors would judge one another's work. The contest had been created by Matt Damon, Ben Affleck, and Chris Moore, Hollywood insiders eager to give a break to an outsider—or two. First prize would be a million-dollar budget from Miramax Films to make our movie with a crew there from HBO to document the process.**

**We felt confident, of course. Our screenplay—a vaguely autobiographical black comedy about English professors obsessed with intramural basketball—had recently been named a finalist in a prestigious film festival's annual competition. On top of that, we were both award-winning fiction writers, English professors who knew their way around a keyboard. Clearly, we had to be among the favorites.**

**The first sign of trouble came when contestants began informally exchanging scripts and offering feedback outside the parameters of the competition. Our first reader condemned our screenplay as "too linear," a criticism that alarmed us on two counts. First, our screenplay wasn't linear at all. It began in a police station and then developed as a long series of flashbacks. Second, our reader's criticism seemed the product of a strange and arbitrary criterion: Screenplays should not be linear. If this was his standard for good screenwriting, what other bizarre yardsticks might our fellow contestants use to measure our work?**

**And there was no telling who our judges might be. In the early days of Project Greenlight, there were so few entries that "Flagrant Fouls" was the only basketball-related screenplay in the contest. But as the deadline for entering neared, the number of entrants—and thus the number of potential judges—exploded. In the end, there were nearly 8,000 screenplays, 25 of which dealt with basketball. What if the fate of our black comedy rested in the hands of, say, the author of "The Stranger Jordan," in which a basketball coach and a wandering messiah**

join forces to enlighten the human race? How could we hope to compete?

Most alarming were the Project Greenlight message boards. Soon we were calling the contest not Project Greenlight but *The Dumpster*, as the boards were full of the washed and unwashed alike, the talented and the hopeless, the clever and the crude, all smashed together in this virtual community of Hollywood wannabes.

The boards were activated early in the contest and were soon overrun with contestants who had submitted their work without first reading the contest's rules. These entrants had broken every rule imaginable, thereby disqualifying themselves, and they collectively despaired that their Hollywood dreams were already dashed. Fortunately for them—and alarmingly for us—the organizers of *The Dumpster* announced that because so many people had broken the rules, the rules would not be enforced. In other words, these people would still be around to pass judgment on our screenplay.

Messages on the boards swelled by the hundreds and then the thousands, the plurality generated by a few dozen voluble types who formed friendships and alliances. Self-promotion became the dominant form of discourse, with writers “pimping,” as it was soon called, their wares. The *Dumpster* organizers *did* have the foresight to prevent friends from reviewing one another's scripts; the script assignment process was random and anonymous. But this did nothing to deter rampant self-promotion, as screenwriters hoped to generate some buzz on the boards and by extension, it was hoped, among industry types who might be dumpster diving, looking for treasure among the trash.

We were not the only ones who waded into *The Dumpster* with confidence. One woman admitted that she had already raided her local Barnes & Noble for books on movie directing. But for every confident contestant, there were two paranoids, certain that Stephen Spielberg was dumpster diving and stealing their best ideas. And there was, of course, much more than this. Any discourse community worth its phonemes soon outpaces the intentions of its founders, and it was no different with *The Dumpster*. On the boards there was sports talk, political debate, on-line romance, and most anything else you can

imagine that has nothing to do with screenwriting. All the while, we were passing judgment on one another's work.

In theory, according to the organizers of *The Dumpster*, *all* contestants would receive the benefit of feedback of their peers. To qualify for the competition, each contestant or team of contestants had to review at least three scripts. These were known as "the mandatories." In reviewing our mandatories and then some, we found what you might expect to find in a dumpster. An occasional screenplay was decent; most were awful; and some—we swear we are not making this up—weren't even screenplays! Was our screenplay doomed to be judged by the "screenwriter" who had entered a short story written entirely in capital letters?

Still hopeful that we would join the ranks of the 250 quarterfinalists chosen by peer review, we bided our time until the announcement was made. True to form, the initial deadline for submission of the mandatories was pushed back to accommodate incompetents and late entrants. When the 250 were finally listed on *The Dumpster* website, we checked the list and checked it twice, looking for "Flagrant Fouls."

It wasn't there. The dice had not gone our way. But we now we would be allowed to see our reviews! We could look them over for constructive criticism and see how we might improve our script. We were most interested in seeing our mandatories, as these were the reviews that had decided our fate.

There were a total of 51 questions on the review form. For 17 of these questions, reviewers were asked to grade screenplays on a scale of 1 to 100. The mother of all questions came near the end: "Please indicate your overall recommendation: Traditional Hollywood Studio coverage concludes with a reader's recommendation to the studio as to how to proceed with the project. What is your recommendation to Greenlight?"

Our three mandatories all said that they would recommend "Flagrant Fouls." So far, so good. But when we looked at our scores, we were amazed. Averaging the numerically weighted questions, our three reviewers gave us grades of 79%, 53%, and 50%. What was going on here? In our profession, numbers below 60 are reserved for work that does *not* get

**recommended. Why would someone give our screenplay an F and then recommend it?**

**The reviewer who gave us our lowest grade wrote that one of our characters was "A Priest obsessed with basket ball." Another character was "A slow witten 'Townie' who is recruited by the college professors to play basket ball." Not once, in answering more than thirty questions that required written responses, did this reviewer spell "basketball" correctly—though he did have the decency not to criticize our linearity.**

**After reading our reviews, we wept and then got to work on our next screenplay. Not that we've given up on "Flagrant Fouls." We await the responses of Hollywood agents and the results of other contests. When the winner of Project Greenlight was announced, we scarcely had time to notice. We wish him luck with his movie, and we have no regrets. After all, who's got time to direct a movie? We've got more screenplays to write—and more basket ball to play.**

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