

Screenwriter Jeff Nathanson

scr(i)pt sits down with veteran scribe Jeff Nathanson (Catch Me If You Can, The Terminal) as he discusses the fun he had with his latest project, Touchstone Pictures' The Last Shot.

When you show up on a set and there s Alec Baldwin and Matthew Broderick and Toni Collette and Tony Shalhoub and Calista Flockhart and Ray Liotta and Buck Henry, it s hard not to have a really good time, says screenwriter Jeff Nathanson (The Last Shot) about his directorial debut. I thought it would be horrifying and, in fact, it was just kind of hilarious and fun.

Jeff Nathanson loves his work. This screenwriter, whose films include Rush Hour 2, Catch Me If You Can and The Terminal, puts his heart and passion into everything he does. His latest project, Touchstone Pictures The Last Shot, which opens September 17, is no exception.

The Last Shot, based upon a true story, is about a Hollywood hopeful (played by Matthew Broderick) who gets his big break: He will get to direct his movie. The catch: He sold his script to the FBI, and they are using the production as bait for the mob.

I certainly thought at any moment the helicopters could swoop in and the SWAT team would come in and pull me out of the room and say, You re not a director, Nathanson explains. But I had really lived the Matthew Broderick part of this story. I had been a struggling writer-director for so many years that I wasn t that nervous. I figured there wasn t much they could do to me that hadn t already been done.

According to Nathanson, the message of the movie is what screenwriters should take to heart. For better or worse, sometimes you just have to go for it, he says.

People should go after their dreams and take their best chance, and not worry about whether or not it happens. Actually having the courage and the desire to go after your dreams, whether or not you achieve them, is secondary. It s a life-changing experience either way. And it s worth the journey.

A Southern California native, Nathanson graduated from University of California Los Angeles, and entered the American Film Institute s screenwriting program in 1989.

When Nathanson was first starting out, he remembers his friends and family kept asking him when he was going to start showing his screenplays. He says he waited until he had three or four scripts under his belt until he was ready.

I don't think it was until my fourth script that I actually started showing it around town, because I really didn't want to blow my chance, Nathanson recalls. I wanted to make sure that that first script that people saw was something that was like a calling card that I really liked. I strongly recommend people not write one script and send it everywhere they can.

He got his first break back in 1991. I had a spec that some people read; no one bought it, he recalls. But Imagine Entertainment really liked it and they hired me to write a movie for them, based upon someone else's idea. The movie never got made, but that break allowed me to get other jobs and start my career.

The Last Shot was based upon an article in Details magazine.

There's something nice about having it be a true story, he says. Especially as a director in that it sort of kept me grounded and made me stay true to the spirit of what really happened out in Providence in the late 1980s.

I started writing it in 1997 & . It probably went through two major drafts and then it stopped for a long time where nobody knew what to do with it," Nathanson explains.

Disney called Nathanson while he was doing Catch Me If You Can, and asked if he was ready to revisit the project and try another path. He said yes. It was that path that sort of convinced them that this could be a movie, he recalls.

I think it was the first time I ever really explored the major theme of the movie, which is all about these dreams that these guys have and how intertwined all the dreams are in the film with all the characters.

Nathanson says taking the time between drafts made all the difference.

Sometimes it's the only thing you can do, he elaborates, especially if you truly are stuck and not just procrastinating.

If you're really stuck, the best thing you can do is put something away and just read it whether it be a day later, a week later, a month later, a year later. Because reading it fresh with your own fresh eyes you will immediately know whether or not it can be salvaged and whether or not it can work or whether this is going to be yet another script that goes in the

drawer. This was luckily one of the scripts that could be salvaged.

Then, the process took another welcome twist. A year and a half ago [Disney] called and they said they liked the script, and they were going to make the movie, Nathanson recalls. They asked me if I would be willing to direct it & . [I felt] sort of like the way Steven Schats is in the movie Matthew s character. It was like that great, defining moment in your life: You re going to get your big break.

Nathanson learned a lot during his journey from writer to writer-director. There s a reason they don t usually want writers on sets in movies. We re up to no good, he explains. Directing and making movies is all about making sure that everyone s prepared and moving quickly. Writers don t move quickly, they change things and add things and shift things around and give actors new lines five minutes before they shoot. So writers are not good to have on sets. But in my case, I was happy I was around some of the time. I was able to keep things moving quickly by [being] there in both hats.

Nathanson also plans to direct the film he is currently writing, an original comedy called Floaters. That s an entirely different ballgame.

This is the first time I have ever written something with the thought that I might direct it, he says. It s a completely different mindset, and I m trying to get out of that mindset, because it s actually hindering me.

There are times when the writer in you wants to just be free and put characters on the top of The Empire State Building and the director in you says, Wait a minute. That s going to cost a lot of money and we re going to need a crew and it s going to be cold. So you become much more logical as a director. As a writer, there s no logic to anything.

I ve got to get back to what I know, Nathanson continues, which is writing movies.

ABOUT THIS AUTHOR

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