

Hollywood, Solitude & Failure

William Missouri Downs

Sometimes I miss Hollywood - I lived there for almost a decade. When I ask my writer-friends why they still put up with the smog and traffic, their most common answer is "opportunity." Writers migrate to places like Hollywood to "catch a break" to have "their shot" to "make it!" But there's a problem with these opportunity centers when it comes to writing because good writing takes time (lots of it), and seclusion - Two things that Hollywood (and other opportunity centers) lack. This is why there are so many writing colonies where screenwriters and playwrights escape the noise of the city to stake out a little solitude.

Another problem with these opportunity centers is that they don't create that many opportunities, mostly because they're teeming with creative types looking for opportunities. Writing in big cities is like robbing a bank. You plan for years, work out every detail, and calculate every possibility. Finally, one morning you storm the bank, yell "Hands up" only to discover two thousand other opportunists are robbing the same bank.

Still another problem with these opportunity centers is that the stiff competition corrupts what it means to "make it," and so writers are more willing to sell out. Let's face it; all writers sell out. You can't get a play produced or sell a screenplay unless you sell out a little bit. But if you sell out a lot, (in other words, if you become nothing but an employee writing only what the corporations, the producers, the director, the actors, the audience want), you'll discover that writing loses its luster. You might get paid well (I certainly was as a Hollywood writer), but you'll quickly realize that what you write has no meaning except for the physical objects you bought with your paycheck.

I've been writing for thirty years, had hundreds of productions of my plays, but when someone finds out that I once wrote an episode of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, they say, "You made it." I wrote it thirty years ago. I don't remember what the hell I wrote. I crapped out the script in a week and handed it over to an apathetic producer at Sunset Gower Studios, who said, "put it in that pile over there." Then the unimaginative staff rewrote it, aired it, and I recorded it on an old VCR tape, which I later lost. Anyone of a thousand luckless writers could've

followed the story bible and punched out the same pages. How does that constitute "making it?"

After many years in New York and Los Angeles, I now live in an opportunity free zone, a log cabin high in the mountains of Colorado - But because I have time and solitude, I actually have more opportunities. Because when it comes right down to it, what matters is not how well you network, or who you know, or how creative you are, or even how many opportunities you have, what matters most is - Can you write a good script.

There are two keys to "making it." First, work hard, very hard, every day, and second, have no overall plan. If you don't have a plan, you can't be a failure. Failure is the difference between what you expect and what you get. If you expect nothing, you can't fail. And so work hard and keep your expectations low for high expectations lead to failure, and it's difficult to write when you feel like a failure.

And playwriting is filled with failure, and rejection, and absurdity, and talentless directors who screw up your play, and royalty checks that bounce, and thoughtless reviewers who blame the playwright for decisions the actors made. But once in a while, it unexpectedly comes together, and a solitary evening in a tiny black box becomes memorable.

Every writer who lives in the boondocks desires to move to the city, every writer in the city dreams of leaving it. All I know is that here high in the mountains of Colorado, secluded in my personal writer's colony, I can breathe fresh air, and I can create opportunity. My writer-friends in the city have opportunity, but they can't create fresh air.