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Storylink All-Star Profile: TJ Lynch

by PJ McIlvaine

Like his beloved Rocky Mountains, TJ Lynch is a walking, breathing testimonial to persistence, grit, and good old fashioned stick-to-itiveness. Determined to crack the screenwriting code, Lynch assiduously studied and honed his craft, climbing the contest ladder until he achieved the ultimate validation: being chosen as a Nicholl Fellow in 1999. Lynch has taken his career one step further with the release of his first produced movie, *A Plumm Summer* (www.aplummsummer.com), the script he wrote during his Fellowship year. Lynch was gracious enough to take time out from his busy schedule to tell us the secret of his "overnight success".



TJ Lynch

Were you always interested in screenwriting or did you initially start out in another discipline (novels, short stories, etc.)?

I didn't start my career in Hollywood intending to be a screenwriter. Like everyone else, I wanted to be a director. But how to break in? I heard Steve Martin on the radio say, "If you want to direct, write." So that's what I did. I started writing as a means to directing. But I fell in love with the process. So much so that I'm planning on starting a novel soon.

Was your family supportive from the get-go or did you get resistance?

Always supportive. But they never really did understand what I was trying to accomplish or why. I'm sure they would've preferred I go into the family business, but they always said 'Do what you want to do.' That's a gift many people aren't given by their families.

Tell us about your Nicholl experience. The script you entered that eventually won - *The Beginning Of Wisdom* - had you entered it before?

No, it was the first time I had submitted *The Beginning Of Wisdom*. But it had already won the Scriptwriter's Network Carl Sautter Memorial Screenplay Competition, which resulted in my getting an agent. It also placed in most of the other major competitions as well. However, in previous years I had placed in the quarterfinals, and then the semifinals with a previous script. That was in the mid-90's. I've heard that these days even placing in the semis gets you a lot of phone calls, but that was not the case back then.

As far as winning the Nicholl furthering my career, I already had an agent, and my script had already been optioned. But it did get me lots of meetings. Unfortunately I didn't have a follow up script ready, so I wasn't able to capitalize upon them like I might have.

What was the best thing to come out of winning Nicholl? In hindsight, do you feel it helped you or hindered you in that the expectations were much higher after winning?

The best thing is legitimacy. Perhaps the downside is you 'expect' to become immediately successful. And that possibility certainly exists as proven by some of the more successful Fellows. But they're exceptions to the rule. For most Nicholl Fellows, it's still a struggle to get writing assignments, to get your scripts sold or get your movie made.

A Plumm Summer was written during the year you won the Fellowship. It sounds like a pet project, a real labor of love. How did that come about?

My mother reminded me about an incident that happened in my hometown when I was a child. At that time we had a locally produced kiddies' show called 'Happy Herb & Froggy Doo.' Happy Herb

was a magician and Froggy Doo was his wisecracking string-puppet sidekick. So my mother happened to ask one day, "Do you remember the time Froggy Doo was kidnapped and held for ransom?" I didn't, but I knew immediately it could make a great movie. So I made it my goal to find Happy Herb and get the rights to his story, which I did. (An indie family-friendly movie, *A Plumm Summer* stars Henry Winkler and William Baldwin with narration by Jeff Daniels. It won accolades at the International Family Film Festival and the Austin Film Festival and received a seal of approval from The Dove Foundation. In limited release, the film will also be available on DVD).

How involved were you in the filming of *A Plumm Summer*? Were you on the set every day?

I was on the set for four of the seven weeks of production. The producers and director were very receptive to my being there. It was a fantastic experience. Everyone should get to do it at least once.

Were there many rewrites/or changes once production began?

There were small changes made every day. And I was able to contribute in that way.

Seeing your words on screen, how did it feel? Were you satisfied with the end result?

It's tremendously satisfying, if the movie was shot as written, which I'm glad to report *A Plumm Summer* was. While it didn't make a lot of money at the box office, the audiences who did come to see it liked it very much. I'm very, very proud of it.

Have you started on your next project?

Yes, I'm hoping to direct *The Beginning Of Wisdom* next summer. I'm also finishing two more commercial horror scripts, and another small Montana story.

Do you have a daily writing routine?

It's fluid. Usually from about 11AM to 5:30PM. I do my e-mailing and business stuff in the morning, get that out of the way, and then start in. Sometimes I like to brainstorm very late at night when the 'Universe' opens up and I'm receptive.

How long does it take you complete a script from start to finish?

It varies widely. The fun ones, the ones where you've really nailed it, seem to write themselves. It goes very fast. Other ones are drudgery. They take forever. That's usually a sign, for me at least, that it isn't going to be a very good screenplay.

How many drafts do you complete? When do you know when a script is done, so to speak?

I do three or four drafts. It's done when I can't think of ways to improve it. That's not to say I think it's perfect. No script is perfect. But at a certain point you get to where you've exhausted your abilities. The script may not be great, but it's as good as you yourself can make it.

How many scripts do you write a year?

Again, it depends. Between my own scripts and collaborations, I average about two.

Do you see yourself primarily as a screenwriter, a director or simply a filmmaker?

I see myself as primarily a screenwriter. I think that's actually the most important piece of the puzzle. Without that, there's no movie. That said, I still make a portion of my living working below-the-line as a gaffer on commercials and industrials. It's part time and pays great; perfect for a screenwriter. So in that sense I am a filmmaker.

Do you have an agent and/or manager?

My agent left the business shortly before the Writer's Strike. But at this point I have enough connections that I can get my scripts read without one.

Living in LA, do you find that your writing style/ideas have changed?

Interesting question. I don't really think so. Then again, I've been here a couple decades. We're all products of our environments, so I suppose some of the big city has rubbed off. But I always think of myself as a Montanan at heart.

Do you have any words of wisdom or advice for newbie/fledgling screenwriters?

Don't worry about getting an agent or a manager when you're early in your career. Worry about getting better. And enter the legitimate screenplay competitions. They're a great barometer to objectively examine how your work compares to your peers. If you aren't at the level to at least make the semis in a screenplay competition, you probably aren't good enough to attract an agent anyway. Keep writing, keep studying. And once you start making the finals or winning, the agents and managers will come to you!

Is there anything you would have done differently?

Yes, I would've begun my study of the craft years sooner. My first several scripts I wrote without knowing anything about the craft of screenwriting. I figured I'd learn by doing. I'd been to film school and loved movies, so I figured I'd pick it up naturally. But even after making the semis in the Nicholl, I felt like I really didn't know what I was doing. I'd be working on a scene and wonder what should happen next.

So I stopped writing and devoted a year to learning the craft. I had my script analyzed by one of the well known consultants. I read all the books, went to all the classes. Eventually I cobbled my own 'expert database' of screenwriting craft. When I put pen back to paper it really paid off. I wrote *The Beginning Of Wisdom* and won the Nicholl Fellowship!

How do you think the business has changed since you won Nicholl? Do you think it's harder today to break in or easier thanks to the Internet, the indie world, etc.?

My hunch is that it's more difficult to break in now. Each year there are more and more people who imagine themselves becoming screenwriters or filmmakers, more and more film school students graduating to find a limited number of job opportunities available to them. Also, and this is only my opinion, I think the indie film world is shrinking because the audience demographic is changing. Fewer adults are willing to get off the couch and go to a theater; they're content to wait for films to come out on DVD. So Hollywood has no choice but to cater to the demographic that does go out at night and see movies, that being the teenage 16-24 audience. Unfortunately that audience isn't very discriminating. They'll go to just about anything that appears to be big and loud or scary, regardless of the reviews. And amazingly they don't even seem to feel ripped off when these films are below their expectations. The important thing is that they've seen it, so when it's talked about at school Monday they're in the know. Thus more big, loud, expensive tent pole movies and fewer indies. Filmmakers who make more intimate films for a sophisticated 'art house' audience, for grownups so to speak, do so at their own peril.

That said, there are more opportunities to have your work seen outside of the big screen, especially for makers of short films. The explosion of outlets on the Internet for posting films, and even screenplays and pitches, is nothing short of amazing. Whether that proves to be a stepping stone to larger success in real filmmaking or screenwriting however, remains to be seen.

Are you a full-time writer?

Actually I still make a minority portion of my living as a lighting designer and gaffer on commercials and industrials. It pays quite well and affords me lots of time to write. I also do screenplay consultation on a limited basis.

You seem to write in several different genres. What do you think of the idea of "branding" oneself with a particular genre?

If it's a popular genre, you're golden. But if you specialize in art house fare, historical costume dramas, et al, you're in for a frustrating ride. And you probably won't make a lot of money. That said, if you're a newer writer you should write what you want and not cater to an audience. You'll enjoy it more and thus you'll learn more. Over time you'll build your own 'brand' as you figure out the one or two genres you're best at.

Where do you see yourself ten years from now?

I'd like to be directing films that I write, as I hope to do so with my Nicholl winner, *The Beginning of Wisdom*. If that doesn't work, I'll be living in a cabin in the woods somewhere writing novels. That actually doesn't sound so bad, does it?

TJ Lynch now lives in Los Angeles and does script analysis on a limited basis. For more information and screenwriting tips, please check out www.writingisrewriting.com.

PJ McIlvaine (www.pjmcilvaine.blogspot.com) is the writer of the Emmy nominated, critically acclaimed Showtime original family film *My Horrible Year* with Eric Stoltz, Mimi Rogers and Karen Allen. In addition, she has an indie holiday movie *The Town That Banned Christmas* with Matt McCoy, Jane Sibbett, Hunter Gomez and Carol Alt awaiting distribution. PJ is also affiliated with Julie Gray and the other fine folks at www.thescriptdepartment.com. PJ can be reached at pjmac56@yahoo.com.

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