

“Are you there,
Hollywood?
It’s me, Paul.”

A TV writer wannabe from Rumford makes his way to L.A. to pitch his personal life as sitcom, hoping a Tinseltown producer will bite. But is anyone listening?



BY MICHAEL PERSSON
PHOTOGRAPH BY DANA SMITH

THE SCENE:

Aspiring writer, looking to make it big, goes to Hollywood to pitch a sitcom.

He's got two days to crack a list of entertainment execs, movie agents and production house mucky-mucks and walk out with a deal. Into this mix throw 200 other writers who've also come to town with similar ambitions. Our hero must get his before they do, and, at the same time, appease his family, who are ready to bring more heat than the LAPD in flannel pajamas if he tries uprooting them to La-la-land—besides, they've just bought a new kitten and Murphy wouldn't like it. There's one more thing. The aspiring writer? He's from Rumford, Rhode Island, which to Hollywood thinking makes him a cross between E.T. and Forrest Gump. [End scene.]

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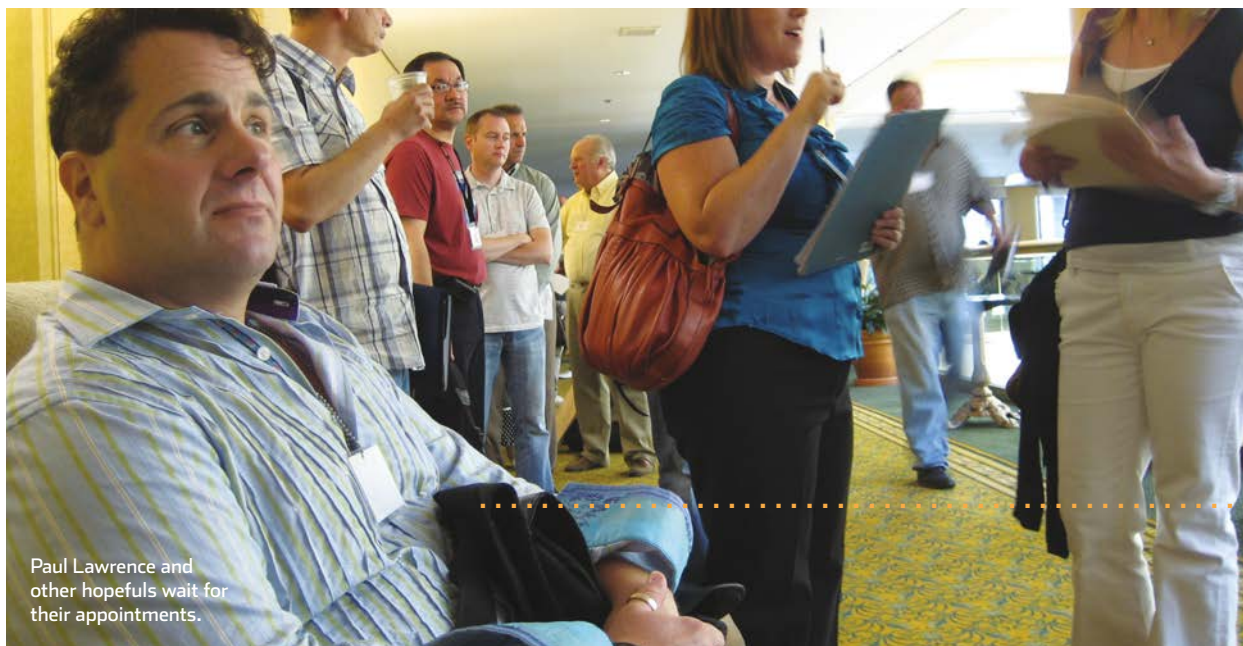
It's 7:30 a.m. in the lobby of the Marriott Hotel, downtown Los Angeles. A man flailing an attache case sprints past a group of people waiting to be ushered into a conference room. He's sweating. "Is this the back of the line?" he asks the last link in the long human chain. The person looks back and nods. The latecomer stands for a moment and ponders this, then erupts, "Aaaaaahhh!!! F#&*! F#&*! F#&*!!!" slamming his case to the ground, his nametag unclipped and somersaulting through the air. At the other end of this line is Paul Lawrence, "Paul Lawrence, Rumford, RI," printed on the tag that is attached to his lapel. He's been waiting since 4:30 a.m., fully aware that "registration," as it's listed on the itinerary, might say 7:30 a.m., but this being Hollywood, a place where a man can be stabbed in the back brushing his teeth, those who arrive first will receive a slice of face time with the people who best suit their genre.

For those who don't, as with the apoplectic man in mid-seismic shift, being last in line means he'll get in, but meeting the most influential players—nah, they'll all be taken.

The 12th Annual Hollywood Pitch Festival, sponsored by *Fade In* magazine, is a golden opportunity for wannabe screenwriters from all over the world. Here, they sign up for fourteen seven-minute meetings, where they go one-on-one with an industry creative from any of the 180 or so fantasy factories. That's seven minutes with someone from DreamWorks, Lighthouse Entertainment, Happy Madison (Adam Sandler's production company), Leverage Management or Miramax, who's heard it all before and needs a miracle to make him or her a believer. And for these world-weary pros that miracle is the pitch, a personal offering that is part science, part showmanship and 100 percent adrenaline.

Unlike most of the attendees, Lawrence doesn't have a pitch, at least not one he's memorized. "I was afraid if I did and forgot my lines, I'd get too flustered and come off as a bad actor," he says, observing his fellow pitchers, many of whom stare vacantly off, mouthing inaudible soliloquies to imaginary agents. Seven minutes. That's eight less than Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame and four more than your average elevator ride, which prior to events like these was where hopefuls got to pitch big-time players on their way to the top floor. And in those seven minutes all that matters is the "log line," that unforgettable sentence that says it all and is delivered without stumbling, with eye contact, and must, must, must be sold with a passion bordering on lust.

In the lobby, Sam Kochman, a college graduate from New Jersey, sits at a table and rehearses. He's pitching a reality TV show about music producers. Kochman looks down at his watch, looks up at the lines of people snaking their way past, glances at his watch one more time and sighs, "Ten minutes until my life is over," he says. Gallows humor isn't reserved for scripts alone. Here, it's a greeting.



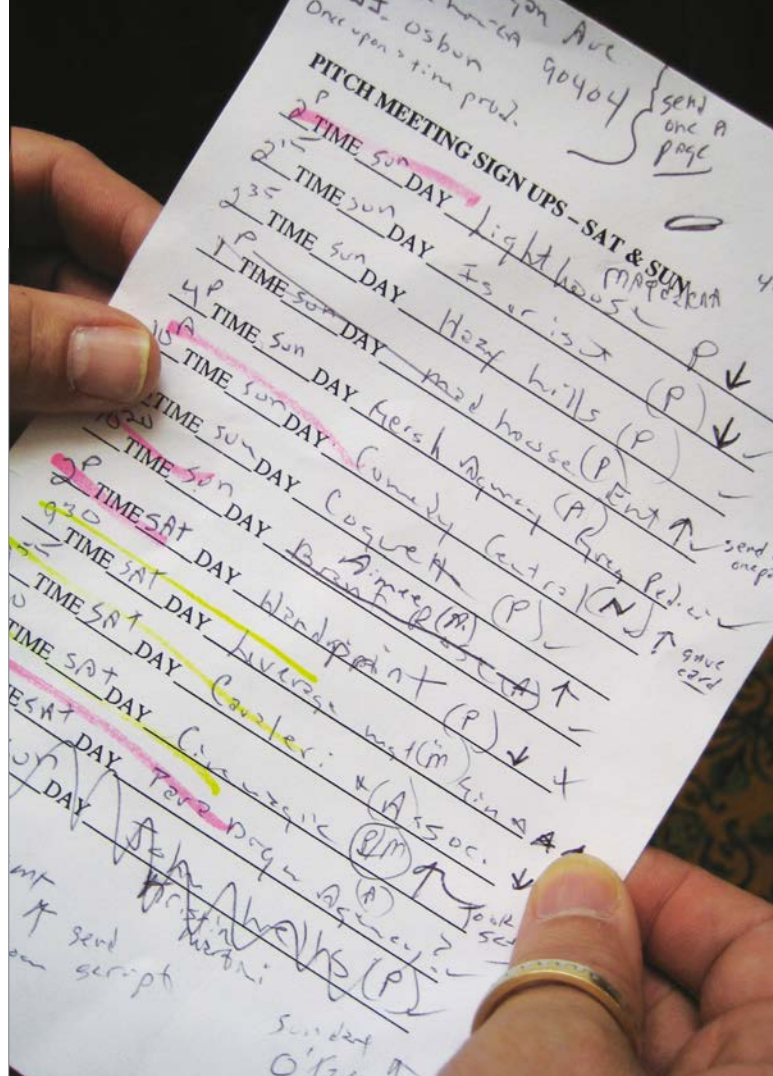
Paul Lawrence and other hopefuls wait for their appointments.

Lawrence isn't too concerned. Despite paying the festival's \$375 admission fee, a figure that varies depending on whether you've paid for the cocktail reception, he's arrived minus the helium-filled expectations, or so he says. That's not to say he's not a serious writer. This might be his first pitch fest, but Lawrence, as with most serious writers, has had to endure a wash of rejection for a few sips of success. Twice, his full-length play, *Cynthia's Lament*, narrowly missed winning awards from Pulitzer Prize winner and one-time Rhode Islander, Paula Vogel, and his script for this year's Forty-Eight Hour Film Project was chosen best by the viewing audience. Lawrence isn't about to be crushed, which is more than you can say for many of the wide-eyed hopefuls. As Mark Graham, managing editor at defamer.com, an online site covering the film industry, has observed about pitchfests, "It's desperation meets \$400 worth of hope." Judging from the crowd, he seems to be right.

Further down the line is Steve Maidment from Kansas City. It's Maidment's second time at this festival. "Last year taught me that if you don't know anyone in the business, you may as well forget it," says the schoolteacher who's pitching an hour-long TV drama on street gangs. "You can live here, go to every cocktail party, do everything you can, but you won't meet these people like you'll meet them here, and you'll never get to pitch. This is not a party. And good material is gold."

In the entertainment industry, good scripts are the *prima materia* that can save the reputation of any big studio as well as balance the books. Writers who deliver are the King Midases of Tinseltown and their reputations are as gilded as those of the star actors. Until *The Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, Walt Disney had not had a blockbuster come through its lot in years. Thanks to the rock star writing tandem of Ted Elliot and Terry Rossio, the studio hauled in \$2.79 billion from this Johnny Depp blockbuster along with its two sequels. With returns such as these, it's easy to see how show biz is second only to technology as California's largest revenue-producing industry, generating some \$34 billion per year and keeping 250,000 people gainfully employed.

Unlike most of the people attending this weekend, Lawrence isn't writing for the big screen. He's pitching for TV and is one of the few pitching a TV sitcom. Like 99 percent of all writers, Lawrence has a day job. And like 99 percent of all writers, Lawrence writes from what he knows. Put those two facts together and you have the key to what Lawrence believes will make a hit show.



Lawrence's heavily annotated dance card for the Annual Hollywood Pitch Festival. Photography by Michael Persson.

"Juggling Lives" is the story of Casey, a male nurse who gamely goes through life jerry-rigging his work, home and all the people existing in these worlds to the credit of his unflinching altruism and his willingness to have his ego pummeled.

With a wife who's scaling the corporate ladder to success, Casey is left playing Mommy-Dad to his children, agony aunt to his gay boss and the Count of Monte Cristo to his own needs. In a nutshell, welcome to the world of Paul Lawrence.

Lawrence describes his show as "a trade in family function," where parents switch traditional roles. That's why he believes in his script. And for the self-professed lover of comedy-sketch writing, what will have them rolling in the aisles is an ingredient likely to produce more chuckles and double-entendres than a Farrelly Brothers flick. Casey—or Lawrence, if you will—works for || CONTINUED ON PAGE 84

Taking in the atmosphere means hearing a barrage of propositions being fired off like prices at a cattle auction.

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Are You There, Hollywood?

|| CONTINUED FROM PAGE 49

a gastroenterologist and most of the show is set in a medical office of bodily dysfunctions. With a fully written pilot and thirty-one other episodes outlined, Lawrence has brought an idea that can be read and realized. He's done his work. It's time to sell.

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Inside the conference hall, hopefuls sit across from their media merchants. Steve Maidment describes the scene as "very polite. There's no room for small talk. It's down to business." Taking in the atmosphere means hearing a barrage of propositions being fired off like prices at a cattle auction. "It's about the horse who came second to Secretariat — three times." "So, I was gonna pitch this drama I've been working on for the past three years, but I got a better idea in line." "Two heroes chased around the world by constantly morphing monsters. Don't worry. It won't cost much." "It's like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* meets *The Matrix*, but no one gets hurt." Maidment makes clear the one undeniable fact that exists inside the hall: "It's the clash of perceptions between the majority of the people pitching and the talent scouts."

Back in the lobby, Linda Gray occupies one of three concession stands offering the pitchers various kinds of professional services. Gray's company, The Script Department, acts as doctor to writers' scripts and at this event, for a fee of \$20, as a pitch coach. Gray is a tested industry professional. She's worked for some of the big production houses reading scripts for many years and knows what it takes to get a piece of writing beyond the "pass" scenario, which in plain speak is "no thanks."

"There's a disconnect between what many of these writers see on the screen and what they write themselves," she says. "Many don't understand that the script itself or the series are usually phenomenal pieces of work that are compromised during production."

But still they come. Missy Maxwell, a veteran of these fests, moves through the crowds telling stories of past fests and sagas of various scripts as if she were the homecoming queen. "Imagine them in their underwear," she says of the experienced listeners. "Ninety percent don't know what they're doing. I had this guy—well known for being the Simon Cowell of this kind of thing—say to me, 'Let me guess, you hate your kids, loathe your husband and the

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reason you write is to escape your terrible life, right?" Missy denied these allegations and the man asked for her script. With her anecdote told, Missy breaks off, wishing her audience luck with a regal wave and a "See you at the Emmys." Obviously, Missy writes for TV.

"There are so many pitch-fest junkies, here," says Gray, watching from her booth where she hands out free thank-you cards for writers to send to producers who've shown an interest in their work. "The number of people who do this and can't write is truly unbelievable."

Gray mentions that festivals such as this have been around for about a decade. Back in the day—the early 1990s, say—there were script spec sales. Writers like Shane Black, who wrote the *Lethal Weapon* series, would saunter into a meeting, slap down a script and ask the collection of studio executives, "What am I bid?" That's not to say the era of the seven-figure deal is history. It's just that the new era of turning cheap into a bonanza is more what studios and production houses crave. Hence, the pitch fest.

With the first morning coming to a close, Lawrence hasn't done too badly. His payoff for getting here by 4 a.m.: A representative from Leverage Management says she'll have her assistant call him, one likes his idea but passes, one gives Lawrence his card and at the last meeting, two guys from Cinemagic ask for the script on the spot, a rarity that Lawrence attributes to his unique form of salesmanship. "I mentioned earlier in the pitch that the main protagonist works as a colonoscopy nurse," he recalls. "Why did you pick that occupation?" they asked. "Because that's what I do and you just shook my hand."

With some good results under his belt, Lawrence goes back to his room to call his wife, freshen up and take a quick snooze before the afternoon session begins. "Sure, I'll analyze what's happened. How can you

not?" he says, trying his best to keep his examination of those nuance-laden exchanges between himself and those manning the barricades to the enchanted kingdom in check. On the one hand, it's important to not get carried away. Delusions of grandeur can be dangerous. Then again, there is that slim possibility, that wafer-thin chance, of a shot at the big time. It all rests in the mind of the pitcher along with Steve Maiment's "clash of perceptions" and Julie Gray's "disconnect" between what writers believe they are capable of and cruel reality. In short, it's the script for *National Velvet* versus the horse that came second to Secretariat... All. Three. Times.

Closing out the first day with a couple more meetings, Lawrence has exceeded his expectations. "I never believed someone would take a script," he says, chatting with other writers. "Some people got slammed, you can see it in their faces. I escaped pretty unscathed." The first day has given Lawrence some much-needed confidence and experience. To help keep "Juggling Lives" top of mind, Lawrence doesn't scribble on his calling cards "Thanks," or "It was a pleasure." No, what he writes is that all-important word that makes his show stand out. What he writes is "Colonoscopy."

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The change in mood from the first to the second day is dramatic. The levels of adrenaline have subsided, the silent mutterings of writers going over their log lines are no more, and for an event that people leave with broken smiles and compound fractures to their egos, there's an air of cool contentment circulating the mezzanine floor like the Marriott's processed air. Lawrence has made it through, though not without taking a few hits. A woman with a heavy accent from Lighthouse Entertainment draws first blood, telling him, "Theees eesn't funny. Let mi tell yu abowwt





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Amerrikan televishon.” Then, he is put down and apologized to within the same five-second exchange by the president of actress Lisa Kudrow’s production company. “It’s got to be based on something real that people can relate to,” says the president of Is or Isn’t Entertainment. “It is,” replied Lawrence. “That’s my life.” “Ah,” says the man. “Good pitch.” With a handful of industry calling cards, Lawrence has all the fodder he needs to fulfill his fantasies of finding success on the tube. “It’s fun to dream,” admits Lawrence, back in his room. “I make my Emmy, Tony and Oscar speeches when I’m running.” Before leaving for Hollywood, Lawrence’s eleven-year-old son, Sam, told his dad, “I want you to succeed, but I don’t want our lives to change. You can get a place in Los Angeles to work. We’re not moving.”

If the numbers are anything to go by, Lawrence and his fellow pitchers won’t see an airing of their work anytime soon. Numbers from previous fests suggest that from this weekend’s number of attendees, a few might get signed to a talent agency, a couple may receive a treatment of their script that may lead to an option, perhaps, but mostly likely no one will have their film or TV show made. In twelve years of the *Fade In* pitch fest, only three films have made it to the big screen. Three. Including the attendees in the class of 2008, that’s less than one-half percent. Some might call that a scam, or preying on people’s dreams. The truth is, companies like *Fade In* magazine or The Great American Pitch Fest provide writers with the possibility—albeit a pretty small one—of success.

Lawrence is luckier than most and not because he has a day job and a supportive wife, whom he describes as having “been through the endless what ifs with my playwriting.” But more than that, Lawrence lives in a state that is in a position to really help him realize his ideas.

Show biz is no longer exclusively West Coast-centric. Since 2004, when the state’s council for the arts appointed Steven Feinberg—a film writer and producer who spent twenty years in California—its executive director of film and TV, Rhode Island has made the respectable sum of \$200 million in the movie and TV business, accommodating several big budget productions. Showtime’s television series, “Brotherhood,” is back for a third season, and films such as *Dan In Real Life*, starring Steve Carell, as well as *27 Dresses* with Katherine Heigl, have all helped Rhode Island develop an alter ego, Rhodywood. Feinberg puts this recent cache into perspective. “When

I began as director, there were fifty-one members of the Rhode Island Film Collaborative. Four years later, there are 1,500. And film is now the fastest growing major at the University of Rhode Island, since it started in 2005.”

More important, the culture of film is being promoted through the state’s program of drawing productions to its natural beauty and providing local writers, movie-makers and actors with the tools, funding and community they need to make film here. Hollywood is still the place to be, but Hollywood now exists outside California.

With two decades of experience, Feinberg knows how tough the entertainment industry is to crack. “Between the sharks and the leeches, there’s a golden goose, for sure. But it’s a long shot. Chances are you’ll get swallowed up.” And while the Farrelly Brothers remain Rhode Island’s most notable Hollywood success story, what’s true today is this: Who needs the sharks and the leeches if Rhode Island’s film industry offers possibilities?

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It’s late afternoon, and Lawrence is sitting at the hotel bar sipping a cocktail. The pitch fest is over. There’s no more talking to be done...time to fly home. The late-day sun streams through the panes of glass reaching three stories high. Inside, radiant rectangles are projected along the walls, gilding all that they touch. Outside, the azure of the sky reflects the aquamarine in the pool and the fronds on the palm trees glisten like stands of golden pompoms. Hollywood is celebrating another perfect day.

A waitress passes by, checking customers’ drinks. Spying Lawrence’s nametag, she asks, “Any luck today?” She’s fringed by the light pouring in from the glass behind her, opalescent in the back glow. Her lipstick shimmers, her eyes a galaxy of sunbursts. “Oh, not too bad...kind of hard to say,” answers Lawrence, sipping his margarita. She switches his bowl of bar snacks. “Big screen or TV?” she asks smiling. “TV,” replies Lawrence. “I’m an actress!” she announces enthusiastically. “I was on ‘Seinfeld’ and ‘Frasier.’ I hope you have a part for me?” She smiles again. Her lipstick shimmers all the more brightly. Then, she turns and the sunlight reveals the deep lines of her face. Here, everything is perception, and swimming with the sharks and the leeches for the chance of having your script hit the big time can seem like good odds, but the problem is, Dorothy, we’re not in Kansas—this is Hollywood. **Q**