

# Slush Pile

Todd Longwell reports on unsolicited screenplays and the new screenplay consulting services.

**OSCAR-WINNING PRODUCER/DIRECTOR** Tony Bill (*The Sting*, *Five Corners*) is fond of saying that if you've got a great script, you can throw it out of your car on the Hollywood Freeway and it will find its way into good hands. But there's a new crop of script consultants with names like Storybay, Scriptshark, ScriptP.I.M.P. and Studionotes that claim what you really need to do is pay them a few hundred dollars and sign over 5 to 10 percent of your potential profits, and if they think your script is worthy, they'll pitch it to the Hollywood big shots who regularly peruse their Web sites. If you're an aspiring writer with no connections, you might think this is a pretty good deal. After all, if they're able to break you into the big leagues, a few hundred bucks up-front and a piece of the profits is a small price to pay.

"They think, 'I've only got one chance on this script, I'll try anything,'" says Grace Reiner, senior director of negotiations and policy planning for the Writers Guild of America, West (WGAW). "It's sort of like playing the lottery in that, very often, the people who can least afford it are the ones putting in the most money. [These companies] prey on people's fantasies."

"I think the fact that they call themselves 'pimps' and 'sharks' sort of speaks for itself," says Natalie Chaidez, a writer/producer whose credits include such TV shows as *New York Undercover* and *Judging Amy*. "On the other hand, for someone in Des Moines, it may be their only option."

Jim Harrison is not from Des Moines or anywhere else in Iowa. A 42-year-old divorced father of two living in Oregon, he had briefly flirted with a screenwriting career in his early 20s. But back then he lived in California, where it was easy to make the acquaintance of



the proverbial somebody-who-knows-somebody. When it came time to sell his new script *A Street in Rome*, he was forced to go the query-letter route, pitching various agencies and production companies via mail. He got a response back from Paradigm, a respectable mid-level Hollywood agency that handles stars such as Randy Quaid, Billy Baldwin and Tyra Banks. The letter stated that Paradigm does not accept unsolicited submissions, but there are other options available, one being Storybay... Web site and phone number follow.

In truth, although the missive was printed on Paradigm letterhead, it was actually sent by Storybay. The mailing was the result of a unique deal Storybay cut with approximately 70 agencies and production companies last year. They agreed to turn over all the queries they receive and, in return, Storybay would sift through the dreck and notify them of the few scripts they felt were worthy of consideration. The first and foremost test of worthiness is the willingness of the writer to pay \$150 for coverage of their script, or \$200 for coverage and a few pages of notes, in hopes that Storybay will like their script and recommend it to their

industry clients, who will in turn generate a seven-figure sale.

"I would be upset if I was a writer sending my query to a specific company and that company turned my query over to them," says Frederick Levy, vice president of development at Marty Katz Productions (*Reindeer Games*, *Titanic*) and author of *Hollywood 101: How To Succeed in Hollywood Without Connections*. "It's one thing if they're not interested. You can pass, not respond — it's your prerogative. But to take my letter and give it to somebody else? That just doesn't seem right."

It's also not quite kosher with the WGA.

Most companies that use Storybay (including Paradigm) are signatories of the WGA, which has a "no fees" policy prohibiting them from charging writers to read their material or referring them to companies that do. The queries-for-coverage arrangement would seem to be a clear violation of Guild rules.

"It's my belief — through Armstrong/Hirsch, my lawyer — that the law is gray in that area," says Storybay president and co-founder Bill Papariella. "My understanding is that if we contact only non-WGA writers, we're okay."

Reiner responds: "What he's saying is, 'We understand that many people would find what we're doing unethical, but not illegal. So it's not inappropriate for us to be doing unethical things, where we take advantage of people and take money that we don't actually deserve.'"

Papariella says they last heard from the WGA in November, 2000. "Since then, we haven't had any problems, so I'm assuming that we've been operating under guidelines that they feel are fair to both parties, even though they still don't like us."

"The idea that we think it's okay is a misun-