

Aspiring Screenwriters Share Ups and Downs

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June 30, 2008

Hamilton Post

Anyone who has ever seen a movie can be a screenwriter. There's no degree required, and no special writing resume, although those things may help.

At least, that's what members of the Central Jersey Screenwriters Club have come to learn in the five years the club has existed.

Spearheaded by actor, artist and screenwriter Mark Violi, the club meets at Barnes and Noble Hamilton the first Tuesday of each month.

"It's just a great way to exchange ideas and read each other's work," Violi, a Hamilton resident, said.

During meetings, they discuss work, share ideas, give critiques and offer tips.

"It's a nice group of people and I think I'm learning something," Anthony Vizzari, of Hamilton, said.

Vizzari, like Violi and member Barbara Webb, of East Windsor, were fellow classmates attending a Mercer County Community College film-writing course. A number of them decided to spread their lessons beyond the classroom, hence the club.

Behind the scenes

"In the whole process of making a movie, the only one doing anything original is the screenwriter," he said. "Everybody else is interpreting the screenwriter's work. It's really the screenwriter who is the first artist in the process."

Like many of the members in the club, Violi didn't plan on being a screenwriter.

"Ever since I could hold a pencil, I would be lying in my living room on my stomach drawing," he said.

He still draws, mostly as a full-time graphic artist. But after college, he caught the acting bug. Today he has a number of television, stage, and small screen roles to his credit.

The decision to write came after watching a documentary on the History Channel about the building of the Brooklyn Bridge. His thoughts went immediately to Trenton's Roebling factory and the passed workers who helped build parts for the bridge.



Carmen Fiore, Mark Violi, Doug Slocum and Anthony Vizzari meet the first Tuesday of each month at Barnes and Noble to share their work and talk movies. Staff photo by Diana Pichardo.

"I saw what struggles they went through to make the Brooklyn Bridge and I thought, 'This would make a great drama,'" he said.

In 2001, Violi began writing a stage play called "Roebing: The Story of the Brooklyn Bridge." He won a Villagers' Theatre New Playwright Award for his effort, but he couldn't get anyone to produce the play.

In 2003, he turned his writing efforts to movies, starting with "[Mobbed Up](#)." At the same time, he was attending a screenwriting class at MCCC.

Vizzari's current screenplay is called "The Family Way," a story about two actors, male and female. One becomes pregnant, and drama ensues. It focuses on the two trying to break into show business, while managing their own dilemmas and overcoming roadblocks.

Vizzari has been featured in many plays at Kelsey Theatre. He acts, sings, improvises, and now writes.

Webb has no experience with film or show business, but began writing her screenplay four years ago after retiring.

"Dinner at Sterling's," a take-off on breakfast at Tiffany's, is her project.

Doug Slocum, who travels from Jackson to attend the meetings, has a background in cinematography, but not writing.

"This is the first creative thing I've ever written," he said.

Slocum just finished his screenplay, called Pseudonym. The idea came to him a year and a half ago while he drove along the N.J. Turnpike at 6 a.m. In it, a determined writer is published posthumously after her script lives on, and her stories are ghostwritten by a writing student.

Carmen Anthony Fiore, born and raised in Trenton, is one of the most prolific writers of the club. Fiore heard about the group through Vizzari. He's been writing fiction, nonfiction, articles, essays and short stories since 1962.

Join the club

They all enjoy writing, but going to screenwriters meetings is crucial, they said.

"Writing can be such a solitary thing, but it's really important to get feedback," Violi said. "I think that's the real value in this group."

Violi has brought in many pages to be reviewed, and so have others. His most recent is a sports-comedy called "Wiff," which has been seen by the group at different stages.

There are online services that offer peer-critiquing as well, but they lack the immediacy, Violi said.

"I much prefer the face-to-face honesty that I get from people," he said.

Success stories

Writing a screenplay that an author considers good is one thing. Writing one that is commercially viable is a whole other issue.

Fiore has had screenplays optioned five times. To sell at option, a production company or literary agent gives the writer some cash to hold the rights to the script so they can try to sell it.

Among his screenplays are "Vendetta Mountain," based on his novel, which focuses on a professional Italian-American man who takes a trip with his wife to Italy and begins to fall in love with the land and people. But beauty turns to fear, as he soon finds out that someone wants him dead.

Violi's "[Mobbed Up](#)," which has been optioned by [Starline Films](#) and is in the development stage, centers on Genie, a 18-year-old female hero, who is dealing with the death of her parents. She latches on to hitman Tommy, who acts like a father figure.

Non-club members Mike DiIorio, of Hamilton, and co-screenwriter Jeffrey Winiski have had their screenplay *Midnite Special* successfully turned into a film, *American Crude*. The two received a "story by" credit. Some of the names of characters and dialogue were changed, but the film is based on their screenplay.

The 2008 release starred Michael Clarke Duncan, Jennifer Esposito and Rob Schneider, and centers on one night where unusual characters cross-paths.

"*Midnite Special* came out of the blue," said DiIorio, who together with Winiski has made a number of short films since the seventh grade.

This screenplay was their first feature, although they "always knew we wanted to do this," he said of writing and directing.

The idea for the script was based on the life of Daniel Spalluto, of Hamilton, who DiIorio refers to as an interesting character. Though Spalluto has a role in *American Crude*, the Rob Schneider character would most likely reflect the Spalluto character in *Midnite Special*.

The screenplay was written in 1998 and was taken on by Craig Schaiffer, Spalluto's former classmate. It wasn't filmed until 2005.

Having a screenplay produced can be a tough, humbling process, DiIorio said. Pieces of the screenplay can be completely rewritten by production companies.

But he had this advice: "Be true to yourself and stick to your guns. Movies can't be made without screenplays, even if film studios think they can."

For more information on how to join the screenwriters club, call the Barnes and Noble Hamilton store at (609) 581-2523 or stop by a meeting.

On the Web:

www.mobbedupmovie.com | www.markvioli.com | www.starlinefilms.com