

Interview

Lisa Alexander

Executive Producer of **THE MISTS OF AVALON**

Interview by Catherine Tudor

When and how did you become a producer?

My producing came out of my working for a number of years in development. I ran actor James Coburn's production company and, as a result of developing projects for film and TV, naturally grew into my role as producer.

Which role do you prefer: writing, producing, or teaching?

I am by nature a writer. I originally came out to California from New York City to write films. My first step towards that was to work with other writers developing projects, a move which led me to producing.

Still, I think about producing, writing, and teaching as professions which all demand distinct personalities.

A producer has to be able to say no, they have to be good with people and good at communication, and a producer has to be like a pit bull seeing a project through. A producer also has to be willing to play 'the game' of Hollywood, and even like it.

A writer is more an observer by nature. She's a commentator. She reflects back what she sees in a way that makes it more meaningful. In the movie business, a writer also has to be tremendously collaborative, fast and thick-skinned.

A teacher needs to feel like teaching is a calling. To my mind, the teacher needs to enjoy helping someone else 'get' it, more than doing it herself.

I am really a writer in terms of how I walk in the world. I do, however, have producing skills.

During the 1920s and 1930s there were many women involved in film production, but then the balance of power between men and women shifted so drastically during the 1950s and beyond that women rarely were given important roles behind the scenes. Has the film industry become more equal in regards to the clout women have in Hollywood and in television as producers, directors, and screenwriters? Or are there still gender issues left to overcome? What has been your experience in that respect?

Huge gender issues. The women who succeed seem to act 'like men' more than the men do. Also, there is a real problem for women in the industry who have children. You really need a 'wife' to be a producer if you have kids. The men I worked with all had wives to take care of the kids . . . that means fabulous loving care, the best, of the children as well as someone also handling the rest of your life.

No babysitter or assistant can ever do that for your personal life.

And so, the women producers just try to juggle like crazy. And it's hard. The work world model is a man's model. It doesn't take into account the emotional component of having a family.

Any advice to women embarking upon a career in film production? What are some of the day-to-day challenges that women in particular face?

Be nice to everybody, you never know who they'll be next year, or next month, for that matter.

Be clear in your communications. Super clear. Know that you will have to play the game, everybody does, but find a way to enjoy it--you'll last longer.

Be clean: i.e., be honest and upfront. What you see is what you get. If you do that, you will also become someone we need in this industry.

Don't be afraid to do the grunt work and, do it when you're young and you don't have other responsibilities.

Take time for your personal life--when you're sitting in the audience at the Emmys or the Academy Awards waiting for the envelope to be opened--have something else going for your life as well as your career. That way, if you win, great, if you don't--you still go home with the prize. (Believe me, I know. It happened to me.)

Who decided to adapt the now late Marion Zimmer Bradley's novel, THE MISTS OF AVALON, into the Emmy award-winning mini series? Was it the screenwriter who came up with the idea, or the producers, or was it the novel's publisher or agent who began the process? How did it evolve?

I came up with it. THE MISTS OF AVALON was a book I found at the Bodhi Tree Bookstore. I read it, loved it and was naïve enough at the time to think it could be turned into a movie. Seventeen years later, it happened.

This was a really hard project because it involved a very big check, and it was essentially a woman's film.

What are the advantages of turning a novel into a TV mini series over a theatrically released film?

We developed MISTS as a feature with Warner Bros for years. Ultimately, I got a call from our executive who said that we had a real shot to make it as a mini series, and she couldn't promise she'd be able to push it through as a feature. This was at the time of BRAVEHEART and DANCES WITH WOLVES. I knew we had a movie that was just as expensive to do right, and yet we couldn't attach a Kevin Costner or a Mel Gibson because the great parts were for the women.

I think the mini series form worked much better for this story. There is no way we would have been able to turn an 876-page novel into a two-hour film and do it justice. In this case, MISTS was also the Arthurian legends from the woman's point of view. Every time we'd cut the script, we'd pare away everything that made MISTS unique, and end up with CAMELOT.

Did anyone ever consult the author during the filming? Did you ever meet her?

No, I never met her. I did try to contact her through Russ Galen, her agent, from the beginning. She was adamant that she did not want to be involved. I think MISTS was a project dear to her heart, and she didn't want to have to go through the adaptation process. I did not push it because I knew we would have to cut the book anyway because it was so long, and it was easier without the author. I also took on the position of 'protector of the spirit of the book' because I felt a tremendous responsibility to Marion and to her fans.

It was sad that she died just before it was finished.

The cinematography in that series was mesmerizing. Who has the final say in who is hired for the cast and crew: the director, the producers, or the studio?

Vilmos Zsigmond did the cinematography, as you know. He was wonderful. We were very lucky to get him for a TV project. The final say depends on the players. In this case, Uli, the director, came up with a wish list approved by the studio and the producers.

In the DVD version of THE MISTS OF AVALON, there is a special feature that presents the storyboard. Who works with storyboards? Whose job is it to create them? Why?

Usually it is the director who does the storyboard. He's the one who is breaking down the script shot by shot. He works with an artist. The storyboard is the visual aid for the shot by shot breakdown of the script.

What is your favorite memory from making THE MISTS OF AVALON?

I think it would have to be Julianna Margulies charging down the hill on the horse. We brought in horses from France, the same ones that were used in Joan of Arc. We also had an incredible trainer and stunt woman. Julianna had been in horse shows as a girl but she had not ridden since then. She wanted to do the charge down the hill herself.

It was quite something to watch her, our (extremely valuable) star gallop full speed down a hill and then plunge into battle with her sword held high. It was also amazing to watch her turn that horse 360 degrees while fighting the Saxons with that sword. She's quite a woman.

The still photograph of her with that sword is right above me as I write.

Of all the stars who approached me over the years to play Morgaine, I think Julianna ended up embodying the character perfectly.

You now offer script consulting through WriteMovies.com where you are also a board member. How did you hear about the company and why did you decide to work with them?

I found out about WriteMovies.com while tooling around on the Net. One of the things I enjoy doing is working with stories and writers. No matter what producing or teaching projects I do, I think 'birthing' stories is something I will always be involved in.

What do you believe are the most important qualities a writer must have to be a successful screenwriter?

Talent. Tenacity.

First, you have to learn how to write, then you have to learn to tell a story. Too many writers can do one or the other. The synthesis of the two is key.

You also have to be able to navigate your own creative process, i.e. the gremlins which pop up from your subconscious to sabotage the work.

Finally, self-awareness is extremely important.

Carl Jung said that the creative process is an instinct. I also believe that it is the place where we learn and grow. Sacred work.

What are the most important qualities a successful producer must have?

Talent. Tenacity.

An ability to communicate clearly and firmly. Self confidence--a producer needs to be able to make decisions, hard decisions, quickly and surely. They need to be able to say 'no' a lot . . . and to take a tremendous amount of 'no's' from other people.

Producers also need to be able to balance the 'talent', the wildly creative people essential to making good art, with the 'money', the people who pay the bills. My partner in MISTS, Mark Wolper, is a consummate producer.

Have there ever been any times when you had doubts about your abilities to succeed in film? If

so, what gave you the courage to continue?

I am someone who is constantly learning. Frankly, I like it best when I'm learning and I'm very honest about it. What makes me most uncomfortable about the movie industry is when I see it run by games--power plays, half-truths, dissembling and jockeying for position. I really don't feel that that's the place that I thrive, and that makes me want to go back in my writing cave.

If you could get one point across to novelists who have not yet been published, or to screenwriters who have not yet seen their scripts optioned, what would it be?

Focus on writing from your heart. Don't think about what is going to sell, and then write to it. Someone will always beat you out if you play the concept game and then try to be the first one out with it.

Writing from the heart gives you an authentic end product and that, in the end, is what we want to have optioned and published. It's what we need.

What project are you working on now?

I am writing from my own life for the first time. I came to a point in my writing where I stopped wanting to make things up. I wanted to go deeper. When I started writing from my own experience, the writing dropped to a much more powerful place. Now, I just want to chase that and see where it goes.

Also, for the first time, I am not looking for concept. I am trying to work from the inside out, instead of the outside in. It's an amazing process. My assumption is that it will end up becoming a novel.

I am also writing a non-fiction book on How Story Heals and developing an experiential workshop on working with the structure of stories.

As you can see, the bulk of my work now is as writer and teacher. I do take on certain film projects that come my way, but mostly I see my role now as a storyteller. I look back on the experience, the wonderful experience, of making *THE MISTS OF AVALON*, as an incredible journey with a story that resonated enough with me to insist that I help it get made.

Relevant Links:

- Filmography for [THE MISTS OF AVALON](#) at IMDB.com.
- [THE MISTS OF AVALON](#), DVD, at Amazon.com.
- [THE MISTS OF AVALON](#), by Marion Zimmer Bradley at Amazon.com.
- Marion Zimmer Bradley's official [Literary Works Trust](#).
- [WriteMovies.com](#)
- Alex Ross Interviews, [Part I](#) and [Part II](#): "Working in Hollywood" by the founder of WriteMovies.com.

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