



The 2007 Writers Strike

PHOTO: MATTHEW SIMMONS
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Why I Strike: A Working-Class Writer Puts His Livelihood on the Line



I'm running down Ivar toward Hollywood Boulevard. The rally has already begun. I can hear the voice of Patric M. Verrone, the president of the Writers Guild of America West, booming off the buildings.

I'm late because it took me forever to find a parking space, and I wasn't about to shell out \$10 to park in one of the private lots that proliferate throughout Hollywood. It's not that I'm cheap. I only have about six bucks in my wallet.

I enter the mass of sign-toting, scarlet-shirted picketers that fill Hollywood Boulevard like a Nathanael West version of the Red Sea and instantly become assimilated. It's Day 16 of the writers strike. I'd spent most of my days picketing at CBS Radford and Universal, which are near my home in Studio City, but today I made the schlep down to Hollywood for the big, multi-union rally.

There's a palpable buzz in the air. The companies have agreed to come back to the table and resume negotiations. They had underestimated our resolve and the economic impact of the strike. They had not expected such a strong show of support from the showrunners, actors, teamsters, and other unions. And the PR was killing them. So, the rally had the excited buzz of a party. Maybe, just maybe, this awful, painful and, at times, glorious strike would be ending soon, and we could all go back to work.

Of course, for many of us, the "going back to work" part was the catch.

I was one of thousands of WGA writers who did not have to put down a pencil once the strike began because my pencil was already down. I was not in the middle of a script assignment for Paramount or writing on the staff of *Grey's Anatomy*. I was out of work.

I consider myself a blue-collar writer. Over

the 13 years I've been working as a professional writer, there have been times when projects got made and money poured in and times when work was scarce and I ate a lot of things that came in a can. This year was definitely in the latter category.

I had been working for months on a pair of spec scripts that I'd hoped to get out before the strike. My agent kept reassuring me that the companies were still buying, that they had to "feed the stockpile," but by the time I was ready to go out with my specs, the spigot had closed. I'd missed the gravy train.

Couple that with the fact that the movie I had written for a German studio that was supposed to shoot in September had just gotten delayed, delaying along with it \$100,000 in deferred writing fees—I was screwed. Worse than screwed. I was broke.

And that's when the strike hit.

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Alicia Keys is up on the stage firing up the crowd of 4,000 singing, "Must be crazy if you think I'm gonna fall for this anymore ... everybody say no no no no no!" We shout back "NO NO NO NO NO!" We're feeling, dare I say, almost director-like with power. We'd shut down Hollywood. We'd shut down Leno and *The Office* and *Angels & Demons*. We'd traded in our pens for pickets and remade ourselves into the heroes of our own screenplays. We were badasses. Behemoths. The Incredible Hulk. Actually, that was just a street performer dressed up as the Hulk and passing out business cards, but the metaphor was lost on no one. Yesterday we were competing for jobs and

rewriting each other into oblivion, but today we are united. Bound together against the forces of corporate greed. Outgunned and out-moned but determined to send the ravenous Six-Headed Beast back to hell—or at least the bargaining table. Today we are all Jack Sparrow.

The other day, my youngest daughter was watching *A Bug's Life* (which, in spite of its gargantuan grosses, never paid out a dime in health, pension or residuals). I got teary-eyed watching the battered and bruised hero Flik inspire his ant brethren to rise up and conquer their grasshopper oppressors. That's what being on strike feels like. Like you're part of something bigger and more powerful than you. A strike is very good at making you forget the feeling that you're helpless, if only for a few hours.

There was a time when being broke wouldn't have bothered me. Like I said, I've had bad years before. But, it's different now. I have two young children, a mortgage that is hardly sub-prime, and a wife with a fledgling psychotherapy practice that has yet to take off. When I was younger, I relished the challenge of uncertainty, the roller-coaster ride of boon and bust. Now the ride just makes me nauseous. Being 41 years old is kind of like being at the 41-minute mark of a movie—you want to know where the story is going. You want some consistency. I find myself looking at insurance salesmen with envy. I dream of a day when I will no longer have to borrow money from my mother.

Predictability is a dirty word in the parlance of the narrative, but when it comes to real life, for me at least, it is the Holy Grail.

