

An Interview With Screenwriter Norman Vance

ScriptMag catches up with comedy scribe Norman Vance to discuss his fast rise to television and film success.

San Diego native Norman Vance, one of the most sought-after comic writers of the new millennium, is a seriously good writer. Vance's surprisingly fast rise to television and film success is nothing new to him. He turned down a major league offer to pitch for the Kansas City Royals straight out of high school in order to follow his dreams of attending Southern University. After school, he found a position as a sales rep for Pepsi Cola Bottling in Buena Park, California and quickly became a cog in the corporate machine.

Coincidentally, Vance has been writing professionally since he quit working for Pepsi 10 years ago. Shortly after the birth of his son Tre Norman III, and much to the chagrin/reticence of his wife Kena, Vance took the plunge into the fly-by-night world of entertainment. The birth of Tre was an inspiration not only to follow his passion, but to get on the fast track to success.

Norman Vance

An opportunity to work on a sketch-type sitcom, *Nothing But a Woman*, a small bit show viewed during breaks in BET's wildly popular standup comedy show *Comic View*, was presented to Vance after tabbing and word processing spec scripts for *Martin*, the popular comedy sitcom starring Martin Lawrence. Vance had several friends who were comics and the constant give and take between them became the impetus for a career in writing for laughs.

From BET, Vance landed his first network sitcom gig, the WB's *The Parent 'Hood*. This first show got him the coveted Hollywood agent—a large, all-purpose agency by the name of Broder, Kurland, Webb, Uffner. But Vance lamented, "They really had a lot going on … a television division and a film division … lots of clients. They didn't really give me the personalized attention." They also sent him a Dear John letter when *The Parent 'Hood* was dropped from the network's lineup.

From *The Parent 'Hood* Vance was recognized for his comic sensibilities and made the shift to agent Brad Rosenfeld, from the boutique Preferred Artists Agency, who he actually has stuck with to this day. "It's important to have a good relationship with your agent. He's honest and he offers constructive criticism. We have a genuine friendship."

He was pulled onto the show *Moesha* in 1996 by Warren Hutcherson, the current executive producer on *The Bernie Mac Show* that he had befriended while at *The Parent 'Hood*.

"Making friends in this industry is essential. People want to work with who they're comfortable with. You can always teach people how to do the sitcom thing if you want them in the room. I've had people shepherd their nephews through on the writing team with no experience."

After *Moesha*, Vance continued to write. He punched up scripts for other writers, rewrote scripts for other writers (with and without credit), and wrote his own original scripts. He reiterated, "Sitcoms are all about collaboration, accessing different people's strengths. Somebody's good at story, somebody's really funny, somebody else is a structure guy … it's really a dance." From his work on *The Parent 'Hood*, he got writing gigs on the hit UPN comedy *Moesha* and the current show *Girlfriends*, where he continued to write until 2004. When discussing sitcom writing, Vance tells newbie television writers that it's essential to be on the set. The experience of seeing the show running and the work that actors put in is invaluable. Also, jokes might fall flat with the audience and need to be rewritten and performed over.

Vance remembers some advice offered by Greg Fields, a veteran writer of the Rodney Dangerfield film *Back to School*. Fields' suggestions stay with him to this day. "Learn to write all the time. If you're between work, write a spec, write a movie … just keep writing."

This mentality led to the development of his first film script, entitled *Georgia On My Mind*, but he never sent it out. His agency—the big one that played him out—didn't really help develop that route, since the film division was separated from the television division by what was evidently an impenetrable wall of non-communication.

However, despite whatever the reason that *Georgia* flagged, Vance continued to hone his writing skills and eventually wrote two critically acclaimed films that were both produced by State Street Pictures and released this year. *Roll Bounce*, the roller skating coming-of-age dramedy, which was released on September 23, 2005, and *Beauty Shop*, the female-focused version of the *Barbershop* series that Vance also helped develop, released on March 30, 2005. To have two released films that he's penned open in the same year has certainly set up Vance for more success.

He is currently writing a full-length feature film for Nickelodeon Films and Paramount Pictures aptly titled *The Hit*. He has written and is waiting for the light on two other pictures: *The City*, a State Street picture in conjunction with Fox

Searchlight and The Champions, a State Street picture in conjunction with Fox 2000.

If you haven't seen Norman Vance's work yet, you most certainly will in the future. He's still writing. Are you?

ABOUT THIS AUTHOR

Milwaukee-born Steve Hintz is a film scriptwriter and has co-authored several books, including cultural biographies on The Bahamas and Israel. He is a 1996 graduate in sociology from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.