

“Mom, I want to be a Filmmaker”

Robert Townsend shares his story of how he made it in the film industry.

By Mary L. Clavering

Have you ever met somebody so inspiring that every time you hear them speak, it makes you even more passionate about your goal? Or when you think you're having a hard time trying to make it as a filmmaker, you turn around and see someone else who went down the same road and hear their story about how they grew up in the 'hood on welfare while trying to make it in the industry? There's no other response than to feel thankful for everything you have, and to keep reaching for your ultimate goal in life. With over twenty years' experience as a writer, actor, director, and producer, Robert Townsend comes to Columbia College Hollywood to tell his tale of how he got started as a filmmaker.

“Everybody is on a journey as an artist. There'll be days when you won't believe in yourself. There'll be days when you won't trust what you created,” said Townsend.

Townsend said that presentation is the key. You need to be ready to present your work at any time. What if a major studio has \$10,000 to invest in your project? They need to hear something that's fresh or unique, something they've never heard before. And with so many ideas being pitched daily, there has to be something different about your overall presentation, physically and expressively.

He recommends taking acting classes. “If it's funny, you need to make me laugh; if it's dramatic, you need to make me cry,” said Townsend.

People have two attitudes toward pitching, one being: “I'm just going to go in there unprepared and present my idea the way I would talk to my cousin. I'm not going to change my clothes or put on an act to sell my idea. What they see is what they get.” The other attitude is to prepare for days before the audition and really go all out. If this means bringing two outfits as part of the act and juggling two oranges, then so be it. Overall, the most important thing is to remember that these people who work for major studios have heard and seen it all. What makes you stand out more? Why do you want to be in this business? What makes you think that you're going to make it in Hollywood without it eating you alive?

Why? “Because I believe in myself.”

“The only thing that's going to stop you from attaining your dream is who you surround yourself with,” said Townsend. “It's only the person closest to you that can kill your dream: boyfriend, girlfriend, mother, father, friends.”

Townsend says that you have to be careful whom you share your dream with, because it's hard enough to chase this dream without somebody you care about saying, “You'll never make it. You came from the 'hood...from the ghetto. You think you can really make it? When you gonna get a real job?” The more you share with people, the more they know your weaknesses, which they can use against you later. Surround yourself with positive people.

Years later when he saw those same negative people, they were really happy to see him and said that they always knew he'd make it. Little do they know that he still hasn't forgotten what they said back then about how he wasn't going to make it.

“If you only have one idea then you shouldn't be in show business,” he said. “It's all an audition. With the journey that everyone is on, you don't want to waste your time. It is not about who you know. If you have an idea and you know how to execute that idea...”

Townsend grew up on the west side of Chicago with four brothers and sisters. He said that his father was never around while he was growing up. His mother didn't want him leaving the house because there were gang members hanging around on every corner. Since he couldn't leave his home as a kid, he would watch television all day and night. He watched so much TV that his nickname became the *TV Guide*. While in the fifth grade, he was able to imitate over sixty voices.

“Here's the bottom line, you're gonna make mistakes, it comes with the territory. Everything that you're supposed to get as an artist you're gonna get,” he said.

At 17, he appeared in his first movies, *Cooley High* and *Mahogany*. After doing a lot of extra work and commercials, he auditioned for a pimp role. “Baby, be the best pimp that you can be,” his mama would encourage him. After a period of playing pimps, he auditioned for a role as a runaway slave in *A Soldier's Story*. Having had the time of his life making this film, he wanted to do another black movie. The problem was that they only made black movies once a year in the late 1980's, the next one being *Color Purple*. He auditioned for the role of Harpo but didn't get it. At that moment, something clicked inside of him. “That's

when a filmmaker is born,” he said. He had about \$60,000 saved up from doing commercials, *A Soldier’s Story*, and *Streets of Fire*. Working with Keenan Ivory Wayans, he pitched an idea to Samuel Goldwyn, Jr., who said, “I don’t know what the jheri curl is, but I know it’s going to be funny.” He pitched in another \$40,000, and in 2-1/2 years the film was completed. *Hollywood Shuffle* was shot in twelve days.

Friends who have graduated from film school repeatedly say to enjoy film school. Get everything you can get out of it. Learn every skill there is to learn. Get involved with other film projects, shoot your own films—and, most importantly, don’t be afraid to make mistakes. Because in the real world, the project that you’re working on will be rewritten quite a few times before it is shot. As cinema students, we are all on the same path. Eventually, we will move on and graduate from being student filmmakers to professional filmmakers. As a student, you should always be ready to face any obstacles that come your way. It is also important to have faith in your projects and yourself.

“It’s not where you start, it’s where you finish,” concludes Townsend.