Screenwriters

The hacks, wordsmiths and literary giants who invaded the new sound stages of Hollywood

Until the arrival of the talkies, scenario writers conceived camera shots that depicted action whereas dialogue appeared in brief titles. These were usually terse one-liners enclosed in quotation marks: 'I love you' or 'I hate you' predominated. Titles describing time and place, many along the lines of 'Came the dawn . . .' or 'Meanwhile back at the ranch . . .' became clichés after uncontrolled repetition. This tended to be the general quality of screenwriting until fate and Warner Brothers combined to bring talking pictures into the land of make-believe. Before the Thirties were two years old, title-writing had died out.

Of all the frantic changes to be made with the coming of sound, dialogue-writing was the most demanding and most difficult. Technicians could wrestle with recording the voice, and actors, directors and producers could test their abilities in their chosen fields and succeed or be replaced. But dialogue-writing appeared to be a mysterious and evasive gift bestowed on very few. It also called for producers who recognized good dialogue when they saw it.

The studios scouted for authors writing for the theatre (there was some importation of novelists too, as their skills were believed to be close to those of their theatre-wise counterparts). Playwrights knew what to do with the spoken word, but no-one expected them to know what to do with the camera. To overcome deficiencies, studios teamed new arrivals with old timers.

Scripts for comedies were concocted in a highly specialized way and the gag man became an integral part of the writers' colony. He rarely wrote a complete screenplay but instead was called in when another writer had completed its construction – it was then his job to insert a special touch of humour. Highly prized and paid, gag men flitted from studio to studio, an irreverent group made up from graduates of vaudeville, burlesque, night club revues, newspaper comic strips, and a few survivors of title-writing. Best known were Al Boasberg, Robert 'Hoppy' Hopkins, Ralph Spence, Lew Lipton, Billy K. Wells, Edgar Allen Woolf and Joe Farnham.

Behind the scenes

Pert, diminutive Anita Loos, author of the novel *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*, was one who made the transition from early-day silent films to latter-day talkies. She was much in demand, working for the highest pay that studios could afford. Married to playwright John Emerson, and for a time teamed with him on material ranging from Fairbanks comedies to Garbo tragedies, Miss Loos did the writing while her husband basked in the glory. She was one of the most talented scenarists in Hollywood.

Around the same time Frances Marion arrived in Hollywood. She wrote brilliant

Above: Anita Loos, who started writing screenplays in her teens and became one of Hollywood's most prolific authors, with husband John Emerson. Left: Clark Gable in San Francisco *(1936), scripted by Loos and produced by Emerson*

Above: Frances Marion, centre, with stars Binnie Hale and Ann Harding during the making of Love From a Stranger *(1937). Below: another British picture Marion worked on was* Knight Without Armour *(1937) with Robert Donat and Marlene Dietrich*

adaptations of other authors' works but was also adept at creating original screen material. Once established, she used her writing and her influence at the studio to help needy friends and strangers alike. She effected the comeback of Marie Dressler after the stout comedienne fell on hard times, and softened the last days of her terminally-ill collaborator, Lorna Moon, with a skilful adaptation of the latter's book, *Dark Star*. Miss Marion turned the dour romance of the Scottish moors into the hilarious and touching *Min and Bill* (1930), an Academy Award triumph. It was on that occasion that Marie Dressler, who won the Best Actress Oscar, said, 'You can have the finest producer and director, but it won't mean a thing if you don't have the story'.

Other notable women writers who made the transition from silent films to talkies, were June Mathis, Jane Murfin, Lenore Coffee, and Bess Meredyth.

Married teams, besides Loos and Emerson, included Dorothy Parker and Alan Campbell; Sarah Y. Mason and Victor Heerman; Albert and Frances Hackett, who blazed a trail into sophisticated detective movies with their Thin Man series; and Sam and Bella Spewack, who distilled the hit stage comedy, *Boy Meets Girl*, from their Hollywood experiences.

There were other important writing teams. Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, one-time Chicago newspapermen turned Broadway playwrights, scripted such varied successes as *Rasputin and the Empress* (1932) and *Wuthering Heights* (1939). Kubec Glasmon and John Bright concentrated on scripting hard-hitting gangster films at Warner Brothers.

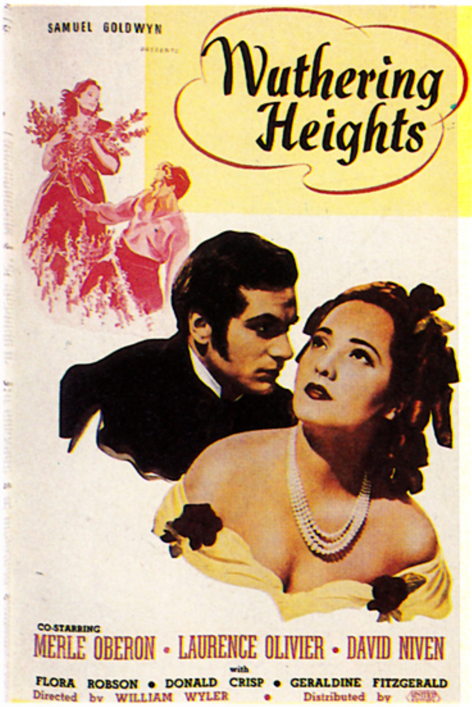
A varied catalogue of excellent screenplays was supplied by Allen Rivkin and P.J. Wolfson, who handled assignments ranging from musicals to melodramas. Billy Wilder brought his experience of Austrian society and European film-making to bear in his partnership with Charles Brackett, an erudite gentleman from the staff of the *New Yorker* magazine. Together they comprised a polished duo at Paramount, delivering superb comedy classics, such as *Midnight* and *Ninotchka* (both 1939).

Horses for courses

The pattern of Hollywood film-making has, to a large extent, always reflected the tastes of its studio heads and this often dictated the casting of staff writers. The studios also tried to select men and women capable of fashioning screenplays suitable for their stars. As a result many writers became identified with a particular type of material and, in their own way, became a part of the studio system themselves.

At Paramount, for example, the staple diet was glossy, sophisticated comedy. To find writers for these, executive-producer Walter Wanger and journalist-turned-playwright Herman J. Mankiewicz continually scoured the literary circles of the more cultured East. Among those they brought to Hollywood were poet and press agent Samuel Hoffenstein; playwright Zoe Akins; Preston Sturges, who wrote and later directed sharp, sometimes black comedies; and Benjamin Glazer, who functioned as a writer-producer.

The system of teaming writers with directors at Paramount was initiated with teams such as Brackett and Wilder; Samson Raphaelson and Ernst Lubitsch, and Claude Binyon, who worked with directors Leo McCarey and Gregory La Cava before becoming a producer.

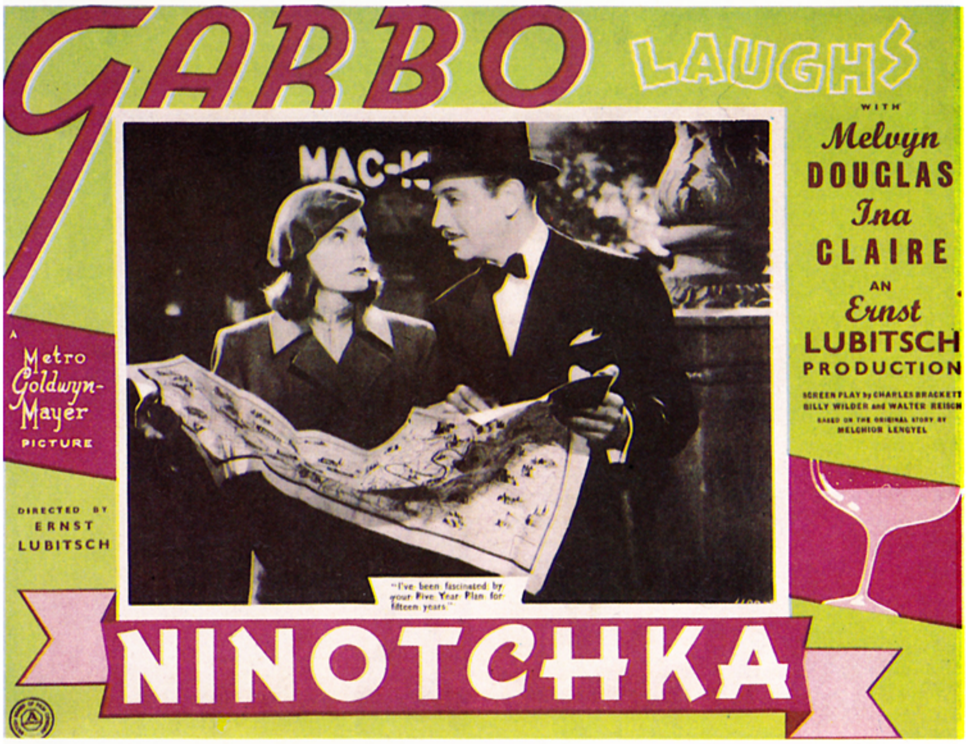

SAMUEL GOLDWYN
PRESENTS
Wuthering Heights
CO-STARRING
MERLE OBERON • LAURENCE OLIVIER • DAVID NIVEN
with
FLORA ROBSON • DONALD CRISP • GERALDINE FITZGERALD
Directed by WILLIAM WYLER • Distributed by UNITED ARTISTS

Cardart
JACK

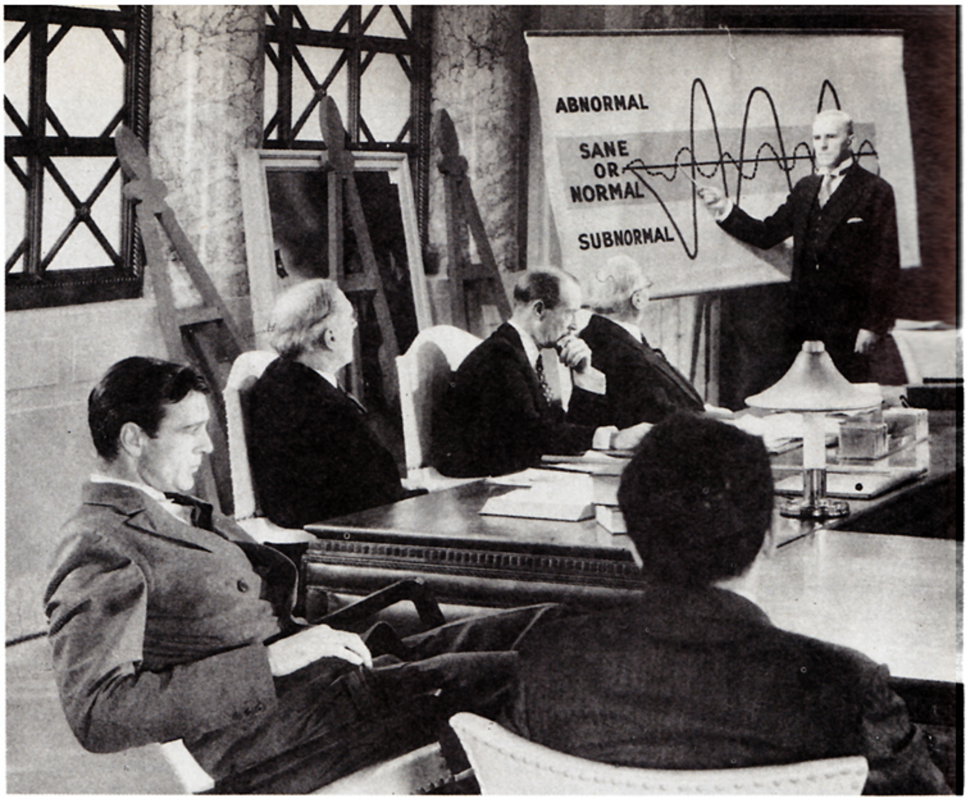
Above: writers Ben Hecht, left, and Charles MacArthur on the set of Crime Without Passion *(1934), which they also directed. Right: their later adaptation of* Wuthering Heights *(1939) was both ruthless and successful. Below right: Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett brought their abrasive humour to films like* Ninotchka *(bottom)*

Paramount had grown out of the Famous Players-Lasky company, and its biggest films under both trade marks were the creations of Cecil B. DeMille. A pioneer writer-director, he had a marked preference for biblical epics and wielded a sure touch with this type of spectacle. He worked closely with scenarists Jeanie Macpherson and Gladys Unger, but the writing always showed evidence of his contributions.

Samuel Goldwyn, the independent producer, made a bid for literary quality with his Eminent Authors feature series. He imported great talent from Europe to add to his American writers. Many, including the distinguished Belgian writer Maurice Maeterlinck, were unable to grasp the intricacies of screenwriting. The average newcomer proved unadaptable to the needs of the cinema, and


GARBO LAUGHS
WITH
Melvyn DOUGLAS
Ina CLAIRE
AN
Ernst LUBITSCH PRODUCTION
SCREEN PLAY by CHARLES BRACKETT BILLY WILDER and WALTER REISCH
BASED ON THE ORIGINAL STORY BY MELCHIOR LENGYEL
A Metro Goldwyn-Mayer PICTURE
DIRECTED BY ERNST LUBITSCH
MAC-K
"I've been fascinated by your Five Year Plan for fifteen years"
NINOTCHKA

Above: Robert Riskin, who scripted nine of Frank Capra's pictures between 1931 and 1941. They included It Happened One Night *– which won him an Oscar – and* Mr Deeds Goes to Town *(right), starring Gary Cooper*



Goldwyn's lofty hopes of establishing literary folk as film personalities collapsed. Much of this occurred in the silent era; its failure seemed to indicate to Hollywood that literary writing was not necessarily a guarantee of good movie-making.

As Warner Brothers became one of the major studios in the Thirties it began to diversify its output and, with the addition of Errol Flynn to its star roster, turned to swashbuckling adventure films. Writing craftsmen like Seton I. Miller, who co-wrote *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) and *The Sea Hawk* (1940), and Casey Robinson, whose first screenplay for the studio was *Captain Blood* (1935), became the foundation of the Warners' writing staff. Robinson later moved on to scripting powerful tearjerkers for Bette Davis, including *Dark Victory*, *The Old Maid* (both 1939) and *Now, Voyager* (1942).

Waiting for Thalberg

At MGM all films pivoted around the taste and talent of Irving Thalberg. Amused and exasperated by Thalberg's endless demands for script changes, his friend Charles MacArthur complained: 'Irving has a theory writers never write the stories they intended to write!' Thalberg's methods were motivated by an unceasing search for excellence; his insistence on re-writing worked well at MGM where the output in the early talking era rated as the best in Hollywood. His daily life was a series of story conferences – writers spent long hours in his outer office, waiting for his suggestions, okays or, to their regret, abandonment. They constantly complained they were wasting their lives working for Thalberg, but, aware of his high regard for them and their calling, left meetings feeling the delays were worth it, full of praise for his picture-making instincts.

And, if their art was stifled by wasting time, their feelings were often assuaged by the weekly pay check. The wages averaged out to nearly $2000 a week each, but many writers were employed on long-term contracts that carried them well above this figure. There were more than 30 writers at MGM at the start of the decade and that number had doubled by 1934. Frances Marion, Anita Loos, Bess Meredyth, John Meehan, Charles MacArthur, Gene Markey, Donald Ogden Stewart often received more than $3000 a week; writers with four-pictures-a-year deals, such as Ernest Vajda, received $100,000 annually, and single picture deals with George S. Kaufman, Frederick Lonsdale, Willard Mack, Bayard Veiller and others ran to similar amounts. To balance this were junior writers receiving only $50 a week.

Above: Sidney Buchman, whose script for Capra's Mr Smith Goes to Washington *contained 186 speaking parts and an impassioned filibuster for James Stewart (below), cast as a senator fighting corruption*

David O. Selznick, Thalberg's closest rival at MGM, was more concerned with achieving authentic resemblance to the classic books and plays he brought to the screen as producer. Despite the noble efforts of Hugh Walpole and Howard Estabrook on *David Copperfield* and S.N. Behrman and W.P. Lipscomb on *A Tale of Two Cities* (both 1935), Selznick often lamented that Charles Dickens himself was not on hand to help adapt his work to film. But when Selznick first brought Walpole to Hollywood to script *Vanessa, Her Love Story* (1935) from his book *Vanessa*, it suffered from the lack of necessary dramatization.

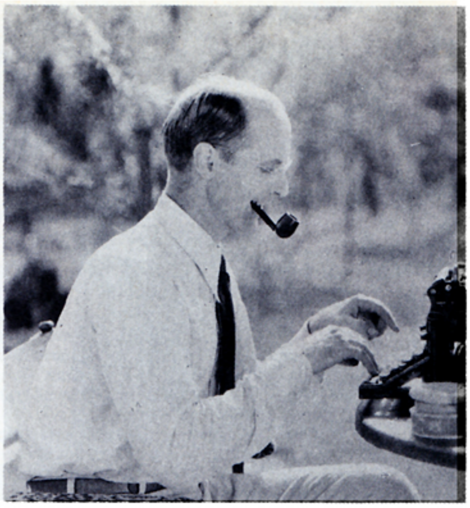
Free-lance writers, who were accustomed to moving out of a studio when their assignment was complete, expected to be called back for others. But those who worked for Harry Cohn at Columbia usually considered an assignment there a one-way ticket. This made for a large turnover of staff at what was a comparatively small studio. There was, by contrast, one major attraction: writers vied for the chance to work with Columbia's ace director, Frank Capra. Except for an occasional adaptation of a book (*Lost Horizon* 1937), or a short story (*It Happened One Night*, 1934), Capra preferred to develop original ideas like *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). In his long period of employment at Columbia through the Thirties Capra mostly worked with four, highly accomplished authors: Dorothy Howell, Jo Swerling, Robert Riskin, and Sidney Buchman. To invest his characters with his own brand of idealism, the director also worked with his close friend, Myles Connolly.

Hard lines for the literati

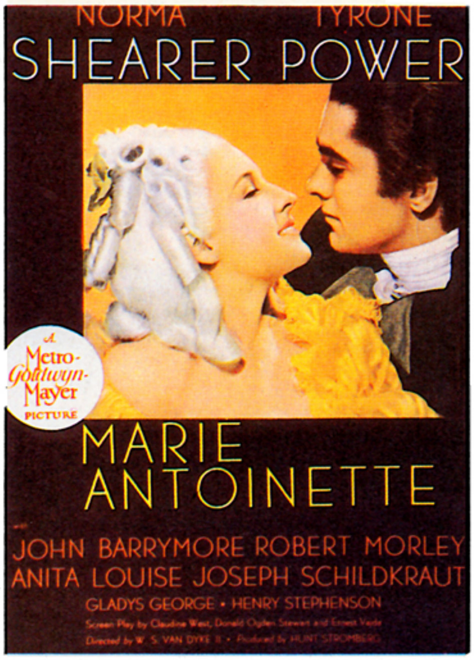
There has never been a workable way to make a bad writer perform well, nor can good writers be forced to write badly. But it is not always easy to make a playwright or novelist change his style to meet the demands of screenwriting, or for him to understand its particular techniques and skills.

Hollywood's most celebrated case in the Thirties was F. Scott Fitzgerald, a great writer of books, but a legendary failure in Hollywood. Nothing he worked on there survived untouched, and his material for *The Women* and *Gone With the Wind* (both 1939) was not used. He received just one credit – for *Three Comrades* (1938). P.G. Wodehouse hardly fared any better: when he left MGM after a year's contract, he told the press, 'I have been paid $24,000 to do nothing'. Thalberg contended that Wodehouse's efforts were hilarious on the written page but failed to transfer to the screen. While writers, in general, are inclined to place the blame on others for their failure (and in some cases this was true), the medium has always been more complicated than some writers anticipated. Edna Ferber, who sold her stories to film companies but refused to adapt them, said: 'When I write a book, the only heart I break is my own.'

Novelist William Faulkner might have been another great writer to fail in Hollywood if he had not been rescued by Howard Hawks: the director took him under his wing and eventually worked closely with him on such films as *To Have and Have Not* (1944) and *The Big Sleep* (1946). When British playwright Frederick Lonsdale was brought to Hollywood by Thalberg, he confessed his ignorance of creating screenplays. Thalberg advised him to write in play form – but without confining himself to the limitations of the stage. In this way a character could walk out of a parlour and reappear in a street on the other side of the world. Having learned this, Lonsdale delivered accordingly – among his scenarios were *The Devil to Pay* (1930) and *Lovers Courageous* (1932) – but like fellow British writers Ivor Novello, John Van Druten and Wodehouse, he soon departed Hollywood for England.



Above: Donald Ogden Stewart, the distinguished playwright and scenarist of witty romances and stylish costume pictures like Marie Antoinette *(1938), co-written with Claudine West and Ernest Vajda for MGM*


NORMA SHEARER
TYRONE POWER
A Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer PICTURE
MARIE ANTOINETTE
JOHN BARRYMORE ROBERT MORLEY
ANITA LOUISE JOSEPH SCHILDKRAUT
GLADYS GEORGE • HENRY STEPHENSON
Screen Play by Claudine West, Donald Ogden Stewart and Ernest Vajda
Directed by W. S. VAN DYKE II • Produced by HUNT STROMBERG

Protecting the pen

After an incredible effort by the studios to save money at the expense of their employees, screenwriting became unionized. In the lean years of the Thirties, however, writers and other staff members were asked to accept cuts in their salaries and many studios threatened reprisals against those who refused.

Outrage at these demands brought about the formation of acting, directing and writing guilds. Hollywood's screenwriting fraternity split into two groups, motivated by strong political leanings. The battle for supremacy between the Screen Playwrights, led by James Kevin McGuinness and Howard Emmett Rogers, and the Screen Writers' Guild (now called Writers' Guild of America) led by John Howard Lawson, Samuel Ornitz and Ernest Pascal, was long and bitter. The Writers' Guild emerged the winner, but the enmities between the factions only died with the participants.

Hollywood itself has often been castigated by those who failed there, but some talented writers have also heaped scorn on Hollywood's system of movie-writing. Ben Hecht was one who bombarded producers and studios with a non-stop barrage of mockery. Among those who came under his fire were his own employers, David O. Selznick and Howard Hughes. Selznick had engaged Hecht for *Viva Villa* (1934), and Hughes for *Scarface* (1932). Hecht was paid $1000 a day (in cash, at his request) for these scripts.

In the main, however, sincere writers toiled in the studio mills throughout the Thirties. Some were incensed by attitudes they considered ungrateful. Witty, urbane S.N. Behrman, dialogue writer for many of Garbo's best films, including *Queen Christina* (1933), hit back at those who ridiculed the Hollywood scene: 'So conditions are lousy,' he said. 'The people you work for are lousy. The movies are lousy. And what do you get for it? A lousy fortune!'

SAMUEL MARX

Below and below right: F. Scott Fitzgerald and P.G. Wodehouse, who both failed as screenwriters. Below, far right: William Faulkner fared much better in Hollywood: his script credits include Howard Hawks' The Big Sleep *and* To Have and Have Not