

EMERSON INDUSTRY NIGHT

MARILYN ATLAS ON WRITING FOR TV

By Barry Brodsky



Marilyn R. Atlas is an LA Agent and producer. Courtesy Photo.

The Emerson College Screenwriting Certificate program presented LA Agent/Producer Marilyn R. Atlas in October to discuss the current TV script market. Atlas is an award winning producer (REAL WOMEN HAVE CURVES, A CERTAIN DESIRE) and personal manager of actors and writers. Atlas talked and answered questions for more than two hours about the state of the spec script in LA and why so many writers are now concentrating on TV specs versus feature length film specs.

“So many people writing spec scripts think that all you have to do is write it and put it out there and it will sell,” Atlas told the audience of students, writers, actors, directors, and producers. “If only it were that easy.” Atlas suggested to the writers in the audience that they should have at least two feature specs. “There’s been a big shift to TV in the past couple years, but it’s always good to have a couple of good feature length scripts to show. You need at least two pieces of original material,” Atlas told the audience. “No one reads specs of existing shows anymore. Generally, since it’s far easier to sell TV

pilots and get them set up than wait the four or five years to try and get a film financed beyond an initial writer’s option, I’d recommend concentrating on TV.” Atlas stressed the opportunities that exist in TV: “TV is so wide open.” There are forty three buyers for TV and just seventeen in features.”

A question on the minds of many in the audience was “do I have to live in LA to succeed?” Atlas responded “You can’t sell a script from outside LA, London, or other film centers if you’re a newbie unless you’ve won a contest. Not placed as a finalist – but won.” She could feel the disappointment in the room and immediately followed with “That said, before making the move, it’s smart to try and network, sign up for workshops in your area, take online webinars, and enter contests to try and make some contacts before you get out there. With the democratization that digital platforms bring,” she continued, “try and brand yourself and get a fan following with a web series.”

Atlas warned the writers in the room about thinking they can fully fund their projects using vehicles such as Kickstarter and GoFundMe: “Out of ten movies made that were crowdfunded, none recovered their money, including VERONICA MARS. She said you were better off “getting together with some friends and creating a web series” as a way to break in. “Screenwriting and TV writing is a team effort. Get out there and meet people who you can work with. Enroll at local pitch fests that has LA industry people hearing the pitches. Build a support team of peers who will be struggling alongside you, and have the occasional email correspondence with a teacher, junior executive, or assistant in LA so you can have your bearings when you do arrive.”

Atlas emphasized the importance of a good pitch, and told the story of David Chase selling the idea for The Sopranos with simplicity, power, a good twist, and most importantly brevity: “It’s a family drama about a middle aged guy who cheats on his wife, doesn’t get along with his mother, sees a therapist, and works in the family business – the Mafia.”

Atlas concluded her session advising writers to be sure to have ‘table reads’ for their works-in-progress and to pay attention to the notes they get from those involved. “Listen to what people are saying about your screenplay. If enough people are telling you there’s something wrong, there usually is.” Marilyn R. Atlas’s book, Dating Your Character, which she co-authored is due out next Spring from Stairway Press.

The Screenwriting Certificate Program at Emerson holds two industry night events each semester which are free and open to the public.

For more information about the program you can visit the website at <http://bit.ly/1mjMqGS>

Barry Brodsky is the Coordinator of the Emerson Screenwriting Certificate Program.

