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SCRIPTLAND

A sci-fi writer's final words are brought to life

As he lay dying, Jerome Bixby dictated his last screenplay to his son. Nine years later, 'The Man From Earth' will screen at Comic-Con.

By Jay A. Fernandez

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The concept of immortality is rich terrain for a writer's imagination. But late screenwriter Jerome Bixby couldn't have known just how personally he would embrace the extension of life beyond death.

Although he died in 1998, Bixby's final screenplay, "The Man From Earth," has been turned into a film by writer-director Richard Schenkman ("The Pompatus of Love"), and it will screen at Comic-Con on Saturday. It's a perfect venue for Bixby's brand of philosophical sci-fi.

A feature writer in the 1950s ("It! The Terror From Beyond Space"), Bixby gained acclaim in the 1960s for writing episodes of "The Twilight Zone," "Fantastic Voyage" and the original "Star Trek." His "Mirror, Mirror" teleplay, about an alternate reality for Spock and Co., solidified his legacy in "Trek" lore because the seminal idea became a recurring part of subsequent series spinoffs.

By the late '90s, he was in his mid-70s and felt mortality creeping in. So he finally began developing an idea he first had 50 years earlier about a thirtysomething college history professor named John Oldman who claims to friends and university colleagues that he is actually 14,000 years old.

As he lay dying, Bixby dictated the rest of the feature screenplay to his son, Emerson, a screenwriter himself ("Last Dance"). Emerson dutifully transcribed his father's ideas and, after his death, gave the script to Schenkman to direct on a \$200,000 micro-budget. Anchor Bay Entertainment acquired the movie for distribution on DVD in the fall.

"The movie definitely provokes discussions, on a lot of levels," Schenkman says. "You just sit there and think, 'What would I ask him? If a guy I knew claimed to be 14,000 years old, and has met all these amazing people, what would I want to know?'"

"It really gets you thinking about our place in the world, and what's come before us and what do we leave behind"

"

These will be sold with little problem

Speaking of what we leave behind, if you're in the market for a screenplay collectible you may want to swing by Joe Maddalena's Profiles in History auction booth at Comic-Con. (Actually, you don't have to be in San Diego -- you can bid via phone, fax or eBay Live Auctions.)

Maddalena's screenplay sales have included Marilyn Monroe's personal hand-annotated script from "The Seven Year Itch," written by Billy Wilder and George Axelrod (\$69,000), Olivia de Havilland's "Gone With the Wind" presentation script (an Oscar winner written by Sidney Howard) from producer David O. Selznick (\$40,000) and an original "Wizard of Oz" script, written by Noel Langley, Florence Ryerson and Edgar Allan Woolf (\$25,000).

On Aug. 2 and 3, Maddalena will make available producer-director Stanley Kramer's shooting script for "It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World," written by William and Tania Rose; the purported sole copy of the original script for "The Wolf Man," written by Curt Siodmak; a bound script of Tennessee Williams' Oscar-nominated "A Streetcar Named Desire" screenplay; star Jeff Morrow's personal script for "This Island Earth," written by Franklin Coen and Edward G. O'Callaghan, including Morrow's scribbled notes; and the original typescript for the 1925 "The Phantom of the Opera," signed by director Ernst Laemmle.

Success may be in the cards after all

Monday night I got a chance to see Zak Penn's "The Grand" in Creative Artists Agency's Death Star-like screening room, and it's a perfect example of what a screenwriter can do to siphon off some of the frustration of his typical, day-to-day career working in the mainstream studio mill.

Over the last 15 years, Penn has become an A-list screenwriter working on big-budget, micromanaged franchise fare such as "X2," "Elektra" and "X-Men: The Last Stand."

"The most frustrating thing to me about being a screenwriter and working on those movies is how disenfranchised the writer becomes," Penn says. "You sit there working on something so hard, and then suddenly you're gone. Either you're fired, or they're not listening to you anymore."

So a few years ago, Penn co-wrote and directed a very low-budget fake documentary with writer-director Werner Herzog ("Grizzly Man," "Rescue Dawn," which Penn ghost-co-wrote) called "Incident at Loch Ness." Penn loved the stripped-down experience and was itching to do another one.

When Matt Bierman, an executive at Warner Premiere and member of a long-running Hollywood card game in which Penn played, suggested that he take a similar approach to the world of poker tournaments, Penn quickly wrote a 20-page "scriptment" that could be shot for a few million dollars in a single location with a posse of eager improvisers.

When the original incarnation of Ben Affleck, William H. Macy and David Schwimmer (another member of the card game) imploded, Penn went off and wrote "X-Men 3."

But eventually he returned to the material and persuaded Woody Harrelson, David Cross, Dennis Farina, Cheryl Hines, Gabe Kaplan, Chris Parnell, Richard Kind and Ray Romano to populate his goofy saga about a bunch of lunatic oddballs involved in a high-stakes poker game.

Among other reasons, going from providing Wolverine with highly stylized lines to writing a loose comedy script with almost zero dialogue had huge appeal for Penn.

"There are two things," says Penn, who co-wrote (with Bierman), directed and produced the improvised film.

"One is, you want to direct the movie because then you won't get marginalized as a writer. The other thing is that if there is no script, if it's just an outline, people have less to criticize, and there's no way for investors or other people to try to change it. It's a leap of faith for all involved."

He means this literally. The final table of six players vying for the (fake) \$10 million was unscripted and played in real time by the actors, so when the game reaches its surprisingly dramatic conclusion, all the reactions are genuine.

Scriptland is a weekly feature on the work and professional lives of screenwriters. Please e-mail any tips or comments to fernandez_jay@hotmail.com.

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