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Hollywood Balancing Act

Far from the spotlight, the industry is rich in personal stories of how to deal with extreme anxiety and the obsession to make it.

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“Hollywood,” as we know it, didn’t happen in one draft. Many pages, no doubt, were tossed. And many revisions most likely await. But what has remained the core of this ever-evolving story is that Hollywood has always offered something indelibly tantalizing: transformation. A quick whisking away of the here and now or—at the very least—a chance to elevate one’s life’s station.

Whether it’s the clackety-clack of the Underwood in the blue cigarette haze of cramped, Fitzgerald-era writers’ rooms or Michael Tolkin’s indelible image of the bloodless, Armani-clad exec in “The Player,” Hollywood through the eras has been many things to the many people who have wrapped not just their hopes and imaginations but their identities around that swirling “it,” the pursuit of the “Hollywood dream.”

The Therapist

“If you don’t come into it with a strong sense of self, you’re in trouble,” says Jennifer Berman, who draws 60% of her clientele from the entertainment industry. “It’s very easy to lose sight of when you’re caught up in it. . . . You have to be smart to survive. You have to focus on the craft as opposed to the success or fame.”

ANACLETO RAPPING / Los Angeles Times

Many in the business find themselves locked into Hollywood's prevailing fictions—often better known by their shorthand “image,” from flash materialism to impossible beauty ideals. And if they're not careful, they become carried away in their efforts to build a life that approximates the model of the moment, no matter how absurd or impossible, and despite the repercussions.

The pressure of keeping up an image, attempting to squeeze a particular life into the narrow margins of that narrative, plays out in odd interpersonal scenarios. It can create intense isolation. Or erect an almost-impossible-to-dismantle barrier between what one's goals had been and what they have somehow become.

We think we know Hollywood and its peculiar arc—the excesses and egos. Every week, it seems, we're privy to another episode playing out before us—the big star who can't seem to cope; the starlet gone haywire and turning to drugs, alcohol or rehab, or in Hollywood spin-speak: “total seclusion.” So familiar is the conceit—the dream long-deferred or horribly derailed—that it is often summoned as the explanation for the inexplicable. We read it as a cautionary text that ponders the detritus of careers gone south on those “True Hollywood” docu-tainments or that play out in puzzle-piece real time like the ever-stranger saga of Bonny Lee Bakley.

But we seldom have access to the deeper levels of the story, or any sense of the incremental ways in which Hollywood's hothouse conditions force personal drama into bloom: the world-view-altering sense of isolation that the work often demands—people putting off starting families, people without real-life plans.

Though one might be quick to assume otherwise, Hollywood's absurdities are not just the result of overripe egos bruising, therapists will tell you, or the natural drift of people who are predisposed to this behavior because they are “creative types.” Much is simply the fallout of trying to work in a chaotic—sometimes sociopathic—environment that keeps people ever off-balance.

Little payoff and “will I ever work in this town again?” anxieties, attend any candid discussion of the frustrations of navigating a one-up, one-down world

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Hollywood: The Pressures of

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Remaining an Industry Player

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where a cardinal rule is “don't let it show.” But a handful of actors, writers, execs and techs were willing to toss out their own notions of how easily the text of big-picture dreams-turned-distortions can suddenly overwrite or impede one's plans for a life in Hollywood. They, along with therapists who've specialized in keeping people from becoming trapped inside the cliché—the latest version of what Hollywood is at this moment—have an intimate view of the narratives that pervade, and the envy, expectations, betrayals and failures that form the walls of the Hollywood maze.

Suddenly, the Phone Stopped Ringing

Actress Ruth de Sosa thought she had just the right setup. It couldn't have been scripted better.

For her, it was a long ride up, like traveling one of those narrow, fabled canyon inclines—all blind corners and switchbacks. Getting to the clearing on top was De Sosa's dream, the Hollywood Hills home, of course, commensurate reward for all the work and sacrifice. For a while, she had one—three levels, a lush garden with antique flora. That and the facialist, the personal trainer, the fabulous Donna Karan gown and the car that rode high above it all.

“I always knew I wanted to be an actress,” De Sosa recalls, over the steady ring of cell phones and the clink of Evian toasts in crystal during the lunch rush at Westwood's Napa Valley Grille. “And following my heart was always most important for me.”

After she left UCLA's theater department, her life from dawn to dawn was an enormous yawn of activity. De Sosa endured the cattle calls, the impertinent remarks and ultimately turned herself from a shy, withdrawn girl into a performer with a certain chameleon-like incandescence. She had steady commercial work, spots in TV shows such as “MacGyver” and parts in feature films such as “Hook” and “Delta Force II.” For 14 years, it seemed that her trajectory was tipped ever-upward, that the work would never stop.

That is, of course, until it did.

“I couldn't get hired,” says De Sosa, standing out in a sea of suits, dressed casually in white sweats accented with a scarf, a wash of soft marine tones, knotted loosely at the neck. The phone didn't ring. The auditions didn't pan out. People who had posed as boosters fell away.

The jobs, the paychecks, the house—gone like a mirage. Did she ever have it in the first place?

That's the Hollywood shock—that the world can crumple like a backdrop. Here on shaky soil, what isn't elusive tends to be impermanent. Success, in Hollywood, is abstract and fame an erratic moving target.

“There are so many façades to envy,” says Brentwood-based clinical psychologist Janet Leduc, who has helped various creative types read between the lines of Hollywood's fictions or at the very least question them. Otherwise, if you're not careful, says Leduc, “it sets you up. People have all these fantasies about great success, great wealth.”

And sometimes that's all they are.

But it's a powerful and resonant fantasy—fame and riches—that allows strivers to dream, and continue to, despite slim odds. “Making it” is just the first chapter. “Maintaining it” is even harder.

Navigating this environment, says Leduc, creates extreme anxiety. “It's intensely competitive. You can feel it too. Everywhere. The anxiety is transferable.”

Though tension may be ambient, even palpable, talk of it rarely surfaces amid conversations about box office take or overnight ratings. In Hollywood, a fickle business full of monumental rises and spectacular free-falls—everyone knows image doesn't just reign, it's the edge. Oftentimes, it is all you've got: “There are two crimes in this business: One is to be boring, and the other is to be desperate,” says Beverly Hills-

based therapist, Jennifer Berman, “and if you don't come into it with a strong sense of self, you're in trouble. It's very easy to lose sight of when you're caught up in it.”

Where ‘There Is an Illusion of Niceties’

Accordingly, as the industry has changed—films with seemingly ceiling-less budgets, stars demanding . . . well, the stars—so, too, have the characters who populate it. People have become “projections,” and it's difficult to discern whom to trust.

In an emotionally inclement climate, stories of how people stay their course—and how they stray from it—become texts to be studied like scripts.

Flip back to one of the earliest and most basic rules of the business to find the simple answer. The first requirement: To circulate. To network. To schmooze.

The world rapidly closes down as all efforts are geared toward going after jobs, juggling jobs and in the spare hours when not doing that, putting oneself in the right social circles—a job in and of itself. Consequently, the industry operates in its own bubble—governed by its own laws of nature and commerce. In this world, reality is fluid, and standards are set by capricious trends.

“I liken it to people who work in the airline industry,” says Leduc. “It's the same thing. You go off on location and when you come home to family and friends, their lives have progressed. Your life takes place in another place. And so, it really does a number on reality if these are the only worlds you move in.”

In a place where people often say things they don't mean or mean things they don't say, “There is an illusion of niceties,” says one longtime writer. “You have to learn to get close—but not too close, to telegraph accessibility but not reveal too much.”

Everybody was everybody's best friend the minute you meet them. It's so false," says Duncan Rouleau, who slowly reprioritized, replacing acting with screenwriting and a career as a comic-book artist. "The minute I got out here, I met a lot of people who looked just like me . . . and I observed [them] as not having anything to say. But the *desire* [to act]. There was an awful lot of that. Quite frankly, the biggest thing was the fame and not the work. It was an uneasy place to be." That instant intimacy, the unrefined plans, reflects Rouleau, "just made me realize that I needed to be unwavering and genuine in my own convictions."

But what makes it more difficult, in a place like Hollywood, says Eric Miller, a line producer, is that "most people look for a job every five to seven years. In this business it can be 10 to 20 times a year. The way the system works is through extreme networking. And it's built in that everyone is using each other. You develop a finely honed survival skill. So the last week on a film, most conversations are: 'So, what are you doing next? Will you mention me to him?' . . . It's difficult in the beginning to, but you learn."

The network hums—encouraging everything from strategic alliances to casual, serial affairs. "And that need for work is always counterbalanced by competition. 'It's beyond fierce,' says Miller. There is this whispering subtext, he has often felt. "It's not enough for you to succeed in Hollywood. Your friends have to fail too."

An Experimental Support Group

Just a couple of floors up from from the heart of it—the protracted power lunches, the drifting BMWs and Hummers—Leduc has the catbird seat. Her office, a muted refuge, done up in comfortable midtones and lit only by filtered sunlight, overlooks the tony, noisy tangle of San Vicente Boulevard. It's here that she has tried to help people throw out their old drafts and began again—with honesty and clarity.

A few years back she had begun to notice a leitmotif in her practice: worries around isolation and disconnectedness—expressed particularly by those who were involved in creative endeavors. "So many of these people were involved in these inherently lonely endeavors," Leduc reflects. "We figured by putting a group together might be some way to get at that. To create community."

Too many who make the journey to "Hollywood" are hard-wired to think that success is synonymous with fame. And, therapists like Leduc agree, it is often an unavoidable extrapolation. "There is this shot at being famous," says Leduc, "that's the motivator, the gamble."

It's played out ceaselessly as many continue to arrive, as they always have, with expectations that far exceed their talents. The rub is that the logic that determines who succeeds seems capricious. "The rules of the game are not necessarily tied to one's level of talent and expertise," says Leduc.

Adds Eric Miller: "Hollywood is

Putting an ad in a local paper and assembling subjects, Leduc embarked on an experiment designed specifically for entertainment professionals. She was aware of groups that addressed creative blocks and rejection but nothing that dealt directly with the dilemmas that Hollywood presented—working through isolation, remaining true to yourself. What was striking about the group she convened was the universality of the themes that arose. There was comfort in the resonance as people listened to others speaking about fears, blocks and trust issues that mirrored their own.

The goal, says Leduc, a soft-spoken woman with long, dark hair and a lingering gaze, "was to get them to get to some kind of acceptance of human frailties, insecurities. That there are limitations. You gather all of those weaknesses up—acknowledge them—and then go forward. You don't have to mask it. This is what it's like to be a human being. It's not exposing yourself," to admit to fear, or failure or struggle.

She was particularly interested in what the group dynamic created among people so used to playing everything so close to the vest. "In an environment that deters people's openness," she says, "you've got people who think I can't expose this part of myself because nobody gets it. But in the group they face real human beings who share the same problems and struggles. The old stuff doesn't get confirmed, and they heal."

Creating balance is a constant battle, and it doesn't help when the fantasy is fueled by countless meaningless award shows, invented "it" girls and "boy toys," or dubious top-10 lists that measure nothing except perhaps persistence. And to compound it all, adds Larry Auerbach, ex-William Morris agent and 40-year-plus veteran of the film trade, it certainly doesn't help to anchor things, when "you're working in an area where you're asking yourself, 'Are those telephone numbers or are they salaries?'"

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'Business Might Change, the Anxieties Don't'

If it was ever dramatically different, it was a very long time ago.

Even back in the '40s, anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker, after a yearlong visit, noted Hollywood's "extroverted cordiality." In her book, "Hollywood the Dream Factory: An Anthropologist Looks at the Movie Makers," she closely observed the social dynamic: ". . . the same people are at the same parties, the same restaurants, the same clubs and the same weekend resorts . . . [they] work, eat, talk and play only with others who are likewise engaged in making movies." But perhaps, most telling is Powdermaker's assessment that "Hollywood itself is not an exact geographical area" but rather "a state of mind."

The studio system in the early decades of the last century became the working model on and off the set. Stars were paid prodigious sums and began to build extravagant houses as effigies to their status; studios sunk formidable sums of money into lavish productions and developing technology.

Not so slowly, though, conglomerates put a suit of a different sort in the corner office. And by the '80s two significant things had happened: Budd Schulberg's prophetic 1941 Hollywood novel, "What Makes Sammy Run?," chronicling the mail-room-to-boardroom rise of ambitious, duplicitous Sammy Glick, had become a handbook to success rather than the cautionary tale he'd intended, and people had long stopped referring poetically to the working gears of Hollywood as the "picture business" or "pictures" and started referring to it as "the industry."

The ante was upped. As the '90s unscrolled, the work ethic changed, say many who experienced it, as the stakes rose and the atmosphere was cut through with a potent mixture of bottom-line ambition, cynicism and entitlement.

the Peter Principle on steroids. You work really hard, you're honest, you don't complain and you look up and the person who screwed off has been promoted. I've been doing this work for 12 years, and I'm still amazed. . . . It's hard not to become cynical."

For some, says Leduc, coming to the understanding that you're not in complete control of the situation, of who or what determines your success, "that you're not omniscient—there is relief in acknowledging that. But for others, there is a great letdown. There's this perception that there is this world that they've gotten into, 'So why can't I?'"

"The business might change but the anxieties don't," says Auerbach. True. Yet, despite its mercenary atmosphere, the film business is still largely an industry of dreamers, people who want to shape not just thought but imagination. "I remember being 12 years old and coming out of 'Star Wars' thinking: If I could make

other people feel this way . . ." says Rouleau. "To me that's the best kind of power."

Focusing on the Craft Instead of the Fame

It's painfully easy, however, to lose one's way and begin, almost imperceptibly at first, to redefine success as stardom. It happens frequently, says therapist Jennifer Berman, who draws 60% of her clientele from the entertainment industry. Quite often, she tells many of them, in order to keep your footing, it is important to maintain "a sense of honesty about yourself and a sense of who you are." Playing the game is important, she stresses, but there is a way to walk the line.

"You have to be smart to survive," Berman says, and much of her job is to help her clients re-think their priorities, particularly in a business where success is a moving target. "You have to focus on the craft as opposed to the success or fame."

Each case, of course, is unique. But at the core, the survival skills she teaches are about rooting people in the here and now, making sure that they've made time and space for a life. "For those who travel a lot, I encourage a spouse's visit to the set. If you have to be away from your family, you have to be clear about your priorities because you don't get that time back. And the job's not worth it. It takes more than accomplishing a career goal to feel fulfilled," says Berman, "so I try to help people discover what it is they are really about."

Most important, stresses Berman, is not to make the industry—the pursuit of it—the four walls, floor and ceiling of your life. "It's important to involve yourself in activities aside from screenings, premieres and parties. It's important to create a support system. Don't wrap your whole identity around it."

Easier said than done, says Auerbach, who has watched the industry associate dean, student-industry relations at USC, is in helping students develop strategies, directions and ways to cope.

"The business is totally subjective," he says. The key to survival: "learning to trust one's instincts and to wear it [both rejection and success] lightly. . . . Talented people do make their way through the maze, but don't be fooled, because it also "takes a great deal of luck and timing."

To remove oneself from the atmosphere could do more harm than good, he adds. "Technically, the doctor is correct, but it isn't practical. It's difficult because the business is so time-consuming. If, say, you're writing all day, you're working in isolation. So you have to go to the right clubs and the right parties. It is very difficult to have a private, insulated life. Again, that's nice for the doctor to say, but it isn't practical."

That's the double bind.

Quieting the Obsession Yet Keeping the Dream

Breaking the spell doesn't mean shattering the dream. Leduc would call it accepting that things end. "To break the obsession . . . to heal, you have to be able to cope with loss and endings and acceptance of them. It's sobering."

It's a daily mantra, one that De Sosa also cycles through.

In the last few years, her losses have helped alter her perspective. "It's difficult," she says, "to get out of the loop of failure. . . . What I wish our society would talk more about is failure. It's [the] art of life and there are ways to use it."

With a new manager and a steady string of work, including a one-woman stage show, "The Lemon Fresh Scent of Diva Monsoon," opening this month at the Rose Alley Theater in Venice, De Sosa is lit with new purpose. She's rebuilding momentum, climbing up the hill. But this time a different one.

"I think in this business you're living for the future not the present. Even now, after all I lost, I still phrase things around, 'When I'm famous. . . . When I get that, I'll do this. . . . We all do. It's not that I don't still want it. I think that I'm much more wise."

"I will never forget doing a workshop and overhearing someone say: 'Is that Ruth de Sosa? What happened to her career? I remember when she was on the way up.' And I'm thinking: Wow. No one ever told me that! I think a lot of people who are successful don't always feel successful."

"If I were to write an autobiography, I would call it 'Private Victories.' I know inside of me what it took for me. It may not look like much to those on the outside, but knowing my frailties, knowing my strengths, I know what I've accomplished. It's that sense inside that you keep, because it is your spirit and your essence that you have."

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