

Angelo Pizzo: Scripting for Hollywood

Today, Angelo Pizzo, in his early fifties, is a successful screenwriter and filmmaker. In 2000, he signed a deal to write a sequel to *GoodFellas*, a film about Mafia kids being raised in the Witness Protection Program. (Martin Scorsese is slated to direct.) He is also known for his moving sports-related screenplays—*Hoosiers* and *Rudy*.

But when Angelo Pizzo was a teenager, he wasn't sure he would ever succeed. Pizzo remembers his own painful adolescent years:

The sense of confusion and self-doubt in your adolescent years can be overwhelming. If there is anything I can share, it is that I was there and you get through it. You figure out a way to keep moving. Things change. They never stay the same. Never give other people the power to define you. Don't give away power to anyone—your teachers, your parents, or your friends.

A family man, Angelo Pizzo now lives in Ojai, California, close enough to Hollywood to attend often contentious studio meetings. "Whenever I face rough times in my work or in my

ANGELO PIZZO

Professions: Screenwriter and filmmaker

Year; place of birth: 1948; Chicago, Illinois

Education: B.A., Indiana University

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Career accomplishments: Wrote the *Hoosiers* and *Rudy* screenplays

What they say about him: “*Hoosiers* is special for a host of reasons, the least of which being that it’s an underdog movie with bite. It’s a warm, powerful, touching motion picture that embraces small-town Midwestern values like no movie since *Breaking Away*.”—Hal Lipper, *St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times*



personal life, I know that those are the ways in which I am going to grow and change,” confides Pizzo. “In my teens and my twenties, I thought [a crisis] was the end of the world. Now I can put these things in context.”

After attending film school at the University of Southern California, Pizzo worked as an executive at a film studio for four years. He read some 2,000 scripts. He was a supervisor of production, helping other screenwriters rework scenes to get their projects made. “I was using my left brain—rational, linear, objective, and analytical,” says Pizzo.

But when Pizzo quit his day job to write the script that ultimately became *Hoosiers*, he had to rely on his creativity. “My left brain got in the way of my right brain,” he recalls. “You don’t want a little creep sitting on your shoulder saying, ‘That’s no good—why did you do that?’”

After completing *Hoosiers*, he showed the script to several people, including a famous screenwriting teacher who found fault with every line. These early reactions he got were so devastating that he threw his manuscript in the closet and said he

would never write again. Luckily, he later changed his mind. He explains:

The best piece of advice I ever got was: When you write “Fade-in” on page one, do not show your work to anybody until you write “Fade-out” on the last page. Do not go back and read anything you’ve written until you have a draft. Just keep writing and keep turning those pages. If you know you’re going to change things later, make a note, but keep going until the end.

If you go back to revise too soon or hand your work over to someone else, even if they just raise an eyebrow you’re going to second-guess yourself and doubt your original instincts. And your original instincts are all you have to rely on—the only thing you have. That’s what makes you a writer who is different from the [person] next to you.

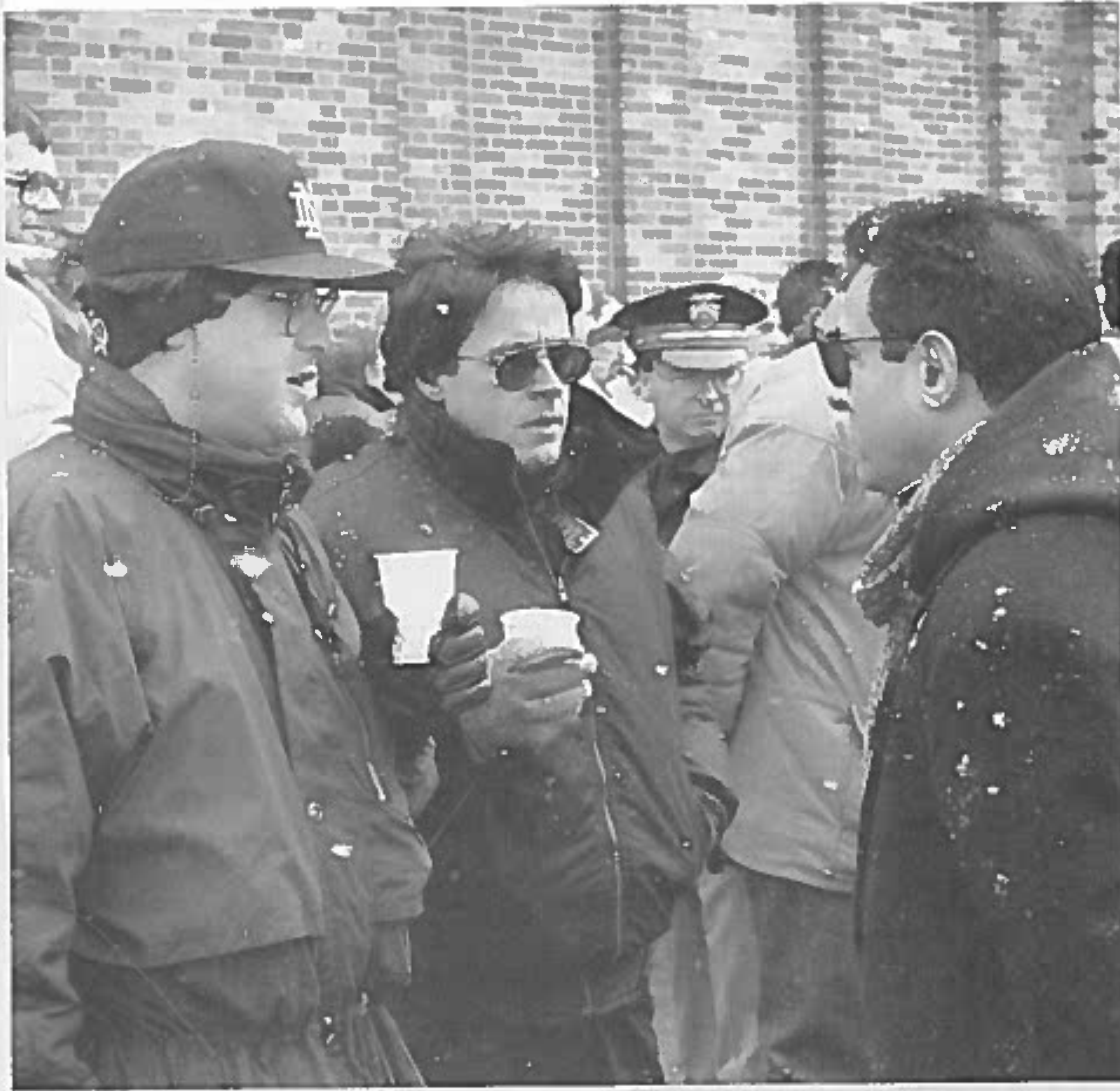
Tips for Storytellers

Angelo Pizzo has many tips for storytellers. One is to write about characters who struggle—people the audience can relate to in some way. He explains:

The real skill of a storyteller is to create a kind of motion in a room. . . . And you do that by creating interesting characters—one or two that the audience, listener, or reader connects to and relates to. They end up rooting for these characters, and they want things to happen for them.

My storytelling is done in a rather sweeping, event-focused way. I look for significant signposts along the way and get a feeling of how the story will build to a climax. I would never start a movie unless I knew I had a great ending.

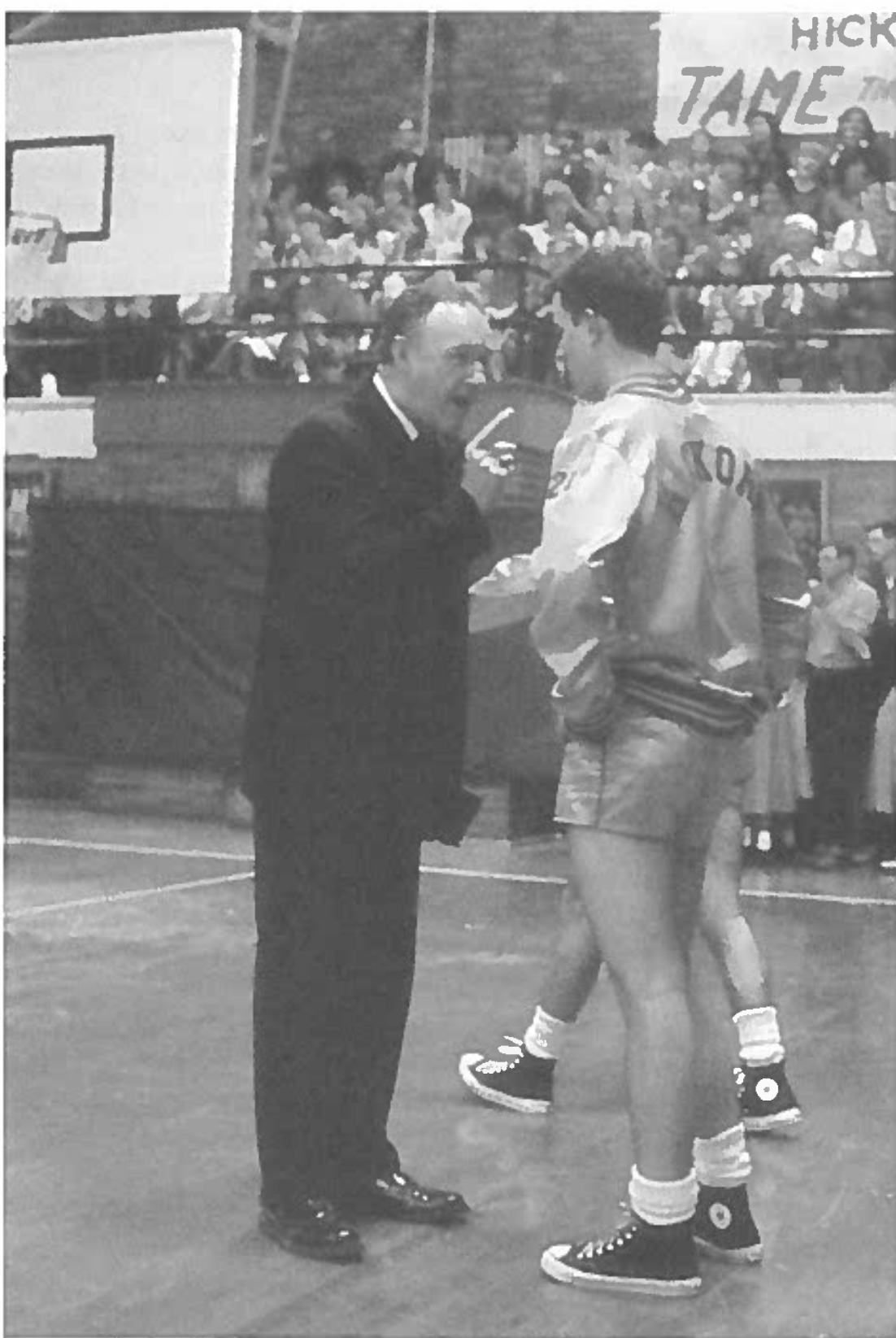
While some stories are so universal that it doesn’t matter if you set them in New York, Minneapolis, or Phoenix, most tales are all the better when audiences can respond to the spirit of a setting. For Angelo Pizzo, *Hoosiers* and *Rudy* benefited from being set in small towns in Indiana. In *Rudy*, a true story,



Screenwriter Angelo Pizzo (center) during the filming of his movie Rudy

Daniel “Rudy” Ruettiger, a University of Notre Dame football walk-on, plays on the reserve team, hoping for his chance on the playing field. In *Hoosiers*, Norman Dale—a basketball coach with a mysterious past (played in the film by Gene Hackman)—struggles to bring a losing high school team to a state championship.

“I felt the place—Indiana—was as important as the Norman Dale character,” says Pizzo. To transport the reader into



In Hoosiers, written by Angelo Pizzo, Gene Hackman (left) plays a high school basketball coach in a small Indiana town.

the frantic world of Friday-night high school basketball, Pizzo made every detail of small-town Hoosier life authentic. "I knew how they walked and talked and how they sat in barbershops," says Pizzo.

A writer always uses his or her own life's experience in some way. "One of the hallmarks of my writing is that I write about what I know, where I have experience and knowledge," says Pizzo.

Another tip Pizzo offers screenwriters is to twist a plot a little. "Take something and turn it just a little bit to move the way a story is told maybe three degrees," he says. "Sometimes that is the most compelling way to tell a story in a more interesting way."

The job of every screenwriter is to surprise and even astonish an audience. This should usually be done in a way that is natural and believable in terms of the story, setting, and characters that appear on the big screen.

"The films that disappoint you are films in which you think you know what is going to happen next—and you're right," says Pizzo. "The films that excite you are films in which you think you know what's going to happen next and it almost happens—or it happens in such a startling way that it's more of a thrill than if it's a complete surprise and goes the other way."

Pizzo explains that great filmmakers, such as the late John Ford, who made the Western classic *Stagecoach* with John Wayne, find ways to make tired formulas original and thrilling. "When you watch a John Ford Western, it's as if you are seeing a Western for the first time. Everything seems fresh and new and alive and real and you—the viewer—can connect to it," says Pizzo.

Pizzo also tells young storytellers to pay attention to how people react to a story. If a listener doesn't seem to respond to a story, the writer may want to rearrange its presentation or cut and add details. "I believe the nature of storytelling is constantly evolving," says Pizzo. He explains further:

I will tell a story once and I will subsequently register how people respond to various points in it along the way. By the time I've worked it out, I've probably changed, misrepresented, and exaggerated what actually happened to make the story more compelling and more interesting, because that is sort of my nature.

I went to Europe for the first time at sixteen, and I was all alone for two months. Some amazing things happened to me. I know I was inclined to exaggerate when I came back. I wanted these stories to seem more dramatic and more compelling. Over the years, these stories got so cranked up that now I'm not even sure what happened!

The Challenge of Writing

Millions of people want to write. Since Pizzo didn't have a screenplay produced until he was thirty-one, he has sympathy for the strugglers. "Writing is difficult. It's very hard to look at that blank piece of paper," says Pizzo. "Someone once said, 'Writing is easy—you just sit at the typewriter and wait for blood droplets to form on your forehead.' I think there is some truth to that."

Pizzo allows himself to write a long first draft. "I think your first draft in some ways is a big concrete stone you've created, and then you go back and start carving and chipping until you get the sculpture you want," says Pizzo. "Often, something magical happens."

As Pizzo composes, he sometimes writes scenes that never make the final cut. He wants to see if the characters will say or do something surprising that he can keep. "When you sit down and create these characters, they take on a life of their own," he says. "They start doing things you never expected them to do. Their presence becomes so dynamic and powerful that you have to deal with them." Even if the scene doesn't get used, it helps Pizzo know his setting and characters better. In *Hoosiers*, a fall harvest was not used in the final cut, but it contributed to the story's authenticity for Pizzo.

In another example from *Hoosiers*, Shooter—the alcoholic father of a star player on the Hickory team (played in the film by Dennis Hopper)—originally had little if any dialogue. In the first scene, Pizzo had Shooter showing up drunk at a game. He thought the townspeople would pull Shooter off the basketball floor. Instead, as he wrote, it made more sense for strong-willed coach Norman Dale to go on the floor to help Shooter off.

“Once Norman did that, I knew he was going to have to deal with Shooter,” says Pizzo. “When I created that relationship, it suggested a whole different avenue, emotion, and path for that character. Shooter became richer and more interesting. He became an essential part of the Hoosiers troupe instead of a fleeting backdrop.”

On the other hand, although Pizzo has a basic concept for a film, he never lets themes or philosophies get in the way of the plot. “To me, the characters are the story, and where they start and what they go through and where they finish is what it’s all about,” he says.

“The fact that [Shooter and Norman] have parallel journeys was an accident,” says Pizzo. “There was a conscious recognition on my part that after Norman started dealing with Shooter, he was dealing with his mirror image—himself. I was aware of that, but I wasn’t thinking of it in grander terms like second chances or redemption.”

The Long Road to Hollywood

Angelo Pizzo says the odds are twenty to one or worse that a film will actually get made once a screenplay is purchased. Between 50,000 and 70,000 screenplays are registered with the Screenwriters Guild every year. The rewards can be great, but Hollywood also has its share of flat-broke screenwriters. “You hope for the best and expect the worst,” Pizzo explains. “With that philosophy, you can cope in the film business. If you are crushed and broken every time you write a screenplay that doesn’t get made, you’re not going to last long.”

Unfortunately, even a good script is not always enough. After he had written a script, Angelo Pizzo had to learn how to sell it to the people who could bankroll the costly shooting. He had to learn studio politics to get the actors he wanted in certain parts. He also had to learn about marketing strategies. He had to avoid the pitfalls that have kept thousands of screenplays from being made into movies—or have caused finished films to go straight to video.

“If a movie gets made, it’s usually because of one person backing it,” says Pizzo. “Five hundred people can say no, but it takes only one person to say yes—the person who can write that check. Oh, and one actor who can get the movie made!”

Pizzo believes screenwriters can live anywhere once they are in demand. Before that, young writers hoping to make movies in Hollywood should move to Los Angeles to learn about the business.

Above all, writers shouldn’t get discouraged if a script fails to get produced. “If a screenplay is not made, maybe the timing is not quite right,” says Pizzo.

Pizzo’s dream is to do a movie about his Italian ancestors who settled in Logansport, Indiana. “Maybe it will be perfect for somebody in two years, five years, or ten years,” says Pizzo. He adds:

I always have about four screenplays in various stages of development. If one of them gets made and does really well, then I can go back to these older scripts. If one gets made, people say, “Do you have anything else?” and I can pull these out. Scripts are never dead to me. These are all children of mine waiting to bloom and grow.

Advice for Young Writers

Writers in their teens should learn to express themselves as well as possible. Pizzo suggests that young writers experiment with a variety of styles and subjects, writing a horror story one week and perhaps poetry the next. He gives this advice:

Find different ways to tell the stories that mean the most to you. It is important to keep writing. Many people spend too much time thinking about writing, wringing their hands and worrying about it. Don't think. Don't analyze. Don't worry. Get down to your computer or get out your pen and pencil and just do it.

During his time at film school, Angelo Pizzo took more criticism classes than screenwriting classes. Since tuition and expenses can easily soar past \$30,000 a year, Pizzo says if he had to do it over, he would use that tuition money to make a movie to show potential backers. He suggests learning from the masters:

Watch as many great classic films as possible—and enjoy them. Don't analyze and break them down to find out how they work. Just let them go into your consciousness and your body—and take pleasure in them. Somehow you will unconsciously learn what it is they are doing to make that storytelling so interesting and compelling. All the best work I have done has been unconscious work.

When Angelo Pizzo writes a script, he understands that he is describing “a journey of discovery and a journey of truth.” The main character will be a different person at the end of the movie than he or she was at the beginning. “I have never written a screenplay that doesn't have that as a core philosophy and I never will,” says Pizzo.

For Angelo Pizzo, those realizations are what the process is about:

The best kind [of revelation] brings an “Aha!” from the audience at the same time as an “Aha!” comes from the characters. If we're too far ahead of the protagonist, we'll start getting turned off. “He's such an idiot—how come he doesn't see what's wrong with him?” But if we're right there

with him, and things are unfolding in front of our eyes and his eyes, and we are able to share his experience, then those moments of truth will resonate with us because either we are reliving our own truth or experiencing a new insight about ourselves.