



Michael Brandt and Derek Haas

THE BOYS ARE BACK IN TOWN

Acclaimed screenwriters Derek Haas and Michael Brandt return for the Screenwriters Conference

BY CHUCK RAINEY

Nashville's Union Station Hotel sets the scene for the 12th Annual Nashville Screenwriters Conference, June 4-6. The event will host a score of panelists, and 2010 looks better than ever. The dynamic duo of Derek Haas and Michael Brandt will attend again this year, providing a double barrel of big-name star power, and they've taken the time to give us some insight on what you might gain from the conference if you attend (and you should).

Haas and Brandt are the writers behind such blockbusters as *Wanted*, *3:10 to Yuma* and *2 Fast 2 Furious*. The pair met in grad school at Baylor, never thinking they'd be tied together in perpetuity. "We quickly realized the town (Los Angeles) viewed us as a unit, and I'm lucky to have a partner like Michael Brandt," says Haas.

"In truth, we both know we are better together. It wasn't so much of a revelation as simply a fact we both accept," continues Brandt.

This duo doesn't have many problems when deciding on the flow and direction of a story. Brandt explains their process, "We usually get together a few times before we type 'fade in' to break the story, figure out the characters and work up an outline. Then we have an open rewrite policy: Our one rule is to just make it better."

Their works in progress include an adaptation of *The Matarese Circle* for MGM and a big summer action movie for Jerry Bruckheimer called *Alien Legion*. "The one we're most excited about is an original script called *The Double* that we're going to shoot this summer. I'm directing and Derek is producing, with Richard Gere as the lead. This will most likely be our next movie in theaters," Brandt says.



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“The reason I’m directing our original script is that we want to be involved as much as possible in the final movie. The director does have the power and can rewrite or reshape the story as he sees fit, so naturally, we wanted to have a greater impact on our work,” he admits.

“We’ve worked with some terrific directors, but you always see things you would have done differently. I just hope Michael doesn’t banish me from the set,” jokes Haas.

“I’ve already written that speech with some inspiration from David Mamet. I hope someone’s around to record it,” Brandt quickly replies.

Both writers look for similar things in a film or screenplay. Haas feels drawn to “big, smart action movies, particularly spy thrillers like Bourne [based on Robert Ludlum’s character Jason Bourne] or [Tom Clancy’s] Jack Ryan.” Meanwhile, Brandt explains how he feels it’s easy to become drawn toward certain styles. “What we saw as kids has an impact on our ‘story sense,’ and often comes from conversations about other movies we have seen,” he says.

“Nashville has a fantastic conference, and we enjoy coming every year. The long days and early morning panels can be a bit rough; but these aren’t just movie-goers, they’re people who care about the writing of the script, and it’s always great to meet people with a passion for writing,” says Haas.

The perception that panelists are just suffering through these events is false, Brandt tells me. “Writers are just happy to be recognized at all, and one reason we love Nashville is that the writer here is king. Hollywood could learn a lot from Nashville.”

Haas talks about the food and the music, while Brandt recalls “the guitar ‘pull’ and the concert at the llama farm as a highlight every

year. I’d trade it all for a chance to be a singer/songwriter. Unfortunately, I can do neither.”

Hanging out with other writers outside Hollywood and telling war stories is also high on the list of things to enjoy while in Nashville. Both men are avid golfers and get out whenever possible. Haas admits that Brandt is the better player.

For fans of our two panelists, I asked for a little trivia you’ll especially enjoy.

For example, Haas calls the one-page screenplay, *Messy Life*, they did for Movie Line “a challenge” and Brandt sees the main character, Braden, going far.

“We’re expanding it into a full miniseries ... one episode per slugline,” he says.

On another note, this twosome once discussed adapting a Manga piece titled *The Drifting Classroom*. “Ha!” exclaims Haas, “I haven’t thought about that in a while. That was a cool Manga comic. Maybe we should dig it back out again?”

Brandt offers, “We’ve never written horror ... probably not our strength. But that book could work as a thriller. I swear my version was printed backwards! (I know, I know.)”

Our final question is the big one: How does an aspiring writer get where Brandt and Haas are? The simple answer is surprising. “I truly believe that if you have a unique voice and write a taut script based on a big, novel idea ... you will sell it. It happens every week in Hollywood. There’s no closed door that says new people can’t come in. It’s not easy, but it’s a fantastic gig if you can get it,” says Derek Haas decisively.

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