



“The How-To Magazine For Screenwriters”

## How MGM Chooses A Script: An Interview With Studio Insider Stephanie Palmer

By Glenn Bossik

As Director of Creative Affairs for MGM Pictures, Stephanie Palmer has helped bring high-profile films from script to screen. Her projects have included *Legally Blonde*, *Agent Cody Banks 2*, and *Sleepover*.

She's currently overseeing the production of two films: *Be Cool* and *Blood and Chocolate*. *Be Cool* is the sequel to the comedy, *Get Shorty*. *Blood and Chocolate* is a romance/horror film written by Ehren Kruger, writer of the screenplay for *The Brothers Grimm*, *The Ring 2*, and *Skeleton Key*.

Palmer studied theatre in college and then segued into film as her career. Her understanding of what constitutes a great script has helped her succeed in the film industry.

Scriptologist.com spoke to her about her distinguished career at MGM and her insights into the art and business of screenwriting.

**Scriptologist.com (Q):** How did you get into the film industry and your current position as Director of Creative Affairs at MGM Pictures?

**Stephanie Palmer (SP):** I went to Carnegie Mellon University and studied directing for theatre. The second semester of my senior year of college was the first time that I even thought of working in Hollywood or moving to Los Angeles. One of my friends from college had moved out here [to LA] and encouraged me to come out and start working with her. I interned on *Titanic* as my first non-paid job. After that, I moved to being an assistant at Jerry Bruckheimer Films. From there, I moved to MGM, where I was also an assistant. Then I was promoted to Story Editor, Executive Story Editor, and then to my current position of Director of Creative Affairs.

**Q:** In the assistant capacity, what did you start off doing?

**SP:** I did all the typical jobs: picking up dry cleaning and mail. I would have to drive thirty miles to go pick up [my boss's] mail at his old post office box. I walked dogs, did tons of photocopying, filing, answering the phone, and all the general secretarial duties.

**Q:** Did your employer give you screenplays to read.

**SP:** Not really. But we were always allowed and encouraged to read everything that was submitted. Having access to the scripts was a huge opportunity.

**Q:** At what point did they start giving you more responsibilities?

**SP:** If you show yourself as remotely having a clue as to how the world works and you're willing to do the coffee run, then you can do the lunch order. Then you move up to planning a meeting. Then hopefully someone will eventually ask you what you think about one of the scripts.

**Q:** So, they gradually started trusting you with more and more?

**SP:** My tactic was always to remain quiet and do my job very well. Then, if anyone ever asked me [about a script], I had an opinion and ideas, but only when someone asked. And eventually, of course, even if it's just in general conversation, people would occasionally ask what I thought.

**Q:** And did they start having you sit in on pitches?

**SP:** Not really. But maybe I would make a recommendation or say, 'Have you considered this director or this change in the script?' If it was a good idea, then they started to realize that I had something to contribute creatively.

**Q:** In your current position as Director of Creative Affairs for MGM, what would you say your day-to-day job responsibilities involve?

**SP:** Each day's different because I usually have movies in various stages from development to release—development, production, and postproduction. My daily job is typically from 9:00 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. and consists of staff meetings, phone calls with agents and producers, and reading. It's rare that I actually get to read during the day at the office. So, that is reserved for evenings and weekends.

**Q:** Does MGM give you an idea of what their production slate is annually? And would you look for material to fill that slate?

**SP:** Absolutely.

**Q:** In terms of screenplays currently being greenlighted for production at MGM, what trends have you observed recently?

**SP:** The best that we have released recently have a specific niche audience, ideally with a potentially franchisable character. For example, the *Legally Blonde* series, the *Barbershop* series, *Agent Cody Banks*—all have been successful here. They are made for a limited budget, but with a specific core audience in mind.

**Q:** Have you looked at spec scripts?

**SP:** Absolutely. We've purchased many spec scripts. A lot of our material comes from the spec market.

**Q:** Are these scripts submitted through agents?

**SP:** Only through agents.

**Q:** Are there general guidelines that you have for agents in terms of how they should submit material? In other words, would you request a query letter?

**SP:** We don't accept any query letters. Just from submission from the major agencies, we receive over 4,000 scripts per year. I do believe that the gems out there find their way to good representation and ultimately find their way into the studio system.

**Q:** Were there problems in the past with unsolicited material?

**SP:** We have an absolutely strict policy not to accept any unsolicited scripts because every major studio has been sued for stealing ideas in the past. Unfortunately, because of that, it's not worth the financial risk of all those lawsuits to be able to find those diamonds out there. Once scripts are represented and submitted, there is a level of protection for the writer and the studio.

**Q:** In terms of writers who submit material through agents, do you see a trend in what their background would be or the background that was required of them to obtain an agent? Was it through friends who introduced them to agents?

**SP:** What I have seen so far is that there isn't a pattern. People have broken in through wildly varying backgrounds. The thing that is consistent is just an exceptional level of execution of the script. People who are professional and dedicated to developing the craft of their writing are the people who eventually do make it through.

**Q:** In terms of what agents have told you, have they expressed any frustration with unqualified writers who submit material to them?

**SP:** Yes. A vast majority of the work is very derivative of other material.

**Q:** So, there's a lot of copycatting?

**SP:** Absolutely. And that is one of agents' and executives' main frustrations.

**Q:** Have agents ever confided in you as to how they go about looking for new writing clients?

**SP:** Sure, we talk about it all the time. The main way they get clients is through referrals from their current clients or other people they trust in the business. This is a relationship business. If one of their clients says, 'I found this great writer, and I would like you to read it [their script],' that's their primary source of finding new clients. Also, if they have seen some of the writer's work, either at a reading, or if they've won a contest, or some other way of distinguishing themselves, it can spark an agent's interest. Any way writers can make themselves stand above the rest of their peers, or get noticed, is a great way to start.

**Q:** So, it's more of a personal relationship approach that goes on in the industry?

**SP:** Absolutely. Finding an agent is not like buying a car. Finding an agent that is a good match can take years. And, whether you genuinely like that person or not, you *are* forming a long-term relationship. It's someone that you're going to want to work with closely. You're entrusting so much of your passion and the work that you've put into a project that you want it to be someone who's going to handle your work with care and negotiate the best deals on your behalf. And for the agent too, they don't agree to sign new clients without a lot of care and thought.

**Q:** Are there any specific screenwriting competitions or places where readings take place that you would recommend to an aspiring screenwriter?

**SP:** The Nicholl Fellowship, Chesterfield [Screenwriting Competition], Project Greenlight and Fade In Magazine seem to get a lot of attention. The scripts that win those competitions are read by agents, executives, and producers.

**Q:** Is there any kind of research a new screenwriter could do to see what types of material are heavily in demand?

**SP:** It is so hard to try and follow trends or 'write to the market' since it is constantly changing and the development process is so slow that the 'trend' is usually long gone by the time the movie is released in theaters.

**Q:** Are there any genres that you would advise a new screenwriter to stay away from like period pictures or sci-fi?

**SP:** Not really. I think that whatever is your real passion is the place where you should start. You're devoting so much time, and you want characters that you're still going to find interesting six months or a year down the line when you're still working on the same project.

**Q:** Since the film industry is a business, are there any business books or courses that new writers should study that would help them break into the industry?

**SP:** I recommend reading everything you can. Become a student of the business. I just read a fantastic book yesterday called *The War Of Art*—by Steven Pressfield—that I would highly recommend. Also, the more salacious books—*The Mailroom*; *Down And Dirty Pictures*; *It's All Your Fault: How To Make It As A Hollywood Assistant*; *Hit and Run*; and *Hello, He Lied*—are read by many people in the business. As far as screenwriting books, I read them all, but I'm not a 'believer' in any. I have gotten some insight from all of them—Syd Field, Linda Seger, Robert McKee, Christopher Vogler, David Freeman, Michael Hauge. I am personally a believer in being as well-rounded as you possibly can in whatever your area of expertise is.

That's another point. It's so hard to be an expert in everything, especially as a screenwriter, that there's nothing wrong with specializing in a really specific niche and becoming the expert in that area. Then you can always expand. If you really have seen all the movies in a genre, know what has come before so yours can be original and unique. Understanding the things that have worked in the past is also great knowledge to have.

**Q:** Would you recommend that a writer look up the box office profits for a similar film to decide whether his or her screenplay is going to be appealing?

**SP:** You should definitely keep that as reference, but not as your guide. It is my opinion that there is rarely a direct correlation between the success of a script and its box office numbers.

**Q:** In terms of the corporate hierarchy at MGM, can you explain how the hierarchy works in conjunction with script submissions?

**SP:** Typically, an agent or producer will call me on the phone and give me a short pitch about the material. If I'm interested, I'll say: 'Yes, I'd like to read it.' They'll send the script over. If it's something conceptually interesting, then I will definitely read the script myself and also send a copy to the Story Department for coverage.

Every script that comes in to the studio is read by a reader. They are union professional readers who have all been in the business for over 10 years.

As a side note, there isn't a correlation between whether we're going to buy a script or not buy a script based on the reader's comments. We have bought many scripts where the reader passed, and we have also passed on many scripts where the reader recommended that we purchase it. Positive coverage can help motivate an executive to read a script more quickly.

**Q:** Is there anything that stands out about the negotiation process between MGM and an agent? What usually takes place?

**SP:** In any negotiation, we want to pay the least and they want to get the most amount of money. We just keep going back and forth until we reach an agreement. Each negotiation is different. It's all done over the phone and can be incredibly complicated. Even the simplest deals have contracts that are enormous with tons of paperwork and lots of lawyers talking to lawyers. There is a real art to negotiation, and that is an aspect of the business that I am interested in learning more about.

**Q:** Is the contract usually revised many times?

**SP:** Yes.

**Q:** Does MGM ever give a percentage of gross profits to a writer, or is it just a flat rate?

**SP:** Flat rate, but usually a writer's deal is multiple steps. They'd get a certain amount for the first draft, a certain amount for a revision, and then typically one or two optional steps. After those two guaranteed script revisions, we decide whether we want the writer to continue working on the script.

**Q:** There are a number of screenwriting Web sites that claim to help new writers sell their screenplays. They offer services where a new writer can post an entire screenplay, and they claim to sell subscriberships to film studio executives who can log in and view the screenplays. In your experience, has anyone at MGM or any of the other studios actually used one of these services?

**SP:** No, I haven't ever looked at those sites and I doubt other studios are either. It is possible that producers are looking on the Web for material. The same goes, in my experience, with pitch festivals or other marketplaces because we get so much material through direct channels from major [literary] agencies. There has been a lot of weeding out by the time it gets to us. There's a much better chance that the material could be commercially viable that we only have to go to that source. We don't have to go outside to unknown sources where a script hasn't been vetted. I think pitch fests can be valuable practice for the writer, but I don't believe they really lead to actual sales.

Sometimes, other companies will take material submitted from entertainment attorneys, but we don't because there's no creative vetting needed to get an attorney. An attorney will happily charge you to send in your script...unlike a producer, who is saying: 'I have read this material, and I will produce this material because I believe in its quality.' That's very different from an attorney just saying, 'Anyone, yes.'

**Q:** I get a lot of questions about which script consulting services are legitimate.

**SP:** It's hard to tell. I don't know how to tell other than your own gut feeling in speaking with the person and checking out their references.

**Q:** There are so many people out there who claim to get writers' screenplays produced, and I try to personally do business as honestly as possible, to steer people in the right direction. That's basically why Scriptologist.com is a how-to forum. I try to take a step-by-step approach. What I wonder about is if someone were really intent on getting into the industry, would you recommend their interning for a film production company?

**SP:** Definitely. Any way that you can meet people face to face and learn the business from the inside is all valuable feedback. It doesn't mean you can't have a [film] career not living in Los Angeles, because you can if the quality of [your] work is that good. But it is hard not having the personal relationships. So much of this business is based on word of mouth and referral that it's hard if you don't live here [in LA] to get in that loop.

**Q:** If a writer had certain non-film jobs that were bringing in an income, would it be worth that person's time to do an unpaid film internship? Would this yield some connections for that person?

**SP:** It totally depends on the situation and individual. When I worked for free, it was because I was fresh out of college and I worked during college to save money to be able to do that. But, could I personally do it now that I am more of an adult and have expenses? I would like to think that I could, but I'm not so sure that I could if I had to start all over again.

We have eight interns here [at MGM] this summer who are all in college now and I think (and hope) have learned a lot and made some great connections just from being here.

**Q:** Were they referred to you by their colleges?

**SP:** Either referred or they just sent me their resume and I interviewed them. Anybody can intern as long as you can get college credit.

**Q:** Is there a requirement that a person be in school?

**SP:** Yes, they must be in school so they receive college credit for their work. They can't just work for free.

**Q:** So, you started as an unpaid intern?

**SP:** Yes, at Marty Katz Productions. He was one of the producers of *Titanic*.

**Q:** How did you transition from there to MGM?

**SP:** One of my college friends (who also interned at Marty Katz Productions) was working as an assistant at Jerry Bruckheimer Films, and she helped me get a job at Jerry Bruckheimer.

**Q:** How did your theatrical studies at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) help prepare you for work in the film industry? In other words, were there specific courses you took at CMU that helped you understand how to successfully bring feature films from development to theatrical release?

**SP:** I only took one film course, so most everything I have learned about film has been on the job or my personal reading and watching movies. Playwriting, directing, and production classes certainly helped, and my theater history knowledge has helped too.

**Q:** What advice would you give to a screenwriter who would like to direct his or her own low-budget independent film?

**SP:** Go out and do it! It is such an accomplishment to actually get a movie made, and it can be a great showcase of their work and unique skills.

**Q:** What effect do you think digital filmmaking will ultimately have on the next generation of independent filmmakers?

**SP:** Digital media is an incredible tool for the independent filmmaker. Because it is so much more economical, it will allow for some breathing room in what are traditionally tight budgets. The result is there will be more funds available for production value. I expect we will see an increase in the quality of costumes, locations, lighting, and visual and special effects now that the money is not tied up in film stock and transfers.

**Q:** As a film studio executive, how do you feel studios like MGM will deal with digital video? What effect will it have on MGM's production and distribution process?

**SP:** It's difficult to say how the industry will adapt in the long run to major technology advances. It will be a slow process with any number of possible outcomes. Over the years, there have been numerous ideas about how to 'revolutionize' the process. Some work well, and others are dismissed. While I do think digital video will play a significant role in the future of movies, what that role is has not been decided yet.

**Q:** With the combined growth of independent filmmaking and franchise films, how do you feel the art and business of screenwriting will evolve in the next few years?

**SP:** This is a great question, and I wish I had a brilliant forward-thinking answer. It saddens me that the studio business is shrinking, but I am hopeful that this will provide more opportunity in the marketplace for risk-taking, ground-breaking creative work.