

THE GREAT IDEA

THE UNITED STATES OF LELAND

by Kate McCallum

This issue's "Great Idea" focuses on the creation, selling and making of the independent feature *The United States of Leland*, released by Paramount Classics and written and directed by Matthew Ryan Hoge.

Hoge was born and raised in Colorado and attended the University of Southern California.

He graduated magna cum laude from the School of Cinema, receiving a BFA from the Filmic Writing Program. In his senior year at USC, Hoge's script *Happy* won the Abraham Polonsky Award for Most Outstanding Screenplay. Hoge then went on to write and direct his first feature, *Self Storage*, for Zero Pictures over nine days on a budget of \$9,000. His next project, *The United States of Leland*, premiered at Sundance in 2003 and was picked up by Paramount Classics. Currently, Hoge is on assignment writing a feature for director Curtis Hanson while completing his own original script which he wants to direct next.

scr(i)pt: *Can you tell us about how you came up with the idea for The United States of Leland?*

MATTHEW HOGE: The idea came from an experience I had teaching. I had been living in Los Angeles, was out of school and tired of working bad jobs, so I decided to get my teaching credential. I stumbled into a job teaching in juvenile hall, where it was ridiculously easy to get hired. The



requirements were, basically, that you don't have tuberculosis and you do have a college degree. I had no idea what to expect, and no teaching experience at all. But, I thought it would be very interesting, and I would meet people I certainly wouldn't have met in my usual environment. I remember the first day at a juvenile hall in East L.A.—a site where I ended up working for about half of the two-year period I spent teaching. I remember getting there, it was late and I was anxious. I was heading to the first classroom, led there by someone "official," and I was asking, "What do I teach? Where are the lesson plans?" He said, "Here's what you need to know: Count the pencils when you hand them out and count the pencils when you get them back. Don't turn your back, and teach them whatever you can. You've got the class for three-and-a-half hours."

In the classes, kids were grouped together based on their offenses, and my first class was a group of KL kids. (KL indicates a homicide charge.) There were 17 kids charged with murder, and I had a feeling of dread as I walked down the hall. I thought,

"I have to face these monsters and somehow occupy their time for three-and-a-half hours with no lesson plan. I don't know what to do, and I have no real understanding of where these kids are coming from or what their level of education is." Then I got there and looked around, and the faces weren't what I thought they'd be. The longer I was around these kids, the more my perceptions of

who and what they were shifted. I wasn't there to witness the crime they committed. I had no connection to the kid who cut his girlfriend in half or the kid who stabbed his mother 40 times. I was interacting with that kid in a different way, on a different basis. Those kids talked about how they missed their families and they were looking at 100 years, 180 years. I remember a kid who came back from court and said, "Mr. Hoge, I just got 120 years." What does that mean to a 16-year-old? You start to get these connections with them, and you realize that they're not at all what you expected.

A lot of the kids were there because of the tremendous fear of gangs and society's desire to sweep them under the rug. Even the kids who had done the absolute worst things, had a lot of goodness in them. How can you really define a life based upon one action? Spending time with the class proved to me that we had a lot more in common than I had thought. It got me thinking about morality. How do we define what's good and bad? I think we tend to walk a very rigid line and say, "We're over here and those people are

over there.” When something like a school shooting happens, it’s our instinct to get rid of the perpetrator as quickly and efficiently as possible—lock him up for 80 to 100 years and then come up with a quick and easy answer as to why it happened. Then we’re done with it. We decide that the event happened because he listens to Marilyn Manson or because he had an absent father. I felt privileged to have an opportunity to move past the easy answers, to interact with these kids and try to get at who they really were. It led me to think that the line [between good and bad] is always shifting and sort of blurry. We’re always hopping back and forth between one side and the other; and we really hope that we don’t wind up on the wrong side at the wrong time.

scr(i)pt: *So this experience became the zeitgeist for the story?*

MH: Yes, but I didn’t take the job thinking I would use the experience to write about these kids. I really just wanted to get away from the culture of L.A. and the culture of ambition. I think there’s something really negative about that influence if you’re trying to be a writer. You’re working at a production company or in an agent’s office where people are talking about what sold and how much it sold for. The motivation for writing in that environment is not about the joy of telling these stories. Taking the teaching job resulted from just wanting to be in a place where I was around people who had had completely different life experiences. I felt that, one way or another, working with the kids was going to be a positive experience for me. It was incredibly hard. I did it for two years, and I couldn’t do it again on an everyday basis.

scr(i)pt: *What do you think the theme of this film is?*

MH: It’s odd, because I think the theme evolved for me—much like the character in the film with whom I identified changed—from writing to shooting to cutting. When I was writing, the character of Pearl the teacher was closest to my experience. Then in shooting, Leland was the main focus of my heart. Then in the cutting, it was Albert,

Leland’s father.

I believe the overall theme is about morality and how we want to define things very rigidly. We want to say there is a good and there is a bad. There is a much more difficult, complex, dangerous and honest thing to say, though, and that is: We all have a mix of good and bad in us. The fact is that this person who has done an awful, terrible thing still has good in him; and somewhere in me I have the capability to commit the same act or have some of these same dark thoughts as well. It’s so much more dangerous to say that there really is no fixed line between good and bad. But, I think it’s a more honest approach.

Another aspect of this theme relates specifically to the character of Pearl. When you are in an environment [like juvenile hall] and making choices and doing things that you’re not sure you should be doing, you hold your decisions up to others. You rationalize and say, “I’m okay with the choices and mistakes I am making in my life because I didn’t molest a child or kill my girlfriend, so I’m still on the side of good.” I think [defining one’s own morality is] something that Pearl goes through in getting to the point: “Just because I haven’t gone to that extreme doesn’t mean I can’t question my own moral choices.”

scr(i)pt: *Leland was from a somewhat privileged family. Did you ever encounter anyone like that?*

MH: There was never anyone like Leland. Occasionally, you would see someone who was from a more upper middle-class background, but, by and large, the kids I was interacting with were from the gang world and were incarcerated with charges, in many cases, not justified. If you and I are in a gang—I’m driving a car and you’re asleep, passed out in the back seat and I kill someone—you can get charged with first-degree murder. There were a lot of cases like that because of the strict anti-gang laws, which flagrantly violate constitutional rights. Leland was drawn from that experience and from other things—from books, thoughts I was having about the world and stuff I’d been carrying around for a while.



ALL PHOTOS: Lorey Sebastian

PAGE 32 (Foreground): Writer-director **Matthew Ryan Hoge** on the set of *The United States of Leland* ABOVE: **Ryan Gosling** and **Jena Malone** star in *The United States of Leland*

scr(i)pt: *I felt that Leland was almost angelic, hyper-sensitive, prophetic. He must have been a very interesting character for you to develop.*

MH: Yes, and so much of that development was what Ryan Gosling brought to the role. Leland was a character who meant a lot to me, so I was very protective of him. I was so very fortunate to meet an actor who felt the same way, connected the same way and had very strong emotion for the character. We both wanted to make sure people didn’t misinterpret Leland.

scr(i)pt: *When did you start writing the screenplay?*

MH: About a half a year after I started teaching, two or three years after I had been out of school. The script took me about six months to write. There was about a year when I was still teaching, finishing the script up while I was getting it out to people. From there I was trying to find an agent.

scr(i)pt: *Was writing what you wanted to do first, or did you always want to write and direct?*

MH: I studied writing. I was in the writing program, but I always knew I wanted to write and direct. Right after school I tried to make a feature. I made about 20 minutes of it; but I ran out of money, and I’m

still paying it off on my credit card. It was a really valuable lesson—as a writer and a director—just getting out there and making mistakes. It was the first time I was able to take my words and see what happened with them. Shortly before I got into teaching, I made a \$9,000 feature that I wrote and directed. I sort of stumbled into the opportunity to make the film. It was so beneficial, so I knew that I wanted to write and direct another. When I was writing *Leland*, I was thinking, “I am not going to let anybody else direct it.” But, I didn’t know if I would ever have the opportunity or if anyone would care at all about this story. I didn’t have any friends in the business.

scr(i)pt: *But you did have that other film under your belt?*

MH: Yes. Surprisingly, it didn’t really help much as far as selling me. It did help me feel more confident when sitting down across from Kevin Spacey or Don Cheadle and saying, “Look, I know what I’m doing.” I had storyboarded the whole film and had a 400-page document of all the drawings.

scr(i)pt: *You had storyboarded the script yourself?*

MH: Yes, because I had that time between finishing the script and trying to get it out there. I was really feeling like I didn’t know if anyone was going to let me do this, so I wanted to be incredibly prepared. It was so helpful drawing on the prior experience I had and knowing the value of coming up with very concrete ideas so that when I sat with actors and financiers, I was prepared. Everybody wants to be reassured—especially by a first-time director. You don’t stammer when somebody says, “What’s this scene going to look like?” or “How are you going to handle the flashbacks?” Instead, you respond with clear ideas, taking him through point by point. I don’t know if I could’ve been so reassuring without going in with that level of preparation.

scr(i)pt: *Were you taught to storyboard?*

MH: No, mine were terrible drawings. Bizarre stick men. I used them with the director of photography, and they became our bible. The drawings didn’t have to be good. They articulated the concept well enough to be functional.

scr(i)pt: *You had this completed script, your storyboard book but you didn’t have an agent.*

What did you do?

MH: Despaired a lot [laughs].

scr(i)pt: *And you were determined to direct the project. Then what happened?*

MH: From there the process was about trying to take every opportunity I could to get the project to someone. How I wound up with the agent I have now was very convoluted. One person had responded to my writing out of film school: Harry Gittes who did *About Schmidt*. He and his assistant Ed Wang were always very encouraging. Through those guys the script wound up with the person who would become my manager, Matt Luber. Matt was the first person to read it and say, “I believe in you. Let’s do this.” I remember the first meeting I had with him. I said, “Look, I’m directing it. I understand if that scares you, but if it does, I can’t work with you.” I was really delighted when he said, “Yeah, we’ll find a way to do it.”

From there, the script got to Caren Bohrman, who remains my agent. There were a lot of people along the way who read the script and said, “I don’t get it.” A lot of those people were telling me a year later how great I am.

From there, progress was really about Caren and Matt getting the script. It took about a half a year before I found Matt, then about another half a year before Caren came onboard. At that point the script went out, and there was a five- or six-month wait. The script got a really good response when it first went out, but then, of course, people were saying, “It’s great but we’re not going to make it.” Everyone was scared of it and the fact that I was really adamant about directing it.

scr(i)pt: *Who did Caren and Matt go out to? Big studios? Smaller production companies?*

MH: Producers. They were trying to get producers excited about taking the script into the studios. Ultimately, it went out to all the big studios, and the response was really good. It led to some writing jobs for me. But, no one really wanted to commit to making *Leland*. We never gave up, knowing that success really just takes that one advocate. That advocate became Kevin Spacey. I’m still not totally sure how the script ever got to him, and it got to him after the first wave when people were passing it around ...

scr(i)pt: *At TriggerStreet?*

MH: Yes, he and his partner Bernie Morris.

Bernie read the script first and gave it to Kevin who really responded to it. I came in, and that’s where I think the preparation paid off in a big way for the first time. When I sat down with Bernie, he asked me all the questions. “So, you want to direct it—how are you going to handle the flashbacks? Tell me more about this character.” I had written character biographies, which also later helped the actors and actresses when they asked, “Why am I doing this?”

scr(i)pt: *You had all the backstories down?*

MH: The relevant thing is to know why the character is doing this instead of that. A lot of times things like where’d he go to school don’t play into it; sometimes it does. I try to know everything that will be involved in a moment of decision for a character. Bernie peppered me with questions, and he felt confident that I knew what I was doing. I think I even showed him my stick-figure drawings so he was impressed. I then sat down with Kevin a couple weeks later, and it was the same thing. We had a long conversation: “What are you doing with this film? What does it mean to you? Who are the actors you want to pursue for this project?” At the end of that meeting he said, “Look, I really believe that you can do this. I’m taking a leap of faith on you because people have taken a leap of faith on me before. I’ve experienced it in my professional life, and more often than not it’s worked out really well. From here on out, TriggerStreet is making this film; you’re directing it—and, if people don’t like it, they can f**k off.” It was just so great to hear that. That was really when my career as a professional director started because you need that passionate advocate. He never wavered from that approach that I was directing it. Kevin was also very supportive of my choices, on every level. The fact that I wanted to cast a black man in the lead was problematic for people, which is so shocking and awful, particularly when you’re talking about Don Cheadle, one of the best actors in America.

scr(i)pt: *Really? That came up?*

MH: That came up a few times—why can’t he be white? People would also ask “Matt, are you sure you don’t want to step aside and let someone else come in?” People would question my approach to the film.

scr(i)pt: *Who, exactly?*

MH: The wild world of the independent

financiers. It was nice to feel, when those questions came up, I had support. For example, the handling of the film was very understated and very subtle. I didn't want to do anything that would differentiate flashbacks from the reality of the chronological march of the film. I felt like there were enough visual cues, and I wanted to make the audience work a little bit. My decision was questioned an awful lot: "I assume you're shooting some other film stock, or that you're going to shoot black and white for the flashbacks." It was nice to be able to say, "No, I want to do it this way, and here's why" and to know that I had someone standing behind me who was behind all those decisions I was making. Spacey held up to that promise of taking a leap of faith and not looking back.

scr(i)pt: *Would you go to these meetings with the financiers? With Kevin? Bernie?*

MH: It varied. We spent about a year putting together our cast before going out to companies. Our thinking was: The more solid the package, the easier it was going to be once we got to the point of taking it to financiers.

scr(i)pt: *Had you been paid anything by this point?*

MH: No. For a while I was working as a teacher and then writing jobs were paying the bills.

scr(i)pt: *Who finally put up the money?*

MH: The first party was Thousand Words—Jonah Smith and Palmer West. Young guys who were developing a track record for co-financing really risky films (*Requiem for a Dream* and *Waking Life*). They had two films under their belt—bold films. We sat down with them after they had read the script. They were interested in the actors we had pieced together for it. Again, there were a lot of questions. The meeting consisted of two hours' worth of questions like, "Where is this character coming from?" They wanted to make sure I knew what I was doing and that we were all on the same page and wanted to make the same film. I was amazed at how differently people could see the film. Often, people saw it as bleak and dark, and I was always speaking of it in terms of hope. I always wanted to do something that was figuratively and literally light in the treatment. When we sat down with Jonah and Palmer, they sparked to those ideas and to

that approach. We were trying to find the goodness in these people. The film wasn't going to be about wallowing in how life is awful. You just need to open your front door to see how life is awful.

Finally, Thousand Words came onboard and put up a portion of the financing, and from there we got the bulk of the financing through MDP Worldwide, which is a foreign sales company run by Mark Damon. Mark really responded to the script on an emotional level. He asked all the questions; I gave him all the answers and that was it. As soon as Mark signed on, we had the full budget; and we pushed forward as quickly as we could.

scr(i)pt: *Did much change from the initial script?*

MH: Right before we started to send the script out, I did a little work on it. After that, there was no rewriting at all. There was no rewriting with Kevin's company or Thousand Words. When we started shooting, there were little things we had to change for production—like we couldn't get a location—then small changes when I rehearsed with the actors. Rehearsing was so helpful because I would realize that a line was not going to work (and discovered that in the safety of rehearsal space as opposed to being in front of the camera while time is ticking). Again, I wanted to be visually prepared, and I wanted to have it be the same for the actors, to be at a point where we all felt that the scene was working.

scr(i)pt: *So, you finished the film and then what happened?*

MH: We made the decision that we didn't want to go into distributors. We now had a film with a bankable cast; we felt the more we controlled it, the better. We were in a situation where we had two financiers who really connected with the project and were going to let me make the film I wanted to make without a bunch of interference. We decided to hold off and not let anyone see it until Sundance. We kept it under wraps, and the response was really good. A day later it sold to Paramount Classics.

scr(i)pt: *Some say that to direct your work as a writer is the surest way to protect your vision. Do you believe your vision as the writer ultimately ended up on the screen the way you had hoped?*

MH: Yes, I do. [Being a writer-director is]

"The film wasn't going to be about wallowing in how life is awful. You just need to open your front door to see how life is awful."

hard because you have to accept that things will change during the process. I remember the first time that Ryan came in to read for the part of Leland. I had been very resistant to his even coming in because I had seen *The Believer*, which is great, but he was just totally different. He read [for the role] and was good, but it wasn't what I had heard in my head. Then he came back again because I thought he was good and read once more. Again, he was great, but it still wasn't what I had heard. By the third time he came back, I was reading the script and I heard his voice. Casting sort of evolves in that way. The part wouldn't have become like a real person had Ryan not infused it with what he brought to the role. The same with the setting of juvenile hall. I wanted it to look a lot like the place where I taught. So I took everybody there, the D.P., the costume designer, Ryan. We were trying to recreate the reality we saw there. The set was not quite the way the real thing is, so we started to make changes, and they seemed to fit the film. Achieving the desired effect is an organic process; and you begin to feel like, "Yes, this is exactly what I intended," when the truth is it had evolved from something else. In the cutting process there were definitely changes from the script to the film, but now it feels like that's what I intended all along.

I was really lucky to be in a situation where it wasn't the case of someone telling me to go this way and I was fighting to go another way. Kevin really trusted me and wanted me to be the guy who was running the show. There was no one second-guessing me; that allowed the film to move organically. People brought things to it and changed the course of it, but it was less of a fight and more of a river flowing. (I)

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