

Feature

FINAL DRAFT, INC.

HALL OF FAME

STEVEN

On October 27, 2011, screenwriter Steven Zaillian received the Final Draft, Inc. Hall of Fame Award at The Paley Center for Media in Beverly Hills.

HONOREE



Screenwriter Steven Zaillian

ZAILLIAN

Steven Zaillian has spent the last quarter century creating intelligent, involving, and impeccably crafted screenplays—frequently based on real people and actual events—that tell compelling, multi-layered stories about intriguingly complex characters. Films based on his scripts have garnered great critical acclaim and box-office success and Zaillian himself has won numerous awards, including an Oscar®, a WGA Award, a BAFTA, a Golden Globe®, and a Humanitas Prize. In January 2011, Zaillian received the Writers Guild of America, West's Laurel Award honoring a lifetime of achievement in outstanding writing for motion pictures.

PHOTO: LYNN HACKING

Anthony Hopkins as Hannibal Lecter in *Hannibal*

“ I find that as I’m reading ... the first read for me is the most important one. I’m trying to read it and see it as a movie as I’m going along. ”

—Steven Zaillian

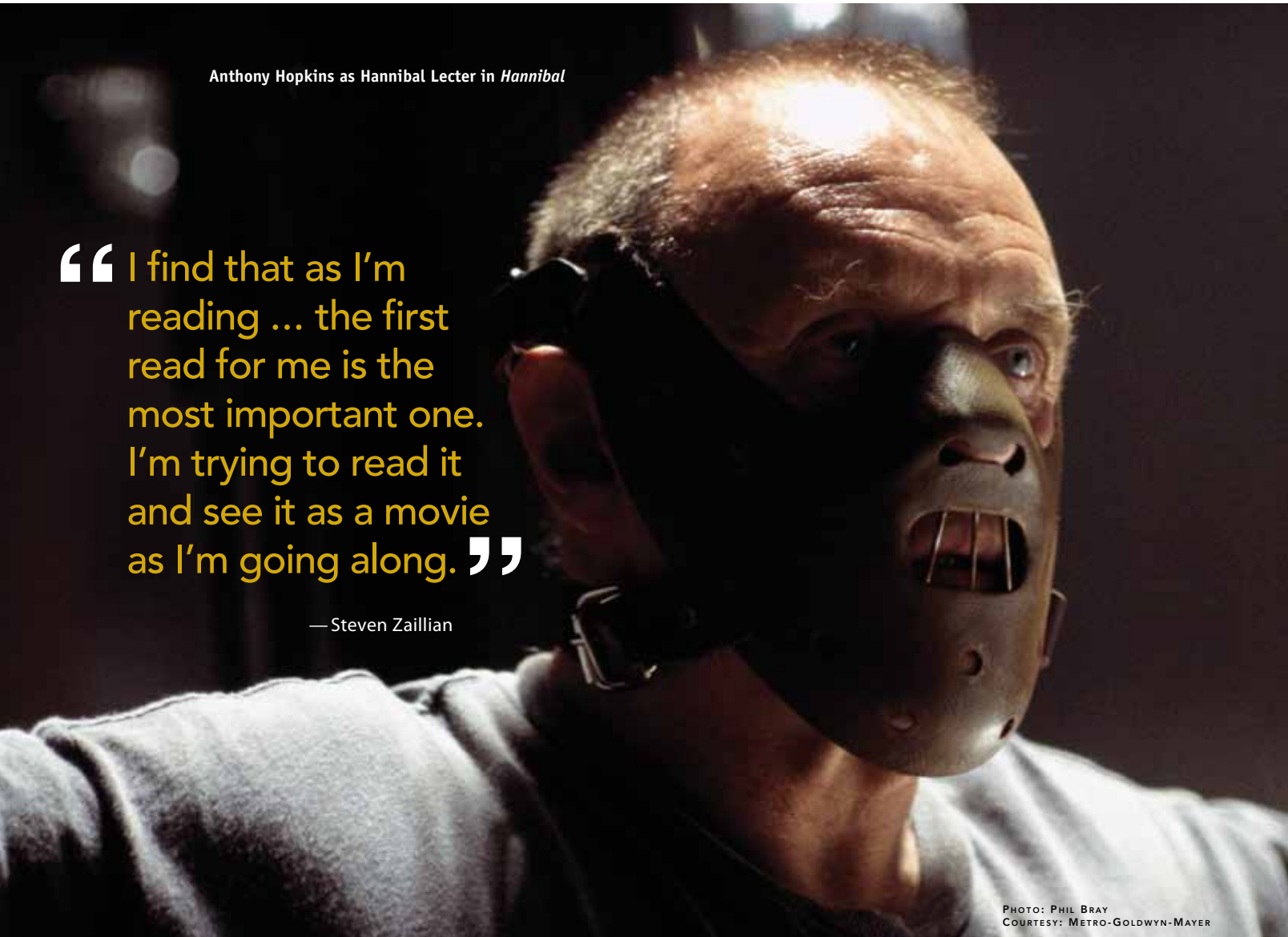


PHOTO: PHIL BRAY
COURTESY: METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER

Born in Fresno, California on January 30, 1953, the man that *The Times* once called “the most artful and subtle screenwriter Hollywood has had since Robert Towne” did not set out to become a scenarist. In fact, when he first enrolled at Sonoma State University (he would later graduate from San Francisco State), he didn’t know what he wanted to do.

“[I was] just taking general education classes and stuff,” Zaillian said in a recent conversation with *Script*. “One of the classes I took was a film history class, and I liked that, so I got into the idea of film. But I was more interested in the production aspect, and when I got out

of school, I got a job as an apprentice editor with a little company here in L.A. and worked as a film editor for a while. I edited a couple features, but they were real B movies. One of them was called *Kingdom of the Spiders*, which will give you some idea of what kind of film it was.” During this period, Zaillian also began writing spec scripts.

In the late 1970s, Zaillian flew to Israel to visit his friend, the actor Perry Lang, and Lang’s castmates Bobby Di Cicco, Robert Carradine, and Mark Hamill during the filming of Samuel Fuller’s *The Big Red One*. Later, Zaillian and Lang traveled to Italy. “I

took one look at Perugia’s main street and said to Perry, ‘I think I’m going to stay.’ I rented a small apartment, enrolled in language classes, and wrote. It was a solitary life, but I liked it. A few months later, I had a script—called *Bad Manners*—I hoped might be a little independent film that Perry and his actor friends could be in. Through them, it ended up in the hands of a producer, who called and asked me who my agent was. I said, ‘I don’t have one.’ She said, ‘You should get one so I’ll have someone to negotiate with.’”

Taking her advice, Zaillian acquired an agent. “I sent the script to all the agencies that

would accept unsolicited material, along with a note that said there was a producer interested in it. I heard back from none of them, but a writer of a film I was editing at the time gave it to her agent—an older man named Harold Greene, who had a small agency on La Cienega. He read it, called me, and became my agent for many years, to the day he died.” Greene sent out *Bad Manners* and it was eventually bought by Rastar Productions. “The script was never produced, but it served as my ‘calling card,’” Zaillian recalls.

Producer Edgar Scherick (1974’s *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three*) read *Bad Manners*, liked Zaillian’s writing, and hired him to adapt Piers Paul Read’s book *Alive*, the true-life tale of the Uruguayan rugby team whose plane crashed in the Andes in 1972 and who resorted to cannibalism in order to survive. Although Zaillian’s script was never made (*Alive* was eventually brought to the screen in 1993 by different producers using an entirely new script by John Patrick Shanley), director John Schlesinger read it and asked Zaillian to adapt *The Falcon and the Snowman*—Robert Lindsey’s nonfiction book about two former altar boys from Southern California who begin selling American secrets to the Russians at the height of the Cold War. This time, the script was made and gave Zaillian his first onscreen credit as a writer.

Following *Falcon*, producer Walter Parkes asked Zaillian to read another nonfiction book—*Awakenings*, neurologist Oliver Sacks’ account of the temporary return to functioning of a group of victims of encephalitis lethargica after he treated them with the then-new drug L-DOPA—to see if he thought there was a movie in it. That there wasn’t immediately apparent. “*Awakenings* ... is a great book, but not an obvious film. Half of it is case studies; the other half, Oliver Sacks’ philosophy on illness, health, life. No narrative, in other words. And no main character.” Zaillian decided to make Sacks himself (renamed Sayer) the film’s protagonist and focus the story on the shy doctor’s relationship with one of the recovered patients. The script earned the writer an Academy Award® nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay. “It was great to be nominated for it. And also great to know that I wasn’t going to win—everyone knew *Dances With Wolves* would take

everything—so I could relax and enjoy the actual ceremony.”

By now, of course, Zaillian was becoming something of an expert at transforming books into films. Has he developed any special technique for doing this? “I wouldn’t call it a technique but I find that as I’m reading ... the first read for me is the most important one. I’m trying to read it and see it as a movie as I’m going along. So, I’m making very brief little notes like—and usually it’s just a check or an asterisk or something—‘Yes, this might work. Yes. Yes. No. No. No.’ And praying, basically, that I’m going to feel by the time I get to the end of the book that I saw a movie I can write. If I feel that way, then the work really starts.”

After finishing *Awakenings*, Zaillian was engaged to adapt *Schindler’s List*—Thomas Keneally’s nonfiction novel about a Nazi businessman who saves hundreds of Jews from the death camps during World War II—for director Martin Scorsese. “I don’t think there was any anticipation that *Schindler’s List* would become a big film, which is why they would entrust it to me. I remember quite vividly reading it for the first time, getting about two-thirds of the way through it, and praying there would be a decent third act. The thing I grabbed onto—which affected almost every scene in it—was the idea of a man doing something that went against everything he thought he wanted. A reluctant hero.” When Steven Spielberg took over the project, Zaillian stayed on and eventually delivered a stunning piece of work that not only won him another Academy Award nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay, but the actual award itself. “Unlike the *Awakenings* night at the Oscars, I couldn’t be as sure I wouldn’t have to climb the stage steps this time, so I was nervous. But it was great.”

Following *Schindler’s List*, Zaillian adapted Fred Waitzkin’s *Searching for Bobby Fischer* for his friend, producer Scott Rudin. When the script was finished, Rudin surprised Zaillian with an opportunity he wasn’t necessarily seeking: “A lot of writers [write] in order to direct—as a stepping stone. I never thought about it that way. I was perfectly happy writing. But [Rudin] said, ‘You should direct this.’ So I said, ‘Okay, I’ll think about it’ and ended up doing it.” Did becoming a director

have any influence on his screenwriting? “I don’t think directing did. I think that writing enough scripts and seeing them get made and how they would get made, that influenced it. I did realize at a certain point that you can’t fake it—you can’t expect the director to figure it out or the actors to figure it out. You really have to do it yourself, or it’s never gonna get done. What I mean is—if you’re going to think, ‘Oh, well, this scene isn’t very good, but I think that once they shoot it and once the actors get into it, it will be a good scene,’ it won’t. It’s not going to get better. The scene might get worse, but it won’t get better.”

After *Bobby Fischer*, Zaillian adapted Dan McCall’s novel *Jack the Bear* and contributed to the scripts of *Clear and Present Danger* and *Mission: Impossible* before returning to the director’s chair to helm the 1998 legal drama *A Civil Action* (“I loved Jonathan Harr’s book. It has at its center the kind of character I love (personal injury attorney-turned-crusader Jan Schlichtmann), someone who, almost despite himself, rises to the occasion.”) Since then, Zaillian has co-written *Hannibal*; reunited with Martin Scorsese for *Gangs of New York* (which earned him another Oscar nomination, shared with Jay Cocks and Kenneth Lonergan); rewrote *The Interpreter* for Sydney Pollack (“Pollack’s films of the ‘70s are some of my favorites of all time, so the opportunity to work with him was a thrill for me”); wrote and directed a new interpretation of Robert Penn Warren’s classic novel *All the Kings Men*; researched and scripted *American Gangster*; and written the initial drafts of this fall’s critically acclaimed baseball drama *Moneyball*.

Zaillian’s latest project is the American screen adaptation of the first book in Swedish writer Stieg Larsson’s phenomenally successful Millennium trilogy—*The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*. Bringing this dark, violent thriller to the screen proved challenging for a number of reasons. The first was the book’s rather unusual structure: “A mystery is presented ... and that mystery is solved eventually, but there was still another 150 pages after the mystery is solved. I wasn’t sure that was going to work, but it seems to have.”

Also, the book’s complicated plot required a great deal of exposition: “Sometimes [in the book], a chapter will start out where a character

will say, ‘Okay, let’s sum up where we’re at’ to remind the audience of all these things that they’ve figured out. I can’t have a scene like that, so the trick is to give the audience just as much as they need to follow [the story].” Zaillian feels that, when it comes to doling out exposition, “it’s nice to stay just slightly ahead” of the audience to keep people involved, but not get so far ahead that you lose them. “Because I’ve experienced that in movies—where you’re right there, you’re following it and then you get lost and you’re done, and there’s no catching up again.”

Like many of Zaillian’s scripts, *Dragon Tattoo* features a number of solitary, isolated characters. “I don’t know if it’s just I’m drawn to these kind of characters or if it’s just accidental, but a lot of the things I’ve worked

on, the main character doesn’t talk to anybody, and he doesn’t share what he’s feeling or thinking with anyone so it has to be shared with the audience visually somehow. This one has two characters [like that]—you’ve got one (investigative reporter Mikael Blomkvist) in a cottage figuring stuff out; you’ve got another (the brilliant but emotionally damaged private investigator Lisbeth Salander) who’s figuring her own things out. And neither one of them is talking to anyone.”

This problem was compounded by the fact that Salander has a very involved backstory that the book takes many pages to explain. How did Zaillian incorporate this material into the script? He didn’t. “There are no flashbacks, nothing about her past. This script was so full of the present-day story

that there wasn’t enough room for it, but I wouldn’t have put it in anyway. I didn’t feel we needed it. I’ve always felt ... that if you show how someone behaves—what they say and what they do—you will understand who they are, as opposed to exposition explaining those things.” Zaillian is not a fan of front-loading a script with information about a character anyway: “I always feel that you need to know who a character is by the end of the movie; you don’t need to know in the first scene. And that is a difference between movies and books, I think.”

Despite these challenges, Zaillian is pleased at how the project has turned out and is currently finishing up the screenplay for the second film in the series, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*.

Rooney Mara as Lisbeth Salander in *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*

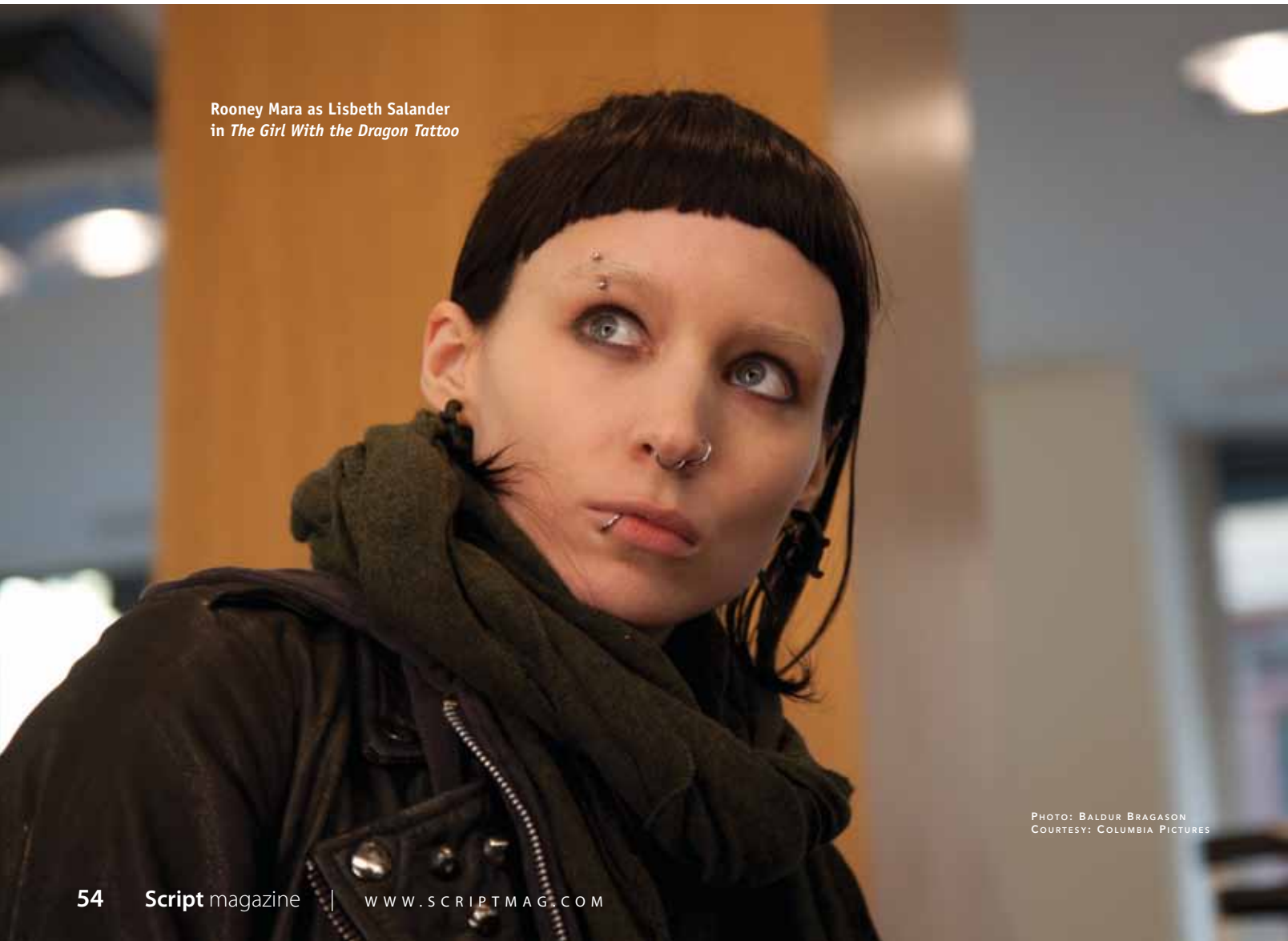


PHOTO: BALDUR BRAGASON
COURTESY: COLUMBIA PICTURES

When it comes to process, this most modern of screenwriters takes a rather old-fashioned approach. Zaillian writes by hand on a legal pad and only inputs a script into a computer when it's completely finished. "I don't like to get hung up on the way things look on the page and that sort of thing. And also, I feel as soon as I see it on white paper—neat—it's harder to change. It's kind of like etched in stone. So, I like the freedom of being able to cross things out and not worry about it."

He lets his initial drafts run as long as they need to—the first draft of *A Civil Action* was approximately 250 pages—but then whittles them down using lessons he first learned back in his B-movie days. Film editing taught Zaillian that "You want to start the story as late as you can and end it as soon as you can. Working on ... the little B films that I did, I realized you could almost always lop off the first reel and start with the second. You just don't have time." In addition, "I think the 'less is more' lesson I learned in editing was getting it down to the smallest fighting weight it can be. And I've reminded myself of that every time I write a script. I might have a first draft that is 200 pages long or something and I know that can't be, so it's a matter of throwing out everything you can."

Being able to write in pared-down fashion is the biggest change Zaillian has seen in his work over the years. "When I started out, I overwrote things. I still overwrite on a first draft, but by the time it's done, it's pretty streamlined—it's down as much as it can be, not too flowery. Earlier, though, I didn't know how to write a screenplay and so I would write it like a book and it would be full of things that are not going to be shot ... what a character is thinking and that sort of thing. I've pretty much dispensed with that [approach] and figured out ways of writing to convey that without saying it. [My work] is more streamlined now and closer to the bone, and what you read is what you're going to see."

Zaillian likes to write outside, at a table on his back patio. "I do it every day: bankers' hours—10:00 a.m. to 4:00 or 5:00 p.m. It's a job. So in terms of the time, that's what I do. In terms of the actual work, that depends on what stage I'm at. I spend a lot of time outlining, more time outlining than writing.



Liam Neeson as Oskar Schindler
in the Oscar-winning *Schindler's List*

PHOTO: UNIVERSAL PICTURES

On a script that goes well, I'd say I spend three months outlining and two months writing. That's ideal."

Based on his body of work, it's obvious that Zaillian has a passion for writing movies based on true stories. Where does this passion come from? "I've always loved documentaries. My dad was a journalist—he did radio documentaries—so I was brought up with documentaries and things like that in the house. I think that, in a way, I'm combining kind of what I accidentally fell into, which was screenwriting, with something that I've always really liked, which is documentaries. I'd love to do documentaries. I wish I had another life."

Despite his fact-based orientation, Zaillian doesn't like to do a lot of research prior to writing his first drafts. "In most cases, I'll just go off the book for the first draft and then once I have the shape of the thing, I'll do the research—go to the place, meet the people. My fear of doing it the other way around is that I'll get mired in the research, like when you go on the Internet to look up something and three hours go by and you can't remember what you were looking up in the first place. I'm afraid that will happen if I do all the research first. So, once I have the context, then I'll do the footwork and it's a lot easier to integrate what I find out."

When asked if he has any advice for aspiring writers, Zaillian responds: "It's hard to suggest anything to anyone because it's hard to

know what the thing is going to be that's going to inspire them or speak to them. All I can do is talk about the things that matter to me, and one of those things was to think about the films that I really love, that really work for me ... and then study those films and figure out why they work. And I think you can tell that by looking at the film and studying the film as opposed to [hearing] somebody talking about it in a class. When I was in college, I had a job as an usher. And this was back when films were played exclusively, so there would be one film in a theater for six months. There was one film that was showing the whole time I was there ... and it was *Serpico*. I saw the movie every single day, sometimes twice a day, for months. And so I knew that film scene for scene for scene, and I look back at the things that I've done and I see the influence of that [experience]. So, I guess my advice is keep watching those films that you really like."

There is no doubt that, for all of us, many of those films we enjoy have been written by Steven Zaillian. ✨



RAY MORTON is a writer and script consultant. His new book *Music on Film: Amadeus* is now available online and in bookstores. Morton analyzes screenplays for production companies, producers, and individual writers. He is available for private consultation and can be reached at ray@morton.com.