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SMARTEN UP
@ The South Orange-Maplewood Adult School

So You Want to Write a Screenplay?

Forget *Lights!* and *Camera!* Where the *Action!* really starts is with the written word.

For movies, that means a screenplay (more about that in a moment). For "Likely Stories," to be presented Mar. 28 by the South Orange-Maplewood Adult School, the written word is literature, crafted by some of the greatest short story writers in the English language and brought alive on the Columbia High School stage by well-known professional actors.

"Likely Stories" artistic director Emily Zacharias says actors "lift the writer's world off the page.... Reader, writer, and listener suspend time together and reach another destination."

For acclaimed screenwriter Benjamin Friedman, that destination lies on the "Borders of the Imagination," the title of his first major independent film, set to go into production in Australia in July. (Meanwhile, he's teaching *Startup Screenwriting* at the Adult School, Tuesday nights through April 5.)

Based on Benjamin's award-winning script, "Borders of the Imagination" is a "sci-fi/fantasy social allegory set in a world where children's imaginary friends are coming to life by the thousands," he explains. Told through "a unique mixture of live-action, animation, and puppeteering," the film explores how, given the current political climate, Americans might react to such a shocking encounter with "Otherness" -- imaginary friends who suddenly come real, with real needs, like houses and jobs.

Yes, Benjamin had his own imaginary friend when he was growing up (in South Orange, where he's now writing in his attic "cave close to the sky," while helping his parents ready the family home for sale).

"All my friends had imaginary friends," he recalls. "We formed a club. Rules, regulations, initiations.... It became very real. Got out of hand, in fact!"

Years later, those imaginary friends caught the imagination of eager contributors when he and friend/co-director Reuben Meltzer launched a successful fund-raising campaign on Kickstarter. They also inspired a generous grant from the Roswell Science Fiction Film Festival.

A 2007 graduate of the University of Pennsylvania (BA in English and Cinema Studies), Benjamin says he has gone "seeking answers to life's big questions" in many diverse locales: he studied transcendental philosophy and shiatsu massage at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, and wrote an epic biblical adaptation of the Book of Samuel at the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem.

Writing all the while, he also tried on a number of occupations: at a major marketing agency in Manhattan, a treatment center for the cognitively impaired and underprivileged, an organic farm in Connecticut, a rustic retreat center in Northern Massachusetts, and working as tutor, coach, and freelance writer and editor.

Benjamin has lectured at the Joseph Campbell World Mythology Roundtable of New York, studied yoga and meditation at the Kripalu Yoga Center, and performed his poetry (slam and verse) at such venues as the Nuyorican, the Cornelia Street Cafe, and the Norman Rockwell Museum. Oh, and he also enjoys sculpting and improv.

Benjamin's screenwriting has won accolades from the Austin Film Festival, the Screencraft Screenwriting Competition, the Shore Screenwriting Competition, The American Gems Literary Competition, The Denver/Starz Film Festival, and The National Irish Science Fiction Film Festival. In addition, his prose and poems have been published in a number of well-regarded literary magazines.

All that, and so quickly? It's the pace of Benjamin's profession: six months from conception to a draft "I'm happy with," he explains. Meanwhile, script ideas continue to stack up from "the cumulative swirl" of life -- world events, reading, just watching what's going on.

He's "bummed out" by much he sees, Benjamin says: "A rising tide of xenophobia...how dark and violent things have become. What does it do to the imaginations of the children of minorities, refugees,

immigrants?" They're all questions he's likely to explore in a future screenplay.

Meanwhile, listen up, wannabe screenwriters: Benjamin, the teacher, shares his three top tips for writing success:

1. **Read!** Don't just sit around watching films. Read scripts. Get them at a library or online -- Google the name of the film and ask for the script.
2. **Show, don't tell.** Only write what you can see, not about someone's thoughts, memories, how something smells. The more you show, the more you trigger the audience's innate problem-solving ability kick in, the more engaged they become.
3. **Be patient.** It takes writing four-five screen plays to get the moving parts to work, to produce something reflective of your talent.

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Editor's Note: "Likely Stories"-- formerly known as "Celebrity Readings" -- takes place Monday, Mar. 28 at 7:30 pm., Columbia High School auditorium. Three well-known actors will be readers: **Charlie Pollock** ("The Good Wife;" "Lazarus," the David Bowie musical at New York Theater Workshop); **Ami Brabson**, stage and screen actor ("Homicide," "Law and Order"); **Emily Zacharias**, artistic director of "Likely Stories, " and Adult School Trustee.

By **Rose Bennett Gilbert**

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