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MARKETPLACE

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HEADLINE: Ins and outs of writing screenplays for Hollywood

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BODY:

DAVID BRANCACCIO, anchor:

This is MARKETPLACE. I'm David Brancaccio.

(Excerpts from various songs)

BRANCACCIO: Today, Daily Variety reports that a fellow named Russell Gewirtz is on the verge of signing a one million dollar deal for his screenplay "Inside Man." The kicker? Gewirtz is a neophyte scribe. We also hear that a U.S. District Court judge, James Zagel, is getting some bites from independent movie producers for his script, "Money to Burn." One almost gets the impression that anyone can make it in Hollywood's big leagues. But as we're about to hear, the real odds are much closer to those of some kid making it into the NBA. From the MARKETPLACE entertainment desk, media analyst Marty Kaplan looks into a not-so- subculture, trolling the streets and coffee shops of Los Angeles.

MARTIN KAPLAN reporting:

They say Los Angeles is a company town, and that if you're not in the Industry, you want to be. Urban legend has it that every other person you meet on the street is writing a screenplay, trying to break into show business. So we set out to find out if that's true.

Unidentified Man #1: How's my screenplay going? It's going very well.

KAPLAN: Have you been working on it for a while?

Unidentified Man #1: Well, I've got one that I've been working on for two years; another one that I've just started; and another one that's in rewrite. I'm prolific, you know?

Unidentified Woman #1: Well, it's going really good, actually, it's going to be the first one that I release into the world.

Unidentified Woman #2: It's going very well. Thank you.

KAPLAN: Not everyone I asked at the Farmers Market or on Sunset Strip said yes, but the funny thing is that just about everyone seemed hip to why I was asking.

Unidentified Woman #3: Is everybody here writing a screenplay?

KAPLAN: Does it seem that way to you?

Unidentified Woman #3: Oh, yes.

Unidentified Woman #4: I am not writing a screenplay, but she is.

Unidentified Woman #5: No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.

KAPLAN: How is it going?

Unidentified Woman #5: I'm not going to talk about it.

Unidentified Woman #6: Yeah, everybody in town's a writer.

KAPLAN: Does it seem like that to you?

Unidentified Woman #6: Yeah.

KAPLAN: Is everybody in Los Angeles a writer?

Unidentified Woman #6: That's why they're here.

Ms. RONDA GOMEZ (Hollywood agent): That is true. I'm probably the only person--in America, not only Los Angeles--who's not writing a screenplay.

KAPLAN: That's Ronda Gomez, an experienced Hollywood agent. If you actually finish your script, the first thing you need to do is get an agent.

Ms. GOMEZ: Everybody thinks they can write, but few are chosen. Not everybody's a writer. I used to say that I was the Statue of Liberty of agents: Bring me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be set free. It's tougher to be that Statue of Liberty kind of agent in today's market. Writers tend to stay poor when they aren't writing those big, high-concept movies.

KAPLAN: And if you do get an agent, what are your chances of making a sale?

Ms. GOMEZ: How honest should I be? I have no way of predicting a writer's chances. It's very tough these days just because of what the marketplace wants.

KAPLAN: How's your screenplay going?

Unidentified Woman #7: Great.

KAPLAN: Really?

Unidentified Woman #7: Mm-hmm.

KAPLAN: How far into it are you?

Unidentified Woman #7: About three weeks.

KAPLAN: How is yours going?

Unidentified Man #2: Mine's going very well, actually.

KAPLAN: Really?

Unidentified Man #2: I'm very close to the end, but there's a huge conflict at the end and all the characters come together and they fight.

Unidentified Man #3: I don't have a screenplay, but my son does.

KAPLAN: Is he a screenwriter or a wanna-be screenwriter?

Unidentified Man #3: He's a thirteen-year-old filmmaker.

KAPLAN: Really?

Unidentified Man #3: Yes.

KAPLAN: And how's his screenplay going?

Unidentified Man #3: He thinks it's great. I think it stinks, actually. It's a little bit derivative.

KAPLAN: I asked Vicki Riskin, the President of the Writers Guild of America, west, how many people actually make careers out of writing.

Ms. VICKI RISKIN (Writers Guild of America west): Eighty-five hundred.

KAPLAN: Eighty-five hundred people have worked professionally in Hollywood and are members of the Guild now?

Ms. RISKIN: That's right.

KAPLAN: And of those 8,500, how many are actually making money as writers in a given year?

Ms. RISKIN: In any given year, about 50 percent of our members are employed in some way, shape or form by a signatory company; so, we have 50 percent employment. Or, said another way, we have 50 percent unemployment.

KAPLAN: And within the 50 percent employment, what's the bell curve--or whatever the distribution is--of incomes? Is it all about the same? High? Low?

Ms. RISKIN: We have a group of people at the very high end who make one million for a script or in excess of \$500,000; and then we have people who work at the low end on a half-hour cable show who make, oh, maybe \$17,000 a year. So, the median income is something like \$80,000.

KAPLAN: If you want to improve your odds, it helps to be young.

Ms. RISKIN: By the time you hit 50, you're not very employable, but I wouldn't discourage anybody. Because if that's your passion, follow your passion.

Unidentified Woman #8: Well, I've written one, yes.

KAPLAN: You have?

Unidentified Woman #8: Yes.

KAPLAN: Are you working on one now?

Unidentified Woman #8: I'm starting my next one. I just completed the Tolstoy adaptation I've been working on for two years.

Ms. RISKIN: I like movies that are off-center, but they are not easy to sell. If you're a writer, you write and you want to write what speaks to you; but the Industry's not called show art, it's called show business. The writers who want to get a paycheck in an ever-tougher world out there can't ignore the marketplace. But because of the marketplace, they're going to try to hedge their bets--then they do become more formulaic. It's sad, but true.

KAPLAN: I worked in the movie business for a dozen years, some of them as a screenwriter. I was lucky enough to get three movies made. That was enough to convince me to leave the casino while I was ahead; that, plus the number of

candles on my birthday cake. Did I tell you today's my birthday?

Unidentified Man #4: How's my screenplay going? You know, I can't even relate to that.

KAPLAN: This is Marty Kaplan for MARKETPLACE.

BRANCACCIO: Martin Kaplan is Associate Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California, and the Director of the Norman Lear Center there. Marty mentioned his birthday today. We're guessing 39, but only his hairdresser knows for sure.