Share the wealth with writers

Writer's Guild members shouldn't allow billionaire media companies to write off their work.

By Howard A. Rodman
October 17, 2007

As I write this, the members of the Writers Guild of America are voting on whether to authorize a strike. Should that authorization be approved -- and I strongly suspect it will be -- the guild's board would be empowered to call a strike of its members: the people who write the films you see, the television you watch, on screens large, medium and small. That strike could be called at any time after the expiration of the current contract at midnight on Halloween.

I don't want a strike. I really don't want a strike. I am a working screenwriter. After years of pushing large things uphill, two screenplays of mine are now filmed and are scheduled to come out in 2008. It's the kind of lovely momentum I've been hoping for, and working toward, for years; a work stoppage would derail this fine train. Yet I am voting for this strike authorization, and I urge my fellow writers to do likewise.

Why am I not hoping for peace at any price? That might seem at best counterintuitive, at worst to make no sense at all. How to explain?

The answer is that the price is too high. Here's what's at stake in our negotiations for a new three-year contract.

First, the companies are still refusing to raise the rate they pay in DVD residuals. The theatrical release of a motion picture has become, in many ways, mere marketing for the DVD, and DVDs have in effect supplanted the traditional syndication of TV programming. Yet the companies won't budge from a formula forged in the 1980s, before these shiny discs -- now ubiquitous -- were a glimmer in anyone's eye. That decades-old formula is such a thin slice of a thin slice that on each disc, the companies pay more to the manufacturer of the box and packaging (about 50 cents) than they pay in residuals to the writer, director and actors combined (about 20 cents).

Instead of properly raising that compensation, the companies had proposed a plan in which they would pay residuals only on projects that they said had already made back their costs and been deemed "profitable." That unpopular proposal was taken off the table Tuesday, but other substantial rollbacks remain in play.

Published reports show that the operating income of the nation's media conglomerates has grown at a compound annual rate of 12% between 2000 and 2006, from $8 billion to $18 billion. I guess they just don't have enough to pay the people who made those revenues possible.

Then there's the issue of "reality" shows on cable, in animation, in new media and elsewhere. It seems that the companies are content to make large profits on these shows but don't want to compensate the writers at standard guild rates. Sometimes they even deny that there's any writing
going on at all. (Hint: in a "reality" show, look in the credits under "story producer.") And when they do admit that their shows are actually written, they don't want to pay the pension, healthcare and wages that are the industry standard.

What's more, the companies refuse to let writers share appropriately in the revenue stream from material distributed over the Internet. They claim that this torrent is at present only a trickle, that there is no "business model," that this all needs to be "studied." And while they search for that elusive business model, they are offering to pay us at those antiquated fraction-of-a-fraction rates. Never mind that, even now, this unstudied trickle is making them millions: Each studio or network has cited $500 million or more a year in online revenue.

In the last two negotiations, the companies gave us little or nothing, although they graciously allowed our leadership to proclaim victory. Our membership -- and the membership of our sister union, the Screen Actors Guild -- believes that in 2007 this no longer cuts it.

The thought of a strike terrifies me. But to let the companies prevail would be to bury the notion that the creators of films, television shows and other media deserve to be fairly compensated. We need to stand strong.

The companies pull in $2 billion more each year than the year previous. The median income of screen and television writers from their guild-covered employment is $5,000 a year, in part because almost half our members don't work in any given year. Unless we fight, the companies will continue to romp away in the money bin while we're left to hang upside down like lacquered ducks.

Howard A. Rodman, whose films include "Savage Grace" and "Joe Gould's Secret," serves on the board of directors of the Writers Guild of America, West. He is a professor of screen and television writing at the School of Cinematic Arts at USC.
Writers Guild East
Protect your screenplay script etc. 10 bucks. 10 years. Peace of mind.
www.wgaeast.org

NYU Tisch School of Arts
Study abroad in spring, summer or fall. NYU Tisch special programs
www.nyu.edu/tisch/studyabroad08

Sell Your Script/TV Idea
Email 3000 agents/producers/prodcos Response in hours/clients worldwide
www.screenplaywritersconnection.com

188+ stage Hero’s Journey
188+ stage Monomyth Story Structure Write and Sell Screenplays, Stories
www.heros-journey.info

Screenplay Registration
No guild membership needed. Low prices to protect work at the WCA.
www.wcauk.com