

# The Redemption

## PRODUCTION NOTES

### The Screenplay

On a clear December day, I was sitting alone, at the Third Street Park in Bloomington, Indiana, eating my lunch and pondering the motion picture, *The American President*. I was thinking about how the movie's simple concept alone almost wrote the script, and yet, how it was still a very good movie.

"Lord, why can't I do that?" I asked. Within a moment of asking the question, a mere fraction of a second, I had the answer, and the answer was the concept for *The Redemption*. It was one of those rare experiences that I call "life defining," that are so rare and memorable that they become part of who you are. Was this an original idea, or had it been done before? I knew that I had never seen a motion picture like this concept. A concept that had come to me at what felt like the speed of light. The insight was so quick, so clear, and so powerful that I believed it was nothing short of Divine inspiration. I believed it then, and I believe it now.

I hurriedly cut my lunch short, and headed back to my office to pull up the Internet Movie Data Base and did a keyword search of plot summaries. Confirming that the concept was original, I set about writing the screenplay that very day. There was only one problem, I didn't know how to write a screenplay. Teaching myself along the way, I was thirty pages into the script before I discovered how to properly format a screenplay.

Truly believing this story idea was a gift from God, I wondered why me of all people. I was certain that there were well connected believers working as writers in Hollywood. "Why me?" One evening, as I worked on the script and pondered the "Why me?" question, I began to feel as if I was experiencing all of the kindness and love of the world. This was the goodness of all humanity. I was so overwhelmed by the beauty and emotion of that experience that I was moved to tears of gratitude for having just been granted that experience. Two of my four "life defining experiences" occurred within weeks of each other. I now had a sense of purpose and obligation that far exceeded anything that I had felt before.

Gifted, brilliant, or talented are not familiar adjectives that have been used to describe me. "Persistent, passionate," and even "tenacious" are adjectives that many people have used to describe me regarding *The Redemption*. Working my regular job through the day and writing all night I completed the one hundred and twenty page script in just thirty days. Thirty days later, an improved draft two was completed.

I set about asking family and friends to read and critique the script. "I loved it." "It's great." "It's really good." "I couldn't put it down." While such phrases were indicative of the responses I received, I also know that "all sunshine and no rain, makes a desert." While I believed in the central concept of the script, I also knew that I was not gifted, brilliant, or talented and that I needed critical input from people in the motion picture industry. I set about meeting people in the industry.

I met Alice Arlen at a session of a conference at the Sundance Institute. I had no idea

who she was, but introduced myself and struck up a conversation. I learned that she was a writer and in the Writer's Guild of America.

"Wow, Alice, you're everything I want to be. I know this is a lot to ask, but would you be willing to critique my screenplay? I'll understand if you say 'no.' I know that it's a lot to ask but I don't know anyone in the business."

She graciously accepted and I got a copy to her. About three weeks later I followed up with a phone call.

"Oh yes, you're the guy who wrote the story about the homeless man."

"That's right," I said.

"Real quick and dirty, because I'm on my way to a meeting, I thought it was very good. You took some old ideas and combined them in a new and original way and that was very creative. I liked it. I thought it was good."

"Alice, I appreciate your feedback, but how do I grow as a writer if all I hear is how good it is? What's wrong with it? What can I do to make it better?" I asked.

"Um, oh! Your monologues are too long." She responded. "You can do that for stage, but it's too intense to have a twenty five foot tall head on the giant screen go on that long. Those will play forever on the big screen, so shorten your monologues."

"Oh, what else?" I asked.

"Surprise us more. The audience is really intelligent. Surprise us more."

"Anything else?" I questioned, not having the courage to tell her that I wasn't smart enough to know what she meant by "surprise."

"That's all I can think of right now. I tried to catch you at the conference to tell you how much I liked it, but I never saw you again."

"I didn't expect you to read it there, but I really appreciate the feedback. I know it was an imposition and I really do appreciate it. Thank you so much."

"I was happy to do it." She graciously replied.

After hanging up the phone I wondered what scripts Alice had written. I looked her up on the Internet Movie Data Base and discovered *Silkwood* on her writing credits. Wow, a writer that had been nominated for an Academy Award [TM], for a script that she co-wrote with Nora Ephron, liked my script! An acclaimed writing professional thought my work was good! After talking with Alice, I had trouble finding a door big enough to get my head through that day.

About a week later Forrest Murray called with his critique. Forrest produced one of my all time favorite movies, *The Spitfire Grill*, and I highly valued his opinion. He told me that he really liked the story and that I wrote good dialog. He made some very positive comments.

"Forrest, I told you to be brutally honest when I asked you to critique my script. I haven't learned one thing from any of the positive comments that I have received. So far, everyone that has read the script liked the story. I need critical feedback. I'm a big boy, I can take it." I said.

"It's really hard to criticize other peoples' work."

"Forrest, it's okay. I won't take it personally. Help me grow." I bravely stated.

Forrest kindly began to honestly critique my script. When he was done, I thanked him, and told him how much I appreciated his generosity to take the time out with a "wannabe" like me and give me some honest feedback. I hung up the phone, and I was devastated.

"I knew that it was too good to be true. Gosh, Steve, there are writing pros in Hollywood that struggle, and you think that you are going to just walk right in with your first script and people will fall all over themselves to produce it." I thought, "Who are you fooling? Maybe now

you can face reality and give up this pipe dream.”

Up to the Forrest Murray critique, I was sure that even with my limited abilities that a script that the Good Lord had inspired had to be a good one. The good feedback to that point had been consistent with my beliefs, but here was some information, from a highly respected industry professional, that not only fostered greater self-doubts in my abilities, but also hammered away at my belief system. If Forrest had been way off base, it would have been one thing, but as I had learned more about the craft of screen writing, I had gained the ability to acknowledge the validity of his honest criticism. I was down, and I felt overwhelmed with my inability to overcome the obstacles needed to get this motion picture produced. Perhaps this was a lesson in life that the Lord felt I needed to learn. I would learn the lesson and give up the fantasy.

I went home that night prepared to resume my ordinary life. I went to check the messages on our answering machine, thinking that immersing myself in the tasks at hand would take the edge off the day's bad news. I wondered what mundane task was being signaled by the flashing diode of the answering machine.

The message was an old childhood friend's wife calling to tell me how much she had loved my script. I had not talked to Lisa for years. It was nothing personal, we just rarely crossed paths. I had given a copy of the script to John, her husband, so he could read it. There, in her voice was such honest emotion. There in her call, so out of character and rare, so full of praise, was the inspiration I needed to jettison the self-pity and doubt. She said that she “just had to call” to tell me how much she liked the script. She had picked it up that afternoon and “couldn't put it down.” My throat still gets a little lump in it when I recall the emotion in her voice. If Lisa had ever called me before in her life, I could have accepted her call as a mere coincidence. Lisa has never called me before or after that day, but it was the one call that I needed, when I needed it, that kept me going when I was ready to quit. Thanks, Lisa, Forrest, Alice, and all of the others.

I revised the script and made it better.

### **Starting the Production**

I am married to a very wonderful woman. She is listed as the “Executive Producer” in *The Redemption's* opening credits. We were sitting at the kitchen table one Saturday morning, and I told her how much this project meant to me. I told her how I realized that investing in a motion picture was not a financially prudent thing to do. It is a passionate thing, not a prudent thing, to invest in a motion picture. We knew that if we were going to raise the money to produce *The Redemption*, a chunk of that money had to be ours. If I didn't show my faith in the project, we knew that others would not show theirs.

I also told her that making a motion picture was something that I had dreamed of doing for decades, and that if I didn't take this shot and give this my best effort, that I would go to my grave regretting and wondering “what if.” She agreed to support the endeavor. That is the moment that I *knew* we would make *The Redemption* a reality. I didn't know how to make a motion picture, but I knew that I would get it produced. I can't prove that I *knew* that *The Redemption* would become a reality, but I think that the completion of the project serves to support my credibility regarding that knowledge.

Speaking of “knowledge,” I have no formal education in the motion picture industry, except a few seminars. I am neither proud, nor ashamed, of the fact that I have never attended one college course related to the entertainment industry, but it is a matter of record. The only industry experience that I have is what I gained while working on *The Redemption*. As the

critique by Forrest Murray demonstrated, I can be a man of great doubt. The completion of *The Redemption* is a testament of my faith. I believed that if I read and educated myself about motion picture production that God would ensure that I didn't miss the details. He kept up His part of the deal.

The motion picture and entertainment industry are devoted to finding, developing and exploiting new young talent. The emphasis is on "young." While I embrace new technologies, insights, and emerging talents, I also understand that long-term experience within an industry or profession is one of the best indicators of competence. Steven Spielberg was a master at his craft at age 27 because he began to practice the craft of directing as a child. If this project was to succeed in spite of my inexperience, I knew that I needed an experienced master craftsman in a major capacity.

### **The Key Person**

I was trying to maintain my motivation to complete the remodeling project that I had begun many months earlier. I was deep into sawdust and nails. The phone rang.

"Hello." I answered

"Hi. This is Carl Kress."

I was stunned. I had written Carl an email months earlier in response to a listing he had posted on an internet site, and I had long since resolved that no response would be forthcoming from him. My heart rate began to ramp up, and I was trying to conjure up the right words to get him to commit to the project without lying or misrepresenting my position. My response was stunned silence.

"Hello, are you there?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm here."

"Do you know who I am?" He implored.

"Yes, you are Oscar[™] winner Carl Kress. You won an Oscar[™] in 1975 for Best Editor for the *Towering Inferno*. Your father is Oscar[™] winner Harold Kress."

"That's right," came an obviously pleased response, "Do you remember writing me?"

"Yes" I responded. "I ... I just can't believe that you called. I mean, I'm just stunned that you called. I wrote you so long ago that I figured you weren't going to contact me. I figure you get contacted by guys like me all of the time. I really appreciate your calling me."

"Do they make movies in Indiana?"

"Not very often."

"How did you get my name?"

"I was searching on an Internet site and you had a listing. I hope it's okay that I wrote you. I tried to keep it short. I'm trying to produce a movie."

"You a producer?" he inquired further.

"No, I'm a 'wannabe.'" I confessed. "I'm just a guy with a dream of making a motion picture."

"Well, what do you do then?"

"I work at Indiana University."

"Do you teach film making there at the university?"

"No"

"What do you teach?"

"I'm not on the faculty. I'm on the staff. I work in HR."

“HR?”

“I’m sorry. Human Resources. It’s a fancy term for ‘personnel.’ I get so used to using ‘HR’ that I forget that it’s not familiar to a lot of people.”

“How do you get from ‘personnel’ to making a movie?”

“That’s a long story. Can I call you back on my dime? If you don’t mind giving me your phone number, I’ll call you right back. I’m really not a whacko or anything. I’m a nobody that wants to make a movie and you are Carl Kress, a man who has achieved the very pinnacle of his career. Having someone of your stature on my team early would go a long way toward giving my project a huge amount of credibility.”

Carl gave me his phone number, and I called him back. We talked about my project, how I planned on raising the financing, realistic expectations, related short term projects, and that I realized that his coming on board the project was an act of kindness on his part because I would not be able to compensate him appropriately. We agreed that he would come on board as the editor and that he would also serve in the capacity of production consultant and postproduction supervisor. He would later agree to come on board as the director.

You may wonder how I can recall details of my conversation with Carl so vividly. When is the first time an Oscar[™] winner called you? It was all that I could do to keep my composure, because I was excited and my adrenalin had to be flowing. Hollywood, Beverly Hills, and the rest of the entertainment business is so full of pretentiousness that I think my honesty about being a “nobody” and a “wannabe” got to him. Carl is a very straightforward individual. He grew up in Beverly Hills, surrounded by legendary names from the motion picture industry. He disdains the snobbery that accompanies the glamorous side of the business, or any side of the business. Very few writers and even fewer editors typically receive their deserved public accolades for their contributions to the creative process. Quick, name three screenwriters! I am just as guilty as anyone in this regard, but I do pay more attention these days. Writers and editors start and finish every great motion picture, but they seldom receive any recognition. Having been with this project start to finish, I now have an appreciation for the entire production team that even people in “the business” often fail to achieve. I think my honesty and my sincere admiration of Carl’s editing abilities tipped the scales.

### **Financing**

Everyone wants to know how I got the money to produce this motion picture. That is the most common question that I am asked when I am interviewed or make public appearances. Raising the financing is absolutely the most difficult aspect of making a good independent motion picture. The bottom line is that I invested in it, and I asked others to invest in it. While having Carl on board early added credibility to the project, I told them that investing in any motion picture was a bad idea, and a small picture like mine was even worse. People invest in motion pictures for their passion. I found some compassionate and passionate people. Raising money is not fun. It is work. Call me for details.

### **Cast and Crew**

Another common question that I am asked is, “How did you get him?” or “How did you get her?” These questions are associated with Jenilee Harrison, Carl Kress, Ted Lange, and Lucy Paquet. They are all industry veterans with differing degrees of celebrity and notoriety. The answer is always “I asked.”

A lot of talented and skilled people said “no” when I asked them to be a part of the project. Schedules, family commitments, or my inability to properly compensate them are all some of the reasons I heard. Why anyone said “no” is of little consequence. The important thing is why the talented and skilled people said “yes.” They believed in the script, and they believed in the project. I made it clear to everyone involved, that if they didn’t believe in the project, I didn’t want them. If they had concerns about some aspect of the script, I was willing to address that, but before we started production, they needed to believe in what we were doing or they should do something else. They said they believed, and I believed they believed. The comradery and positive atmosphere were amazing.

I had lined up crew, equipment, talent, locations and anything else that I could think of to get this production organized. Everything was falling into place and people were very excited about the upcoming production. It was really going to happen, and then the phone rang.

Dan Dougherty, my unit production manager, called me two days before production was to begin to tell me that my gaffer’s girlfriend, Jo, had just called. “Sugar Bear” Wilson was on his way to the hospital for emergency surgery. His appendix had burst. I needed a good dose of perspective. To quote Alfred Hitchcock, “It’s only a movie,” not a life threatening condition. I called Jo to tell her to look after Sugar Bear, for him to get well, and not to worry about the production. Worrying was my job.

I was light on crew to begin with and had hired very inexperienced people at most positions because that is all I could afford, but Sugar Bear was a very experienced and knowledgeable gaffer. I knew that I needed someone very experienced in that role. I pulled out the film commission crew books from Indiana, Ohio, Illinois, and Kentucky and began to call. Not only could I not find an available gaffer for what I had budgeted, I just couldn’t find a gaffer at all. They were all busy working on commercials for the Christmas holidays. I asked whom they knew that “might” be able to do the job and got nothing. I had called for two days and got no takers.

Late Sunday night, with production scheduled for 8:00 AM the next day, Will Crawford called from Louisville. I could not pay his rate and he was booked for a gig starting the second week of my production. I told him if he could just do the first couple of days, that I would have time to at least search for someone to finish the production. I was honest and told him that I was desperate and that he could name his price, as if he couldn’t figure that out for himself. He asked what I had budgeted for the gaffer and agreed to cover the first week for what I could afford to pay. Instead of taking advantage of the situation, Will exhibited class and compassion. Except for his few days meeting his prior commitment, which I insisted he keep, Will did a great job in the role of experienced gaffer leading an inexperienced crew through the entire production. A couple of other very good gaffers that I knew just happened to have cancellations the week Will couldn’t work and filled in quite nicely. I guess in a situation like that you have to keep your faith and a phone book handy.

### **The Weather**

The weather in Southern Indiana in December is very unpredictable. I watched and prayed for good weather on a daily basis. I knew that the weather could be a major obstacle to our production. Scenes might not match, shooting could be delayed, and morale could suffer. I have a keen ability to state the obvious. Overall, we got relatively great weather. We paid attention to the weather, but it was never really a factor until.....

For three straight nights, we had been shooting a series of exterior scenes that were all to appear in the motion picture as if happening in one fateful night. The damp streets had matched perfectly for those three days. It had rained or snowed each of those days, but had always cleared up and melted off by the time we started each evening's shoot. We were just about to complete the last of those shots outside Babb's SuperValu grocery store at 2:00 in the morning. David Bryson, an actor from New York, was scheduled to fly back to the Big Apple early that very morning. We had two more quick shots to get, David would be done, and all of that series' scenes would be complete. The D.P. set up the shot, the actors took their positions, the director called "action," the shooting resumed, and then the snow began to fall with snowflakes the size of dimes, and so plentiful you could barely see the actors from a camera twenty feet away.

"Cut." Carl yelled. "We can't shoot in this, it won't match anything, what should we do?" Carl asked as he turned to me. I didn't have a good answer, but I needed one.

"Well, we could go back and reshoot me coming out of the store." I said "It won't match Lori getting into the taxi, but the audience won't know how much time was supposed to elapse, and the weather in Indiana can change rather quickly. This snow proves that. I think the audience can make that leap. But, I tell ya what, let's just cover up the camera and the sound cart and give it a few minutes. This could clear off. Hey everybody, if you want to go inside and grab something to drink, or a sandwich, or whatever, Redemption Films has an account here, and we'll pay for it."

The sound and camera crews covered up their equipment and some of the members of the production team headed inside the grocery store. I knew that if this snow continued, the scenes that we had yet to shoot would not match scenes shot the prior evening that chronologically occurred after the scenes we had yet to shoot. The motion picture would have no snow, then snow on the ground, then no snow again in scenes that were supposed to take place only minutes apart. I moved away from everyone, and when I was alone enough that no one could hear, I looked up to the dark sky and saw what appeared to be an endless stream of falling snowflakes.

"Lord," I pleaded, "I have been operating on faith. How about rewarding that faith?" I am a "steal away in the closet" kind of person when I pray. I'm just not comfortable having other people hear my private prayers. Unless I am asked to pray at a public gathering, I am very private in my prayers. I headed into the store to authorize the purchases.

I went to the cash register to sign the purchase authorization for the food and drink items that the crew had picked out. They were straggling up to the register one by one. I was explaining to the cashier that these items went on the Redemption Films account, when a crewmember ran in. Only minutes had passed from the moment that I had made me plea for better weather.

"Hey, it stopped snowing, you guys! Carl wants to shoot this while the weather holds."

I instructed the crew to head back out and I would take care of the transaction and bring their refreshments out to them. I signed the authorization and walked outside as the camera and sound cart were being uncovered. The car we were using had accumulated about a half inch of snow on it in just minutes. The crew grabbed some towels and blankets and began to wipe it down, the streets and sidewalks had retained enough heat to immediately melt away the brief but heavy snow. We finished the shoot with little concern for the weather after that. I have often wondered if that bout with the brief, but heavy, snow was just to serve as a reminder that I have to continue to exercise and reaffirm my faith.

I have no physical or empirical proof that *The Redemption* was inspired by God, but no

one will ever convince me otherwise. I have been blessed in so many ways as a direct result of this endeavor. I would be the first to admit, that I am not deserving of those blessings the Good Lord has bestowed upon me. However, I absolutely do believe, that if I had not exercised my faith in the source of *The Redemption* and produced this motion picture, that aside from the personal regret of wondering “what if,” I would find myself like the servant that angered his master by burying his one talent for fear of losing it.

Before any contracts were ever signed or any scenes were ever shot, I told many individuals that God made it clear to me that producing this motion picture was something that I had to do, for the sake of my spiritual well being, and that I would succeed. The story of Jonah and the whale was not lost on me. Producing this motion picture was an act of obedience and faith. I can’t prove that I *knew* that God would provide me with the resources that I needed to produce this motion picture. I can’t even prove that I believed those resources would come through. The talent, the equipment, the finances, the locations, and even the weather came together in the months of October, November, and December. Other than the stories of the gaffer situation and the snow fall, I don’t have the trials and tribulations of production stories that plague many films. God did not give me everything that I wanted to produce *The Redemption*. He certainly did, however, provide everything that I needed. More than one industry veteran has told me in amazement how blessed this project has been, or that I have an angel watching over me. As for any doubts that I might have had along the way, those doubts were always related to my lack of creative talents and abilities, not His. I have never undertaken any project with the degree of certainty of success that I felt with this project, and this is absolutely the biggest project I have ever attempted in my life.

Before I signed any contracts, or any scenes were ever shot, I also told many individuals that God never promised me that I would sell *The Redemption*, get a distribution deal, or make the investor’s their money back. He has never given me the first inkling of that being part of His plan or part of any commitment on His part. I keep hoping and praying that all of those things will be part of my reward for completing this act of faith, but to this day, He has never made that intention known to me. My instruction was to make this motion picture, *The Redemption*.

I do not want to present myself as a holy and righteous person, but I am a Believer. I sometimes feel as if former President Bill Clinton and I stand as testaments that the Good Lord can even love a scoundrel. I am not worthy of that Love. In a speech launching his campaign for President, George W. Bush said, “I believe in grace, because I’ve seen it, and peace, because I’ve felt it, and forgiveness because I’ve needed it.” My experiences have led me to believe that no one is beyond redemption, but.....“No one said it was going to be easy.”

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