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Project Greenlight Offers Young Filmmakers a Shot at the Big-Time, But Adds New Meaning to the Old Adage "Be Careful What You Wish For."

Opportunity SUCKS

text **Nelson Handel**

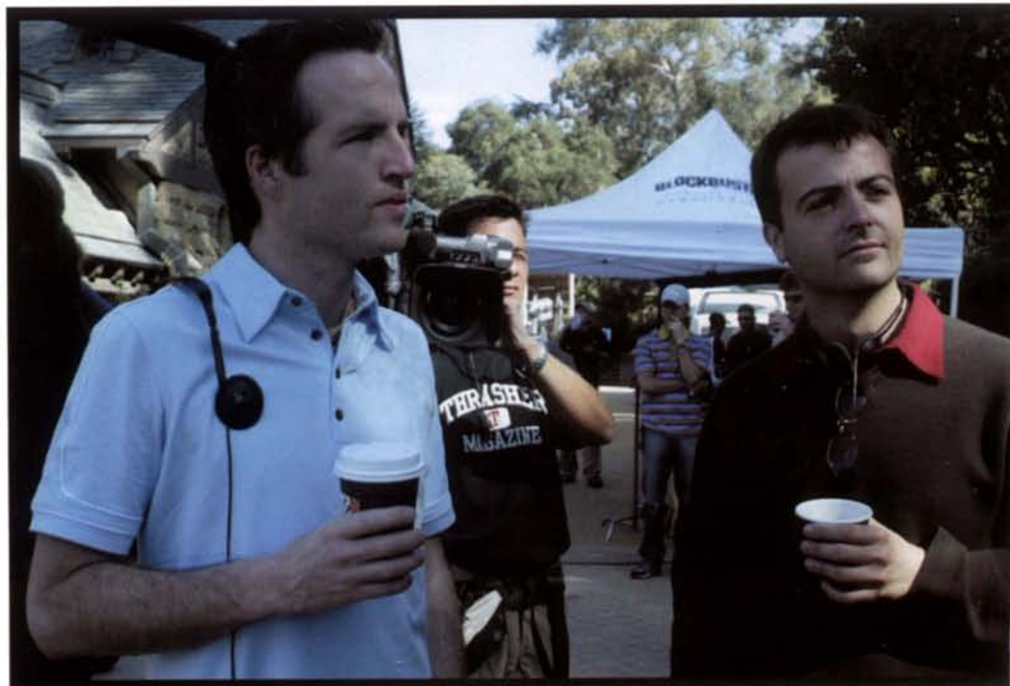
P*roject Greenlight*, Season 2, Episode 2: Actress Sharon Lawrence walks into the Los Angeles casting office for *The Battle of Shaker Heights*, the HBO series' second-season film production. Cut to: Efram Potelle, one of the film's two directors, announcing his frustration with casting interviews. A series of cuts follows: Potelle and co-director Kyle Rankin, Lawrence and writer Erica Beeney squirm and sweat in awkward silence. Cut to: Casting director Joseph Middleton ridiculing their speechlessness. A few more shots of the tight-lipped, blank-faced directors. Then, after what seems like an eternity, Beeney finally speaks: "Do you have any questions for us?"

THIS WAS JUST ANOTHER big, embarrassing moment in the lives of this season's *Project Greenlight* filmmakers, one of many that later became water-cooler conversation for the estimated seven million viewers who followed their roller-coaster ride into Hollywood infamy. Week after week, fans and film insiders alike tuned in to see the filmmakers careen through a *Perils of Pauline*-style serial adventure, narrowly skirting the brink of disaster. And the Sharon Lawrence interview? Just another documentary moment in their epic journey of incompetence.

Except that it never happened.

A slightly awkward interview *did* occur with another actress, Camryn Manheim, who everyone agreed was wrong for the role. But the cameras missed that. Instead, *Project Greenlight* used reaction shots of the principals listening to Lawrence (whose interview had, in fact, gone swimmingly well) to manufacture that silent scene.

"The trade-off these guys made is similar to the coverage of my marriage. You get to make a movie, but you have to give up some of your privacy."
- Ben Affleck



The Lawrence interview, Potelle's equally famous "demand" for a new car and many of the other big dramatic beats of the premium cable series were either completely fabricated, greatly exaggerated or falsely contextualized in the editing room. Similar "created" moments defined the Mad Hatter's tea party that was writer/director Pete Jones' journey through *Greenlight*'s first season, as he struggled to midwife the stillborn film *Stolen Summer*.

With two seasons under its belt and now two failed films to its credit (*Stolen Summer* and *The Battle of Shaker Heights* have cumulatively taken in less than half a million dollars), it's time to ask: Is *Project Greenlight* really beneficial for the aspiring filmmakers and seasoned professionals who participate, or does it hurt the very people it claims to support?

"We want to show things as they really are," says *Greenlight*'s executive producer, Matt Damon, in the show's opening credits.

Fellow executive producer Ben Affleck agrees: "The show for me is not about [producing] a train wreck, but about honestly depicting the creative conflicts that happen on every movie ... I prefer to call it a documentary."

Greenlight's reality, however, tells a different story. As anyone who has ever spent time on a movie set will tell you, 90% of the process is mind-numbingly dull. Hours are spent in crushing boredom waiting for set-ups to be completed — an activity that makes paint drying seem kinetic — followed by a few furious minutes when the cameras are rolling. Something had to be done to raise the odds of having a show worth watching.

"There was a need to drive the TV show," admits producer Jeff Balis, who was part of the program's develop-

ment process. "Using first-timers, we knew there would be conflict."

According to Arthur Borman, a producer with reality TV shows *Big Brother* and *Temptation Island*, and the director of the low-budget comedy *...And God Spoke*, conflict is key to reality television success. "Bringing someone on with no experience and throwing them into the lion's den of money, Miramax studio politics and professional expectations is all about setting up a situation in which we watch someone fail," he says. "Failure makes better TV."

From the onset, *Project Greenlight* presented itself as a much-publicized effort by superstars Ben Affleck and Matt Damon to "give something back" — an Internet contest that capitalized on the independent film boom of the '90s to offer prospective first-time filmmakers the opportunity to make a $1 million movie for Miramax Films. In exchange, participants agreed to have every step of the process documented for a cable series to air on HBO.

So how did they get from helping someone to setting them up to fail?

Like many Hollywood stories, it's a tale of good intentions gone bad.

Though the show's opening titles lead viewers to believe that the Internet contest idea inspired *Project Greenlight*, "the TV idea was the original one," says Eli Holzman, vice president of television for Miramax. Holzman developed the idea to film the hijinks on a movie set with pal Alex Keledjian, who ultimately settled for a "created by" credit (and an associate producer credit on *Stolen Summer*). Together, they brought the project to Affleck, Damon and partner Chris Moore at their production company Live Planet. "When the question arose of what movie to make," says Holzman, "we sat down over a series of casual dinners and came up with the contest idea." Almost every network in town wanted to get into the Matt-and-Ben business. In the end, HBO won the day.

In its first year, more than 10,000 writer-directors emerged from speculative obscurity to post their screenplays online. This year, *Greenlight* split the contest into two categories, writing and directing, garnering more than 7,000 submissions; the drop-off may have been due to the newly instated $30 submission fee (for those of you counting, a quick $210,000). Participants agreed to a four-month period of peer review — providing detailed coverage of their competitors' work — and the producers then chose a winner from among the finalists.

Initially, the contest received widespread support from its participants. A vibrant community sprang up online. Filmmakers working in isolation throughout the country began to communicate through online bulletin boards and chat rooms at the *Project Greenlight* website. Peer evaluation gave oft-neglected writers a sense of control. "Instead of some nameless, faceless intern judging you, you submit and you're a judge," says Beeney, this year's winning screenwriter. "It's empowering."

However, the process did have its detractors. Some participants felt their work was marginalized, or that they were the victim of deliberately bad reviews posted by competitors looking for an edge. Though Miramax did its best to safeguard against this inevitability, reports Holzman, "we can't build a program that can thwart human nature."

Peer judging also riled some critics. "*Project Greenlight* forces aspiring screenwriters to read screenplays," says Greg Beal, program coordinator of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences-funded Nicholl Screenwriting Fellowships, "and that's a great contribution. But they should not judge themselves; they aren't qualified. It makes it hard to trust the *Greenlight* process."

One of the biggest criticisms of the selection process rests in the type of films that make the cut. Both winning scripts — Pete Jones' *Stolen Summer* and Beeney's *Battle of Shaker Heights* — are fairly lightweight, coming-of-age stories. Participants and viewers alike decry the inability of unconventional fare to work its way through the *Greenlight* pipeline. This seems like a particularly strange complaint to direct at Miramax, which came to dominate the independent film landscape on the strength of edgy fare such as *The Crying Game*, *Pulp Fiction* and, arguably, *Good Will Hunting* — which created the Matt-and-Ben phenomenon in the first place. Miramax's outsized CEO, Harvey Weinstein, defined indie film for a good portion of the '90s, not least because he got such unique films made. Non-mainstream scripts usually get made in Hollywood because they find just such a passionate champion.

But by emerging as representatives of the contest and adhering to an afterschool special kind of mentality, the two projects selected so far for *Project Greenlight* call to mind the adage that if everyone likes a thing, it is by definition average. "Within this context," admits Beeney, "the possibility of a challenging, edgy script getting through is diminished."

WITH A CALLING-CARD FEATURE in theatres nationwide and a thirteen-hour behind-the-scenes "making-of" documentary airing in weekly installments, *Greenlight* winners would seem to have a leg up on all those trying to break into the world of moviemaking. They are flown to Sundance to be feted before a waiting world. They are paid a nominal fee for their work (approximately $50,000 this year, though the directing team had to split theirs). Agents, managers and studio meetings would seem to be theirs for the asking.

Yet unlike most independent filmmakers, whose self-financed odyssey wins them creative control over their first

films, these neophytes have a similar nonexistent budget to work with, and yet still have to deal with the politics and powerlessness of being hired guns at a major Hollywood studio.

Despite what would seem like the worst of all possible worlds, all four *Project Greenlight* winners seem genuinely grateful for the opportunity given them, and enriched by the experience. Participants in both seasons routinely describe the generally positive experience of being in production together. "The shoot went really well," says director Potelle. "The vibe was extremely positive, and everyone was supportive and complimentary. There was lots of laughter, and lots of fun."

If this seems surprising to you (and it will to anyone who has seen the show), you have arrived at the very center of the *Greenlight* paradox: Actual events differed greatly from their cable-show representation.

"To make a show work, you want problems," explains reality-show producer Borman. "To make movies work, you pray there are no problems. If the *Greenlight* movie goes great, no one would watch the show." Ostensibly schooled in the mechanics of narrative, filmmakers should be among the first to recognize that the primary requirement of drama is conflict. And where conflict doesn't exist, one must manufacture it.

Enter TV producers Liz Bronstein (*Biography*, *Joe Millionaire*) and Billy Campbell (*Wasteland*, *Glory Days*), the wizards behind the TV series' first season, who were entrusted to deliver the high-tension, entertaining show HBO wanted. They lost no time employing all the tricks of the "reality" trade: preplanned character arcs, deceptive foreshadowing, ominous voiceovers, cliffhanger endings...nothing was left to chance. *Stolen Summer/Shaker Heights* co-producer Balis calls the result a "low-light reel."

"It's like taking the best basketball game in history and cutting together just the places where they drop the ball and miss the shot," he says, "and then putting Chris Moore on the sidelines saying, 'We're on the brink of disaster.' ... We knew going into this that it would be warts and all. We just didn't know it would be warts and warts."

Actor Kevin Pollak calls the first season "80% fiction reworked to create Shakespearean drama." The show featured such contrived sequences as Pete Jones and executive producer Chris Moore disagreeing about a day spent shooting on a baseball field. Moore accuses the first-time director of sandbagging a shot. Jones is offended. An excerpted interview shows him saying he

wrote the script "at 3 a.m. in my underwear" and implying that he knows better than Moore what the film needs. However, the "underwear" comment was filmed two months before the disagreement, in response to an unrelated question.

These "over-my-dead-body" moments became the drumbeat of Jones's character arc, even though few were true. "They made Pete seem like an idiot," says Pollak, "but everyone loved Pete. He clearly copped to his lack of knowledge, and [he] couldn't have been more charming."

Such shenanigans, at one point, jeopardized Pollak's friendship with fellow star Aidan Quinn. After the production wrapped, Pollak sat down for an interview summarizing his *Project Greenlight* experience. During it, he launched into one of his trademark comedy bits, in which he rags on the foibles and peccadilloes of his compatriots with perfect deadpan wit, including teasing his longtime friend Quinn about his Method acting. Bronstein and Campbell excerpted this bit and appended it to an episode about Quinn's early days on the set — which took place months earlier, in fact — that characterized Quinn as difficult to work with and a frustrating prima donna. "It put Aidan into a tailspin when he saw it," says Pollak. "Luckily, we're good friends."

"We went a little too far afield last season," confesses Moore, who — along with Holzman — is responsible for approving each episode before it airs. "We were focused on making a good TV show, and we made decisions that were not exactly accurate."

This season, they brought in a new set of producers, Dan Cutforth and Jane Lipsitz, whose credits include the reality shows *Fantasy Island* and *Bands on the Run*. After the public lambasting suffered by Season One's participants, getting professional-caliber

"It's like taking the best basketball game in history and cutting together just the places where they drop the ball and miss the shot, and then putting Chris Moore on the sidelines saying 'We're on the brink of disaster.'"

- Jeff Balis

cast and crew to sign on to Season Two was no easy task. Cutforth and Lipsitz swore up and down to everyone considering *Greenlight* involvement — contest finalists, actors, crew members and anyone else who would listen — that they were going to be more fair and balanced. If anything, their actions have been more egregious.

Another water-cooler moment blown out of proportion in the second season suggested that co-director Potelle interrupted a major meeting at a crucial point in the production to demand the use of a new car. Careful viewing reveals a skillfully edited and manipulated television event. In real time, Potelle seizes a lull in what he reports was the *end* of a meeting to quietly ask Balis for the same courtesy that had already been extended to writer Beeney (the production had product-placed a new BMW convertible with her). Moore overhears and teases the uncomfortable and apologetic Potelle. Video then shows Moore learning of Beeney's new car for the first time, and picking up the phone to address the issue as if it's no big deal. The voiceover tells a different story. Moore, in an interview taped later, seems outraged at both "the balls" and "the stupidity" of the request.

Using excerpts from interviews to narrate a scene is another device out of the "reality" handbook, and one that can be easily manipulated toward a desired end. "You know how you're going to play it," explains Borman, "and you interview accordingly. You try to lead the subject toward the sound bytes you need to make the scene play."

But more than just misrepresenting individual scenes, the series producers consistently flattened and distorted people's basic characters, in the process blazing a trail between *cinema verité* and soap opera. "In a lot of episodes I came across as some kind of quiet woodland creature," says Rankin, "and Efram [Potelle] as some über-bitch."

"It's amazing that they created the impression that Kyle never speaks and that I do," echoes Potelle. "Typically, that is exactly the opposite of what's true."

Writer Beeney predictably takes an objective view. "I was turned into a character," she says. "I don't know how much of this was decided before the fact, but it seemed as though the character of 'The Writer' would be defensive of revisions, upset at changes and feel marginalized in the process, and that's the arc they gave me. They took away my sense of humor."

Despite repeated requests, both Cutforth and Lipsitz declined to be interviewed. However, confronted by the filmmakers with some of these occurrences, they reportedly admitted to fabricating scenes and excused their actions with the all-purpose platitude, "We have a job to do."

MOORE CALLS *PROJECT GREENLIGHT* "a classic Faustian deal." Co-founder Affleck likens it to his recent travails with the international press. "The trade-off these guys made is similar to the coverage of my marriage," he says. "You get to make a movie, but you have to give up some of your privacy." (Apparently, that trade-off included timing his one major set visit this season — with the ubiquitous J.Lo in tow — to correspond with the opening of their notorious *Gigli*.)

But unlike Affleck and Damon, who are after all movie stars, the featured filmmakers may find the trade-off also includes irreparable damage to their careers. *Project Greenlight*'s TV cameras portrayed directors Jones, Potelle and Rankin for all the world (and the industry) to see as bumbling fools. As a result, Potelle and Rankin have yet to find representation, despite early interest before the show started airing. (Potelle is once again roaming the streets of West Hollywood in his beat-up Eagle Summit.) First-season writer-director Pete Jones (currently agentless, but with management) is in production on his next film, *Doubting Reilly*, which he wrote and is both directing and starring in, but its budget is half that of *Stolen Summer*. Only writer Beeney has signed with a powerhouse agency, ICM. She recently closed a deal to write a new TV show.

You might be tempted to argue that *Greenlight* participants have nothing to complain about, that they knew what they were getting themselves into — especially after the first season. But both years, the TV producers led them to believe they were making a "documentary," with all the journalistic integrity that word implies. (Indeed, *Greenlight* is consistently listed as such in most programming listings.) As a result, people were inclined to trust them.

"My trust was not rewarded," says Potelle, "unless you consider a kick in the kidneys rewarding."

Project Greenlight doesn't take its contestants to an island; it follows them to work. These filmmakers care passionately about what they are doing. But watching people's passion being exploited and sensationalized is not a documentary – it's pornography. So why do we watch?

"It's a guilty pleasure," says one industry insider. "We watch in the same way we watch any airing of dirty laundry, mindful of the old adage that there's nothing more comforting than watching other people fail."

"People ask all the time if they were doing things to ruin or influence the moviemaking for the sake of the TV show," says Beeney, "but that's giving them too much credit."

Yet whether by happenstance or design, there are hurdles built into the *Greenlight* process which would prove daunting to even a seasoned filmmaker. There is, for instance, the artificially shortened production process, which must take place between the late-January Sundance festival and a late-August release date.

"The dates had to do with Miramax and Blockbuster [one of Greenlight's many sponsors] and everybody else," admits Affleck. "It did back these guys into another artificial element, but it was structured around the needs and parameters of the people who were paying for it."

Then there is the question of whether it's even possible to make a successful movie under the scrutiny of TV cameras.

"It works against the organic process of filmmaking," says

Stolen Summer star Pollak. "You want your actors to be vulnerable and free to create. Then you get cameras around and people are miked, so you pull back."

"The show fucks up the movie," says director Rankin, more simply. "Authentic communication is impossible with three Betacams in your face."

The Battle of Shaker Heights star Shia LaBeouf concurs: "It's hard to establish a true and meaningful relationship with your directors and other actors when you're being documented constantly. It's hard to open up."

Crew relationships become equally damaged.

"On camera, the smallest thing becomes a huge insult," says producer Balis. "If a [crew member's] only moment on TV is criticism, it becomes a major incident." In both seasons, this pressure led to dust-ups with the crew, including the demonization of cinematographer Pete Biagi in Season One and the near firing of boom man Sterling Moore this year. "People's agendas become unclear," says Balis. "Are you doing something for the movie or the show?"

The question comes to a head with Chris Moore, who seems oddly cast in the role of Yoda to the novice filmmakers. During Season One, Balis described Moore — who was rarely on set due to the impending birth of a child — as "a seagull manager, someone who flies in, make a lot of noise, shits all over the place and leaves."

The second season found Moore calling directors Potelle and Rankin "manipulative fucks" and "pussies" behind their backs. He frequently let a potential faux pas go uninterrupted, only to belittle its stupidity in later on-camera interviews. Or, as in one late-season conference call with Miramax, Moore would change allegiances midstream, selling out his directors without a second thought. "There are things I'm not proud of," Moore says in his own defense, "but I'm a character. I get angry. I have a bullshit meter and I get carried away."

Often, the damage is already done.

"We did give Kyle and Efram enough rope to hang themselves," Moore admits.

Which begs the question: Is he a real producer, or does he just play one on television?

"What hurts me most," says Potelle, "is that Chris never said any of that to our faces. He's the leader, the coach, yet he never took us under his wing and gave advice. Playground name-calling? How does he expect new directors to succeed without talking to us?"

"Rather than taking a filmmaker under its wing," says the co-founder of another industry-based screenwriting contest, "*Project Greenlight* is throwing them to the wolves."

And yet, in a completely unintended and ultimately ironic way, perhaps *Project Greenlight* manages to be exactly what Affleck and its other architects originally set out to provide: a primer for prospective filmmakers on the pitfalls of moviemaking. Of course, the lesson doesn't lie in the film we're ostensibly watching being made, but rather in the television series itself. *Project Greenlight* — the TV show — brutally exposes all of the destructive tendencies that studio development departments have wrought on film scripts for years: How plot beats and character arcs invariably sweep aside all other considerations, how external logic is the first casualty of the needs of the moment, and how mere human beings become expendable before the need to feed the insatiable beast of narrative.

"I don't know how much of this was decided before the fact, but it seemed as though the character of 'The Writer' would be defensive of revisions, upset at changes and feel marginalized in the process, and that's the arc they gave me. They took away my sense of humor."

- Erica Beeney

But that isn't likely to discourage anyone from biting the bullet and signing up when *Project Greenlight 3* comes calling. Asked if he would ever consider having something like *Greenlight*'s cameras document his own process, even Affleck admits, "I don't think I'm brave enough, to be perfectly honest with you. It's very scary." He pauses, then adds: "I'd have to make the opportunity/cost evaluation of how badly I wanted the part, and what it would be worth to me. But I would be scared." ●

win Weinstein's money

It's All About the Matt-and-Benjamins

GIVEN THAT *PROJECT GREENLIGHT* wears its egalitarian impulses on its sleeve, it's only fair to consider whether Ben, Matt and the gang are getting the maximum do-gooder bang for their bucks.

Doing the numbers, it's safe to assume that the contest's entry fees cover its online operating expenses. Likewise, various industry sources claim that the HBO licensing deal basically covers the TV production costs. Presumably Ben and Matt haven't ponied up any of their acting salaries, so the only one out of pocket so far is Miramax, to the tune of about $1.7 million per picture (combined domestic box office on the two films total less than $500,000).

Miramax's investment, blind though it was, did not represent that big a risk to the studio. Foreign sales of the film and TV show, coupled with the DVD box set release, turned season one's *Stolen Summer* into a modest moneymaker, and executives expect this year's *The Battle of Shaker Heights* to perform marginally better. But to assume a purely philanthropic impulse for a moment, let's look at what a cumulative $3 million or so buys you in aspiring-filmmaker support.

"Anything that will encourage and finance young people's visions is a good thing," says David K. Irving, chair of the Undergraduate Film and TV Program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. "But *Project Greenlight* is reality-TV-driven. One could imagine myriad other ways to give money to encourage filmmakers."

We can start with NYU's own Richard Vague Film Production Fund. The four-year-old initiative, funded by an investment banker with no connection to the world of film, awards a total of $150,000 per year in seed money to two recent NYU grads for production of their first feature. Over four years, Vague Fund awardees have completed three feature films, two of which premiered at Sundance. The five other awarded films are in some stage of preproduction. Not bad for a $600K investment.

A quick online search reveals more than 360 different screenwriting contests in the United States, but the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences-funded Nicholl Fellowships set the gold standard in artist support. The Nicholl International Screenwriting Competition has awarded five annual $30,000 fellowships for the last eighteen years. Its investment has subsidized the work of nearly ninety screenwriters, including Susannah Grant (*Erin Brockovich*), Andrew Marlowe (*Air Force One*), Ehren Kruger (*The Ring, Arlington Road*) and writer-director Allison Anders (*Mi Vida Loca, Gas Food Lodging*). In terms of return on investment, *Project Greenlight* seems to have a long way to go to catch up.

As a platform for exposure — perhaps *Greenlight*'s one great advantage over other opportunity efforts — it has had an undeniably positive effect on the careers of its other finalists, who in many ways seem to have come out in better shape than most of the winners. Industry doors swung open to meet or read the work of most; and almost half have found some sort of professional representation. At least three of the runner-up scripts have been optioned: Matt Burch's *The Upgrade* and Brendan Murphy's *Speakeasy* from Season One, and Robert Lynn's *Prisoner* from Season Two. *Speakeasy* was actually produced by Miramax (with Ben and Matt, in fact, kicking in some personal money) and currently awaits release.

As for any true impact on film and filmmakers, Sam Grogg, dean of the American Film Institute Conservatory, feels that it is mostly indirect. "If its popularity sheds light on the process and encourages parents to let their kids go to film school, that's great," he says. "But on a direct level, it's not a great value. They are helping very few with all that money."