

Writers' block

'Diablo' duo hopes a strike isn't in the script, but they're prepared

By Josh Chetwynd
USA TODAY

SYLMAR, Calif. — During a break in filming the movie *Diablo*, screenwriter Paul Scheuring stands alone, wistfully looking at one of the elaborate sets. It is as if he is trying to soak in the fact that his words helped create the commotion of the crew and the ornate staircase that dominates the room.

Scheuring, 31, and writing partner Christian Gudegast, 30, are on the cusp of Hollywood's big time. *Diablo*, a \$32-million-budgeted action movie starring

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Vin Diesel (*Pitch Black*), will be the team's first feature-film credit — and they have a deal with the movie's studio, New Line Cinema, to write a *Diablo* sequel and another film.

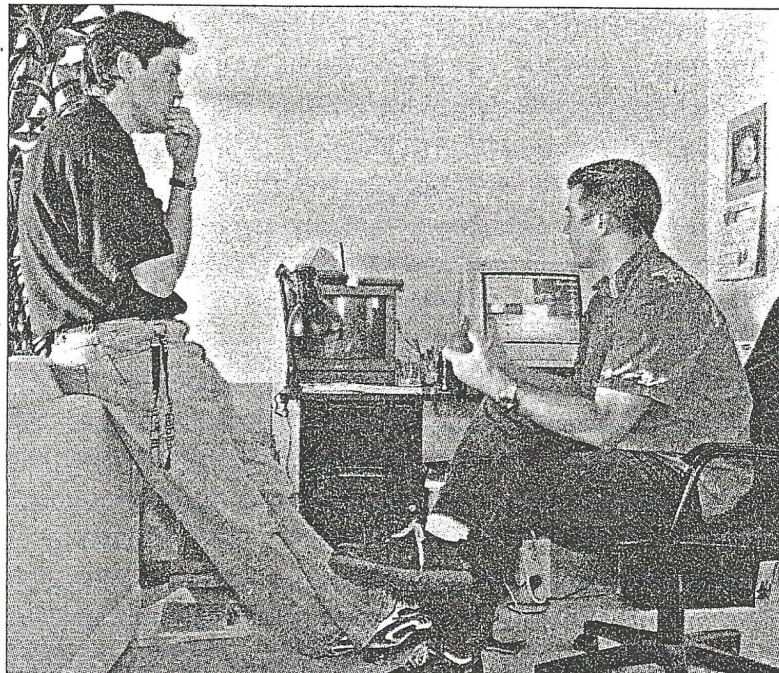
But their ascent into moviemaking's major leagues could be disrupted by a strike. On May 1, the Writers Guild of America's contract with the major studios, production companies and networks expires, and this now-hot writing team would be forced to stop cold.

"Everything is about being hot and streaky in this business," Gudegast says. "Writers may have more staying power than, say, actors, but if there's a long strike, there is certainly trepidation."

It's a legitimate concern. The last writers strike, in 1988, lasted 22 weeks. The WGA and management have been holding discussions for more than a month over such issues as creative rights (such as changing the "film by" credit that directors often get on movies), and overseas, video, DVD and cable TV residual rights. But there has been no sign a deal is close, which means it's crunch time for writers like Gudegast and Scheuring.

"We're at D-Day," Gudegast says.

The urgency is clear during a meeting



"The question right now is, how much writing can you pack into two months and still make sure the writing is good?"

— J.C. Spink, manager for Gudegast and Scheuring

Photos by Bob Riha Jr., USA TODAY; passage above from one of the writers' action-adventure scripts

Bracing for a walkout: Christian Gudegast, far left, and Paul Scheuring work on a script in Scheuring's Malibu apartment; below, the writers and their manager, J.C. Spink, meet to discuss career options in the event of a Writers Guild of America strike that could paralyze Hollywood.

with their manager, J.C. Spink. Earlier that day, Gudegast and Scheuring made what they hope will be a final pitch to write a teen action film for *Lethal Weapon* producer Joel Silver and *48 HRS.* director Walter Hill. But that won't be enough.

"The question right now is, how much writing can you pack into two months and still make sure the writing is good?" Spink says. "With Christian and Paul, I think that number is three. For most writers, it would be two."

Gudegast and Scheuring can squeeze in an extra project because they are workhorses. While they were writing *Diablo*, the pair also signed on to completely rewrite *The Company*, an action

The BMW slams into a huge evergreen. MAGNUSSON IS LAUNCHED THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD.

The Renault CRASHES to a halt on the switchback below.

It rests, UPSIDE DOWN. Then, silence. The snowfall increases.

INT RENAULT DAY

ALEC'S BLOOD drips down onto the Renault's ceiling. He's suspended upside down by the seatbelt.

A ragged GASH on his chin. He looks up through dazed eyes.

The door of the BMW rattles. Amaro emerges.

Alec struggles with the seatbelt. Amaro spots the Renault.

Alec releases himself, falls to the ceiling with a THUMP.

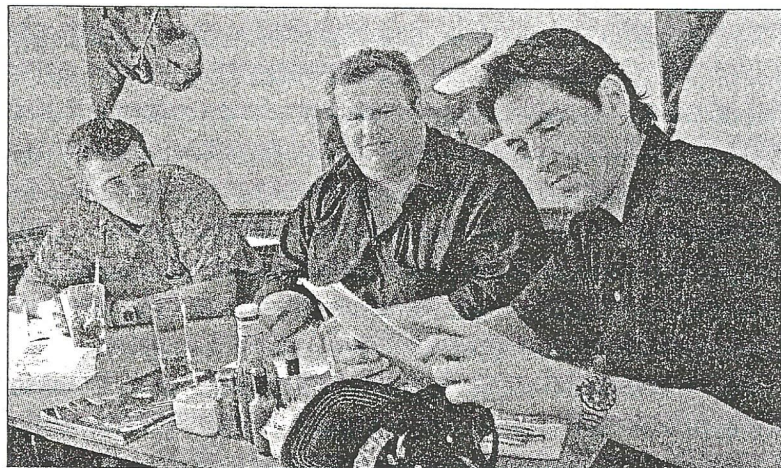
EXT AUTOBAHN / SWITCHBACKS DAY

The SWISS PATROL CAR rolls up to the mangled safety railing. Dondé climbs out. Looks over the edge. Spots the WRECKAGE.

He carefully approaches the BMW. Empty. MAGNUSSON'S BLOODY BODY lies in the snow in a contorted, unnatural position.

Dondé draws his pistol, goes to the Renault. Empty. He looks around. A TRAIL OF BLOOD leads into the forest.

2 sets of FOOTPRINTS follow



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Writers try to cram in projects before strike takes hold

Continued from 1D

thriller for *Stigmata* director Rupert Wainwright.

"We'd write from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. on *Diablo*, and then 9:30 p.m. to 4 a.m. on *The Company*," Gudegast says.

"A lot of writers say they have writer's block," Scheuring says, explaining how they can work for such long hours. "I think most times writer's block is a lack of discipline. You have to be willing to throw pages together. Maybe some of them will be bad. But some will also be good."

To get the three projects, the writers have been meeting with Hollywood execs as much as possible. Along with the Silver/Hill film, Gudegast and Scheuring have talked to Columbia Pictures about rewriting the long-gestating film version of the TV series *S.W.A.T.* They also have offered four potential films to New Line. The studio appears to like two of them, and, depending on what the New Line execs choose, the writers plan to pitch the others around town. They also hope to find financing for the first script they wrote together, a dark action film called *Black Ocean*.

The plan is to finish whatever deals they get before the strike deadline — ideally, one or two shorter rewrites and a full script. If writers strike, they are barred from working on any script for a studio, production company or network. Scheuring and Gudegast officially would have to put any unfinished screenplays aside for the duration of the walkout.

Scheuring says they intend to follow the letter of the law if the WGA strikes but admits that it would be hard not to think about the work.

And he guesses many writers will feel the same way: "I suspect you'll see, four weeks after a strike, writers handing in tons of scripts."

Gudegast believes that strike pressure will help them reach their goal — and that it might be good for the quality of the movies, too.

"Some are saying that studios are rushing things because of the strike, but I believe this is the kick in the (behind) that Hollywood needs," he says. "There is so much overdeveloping. It's ridiculous. (The potential strike) helps stop a lot of the jerking around."

Shooting the films, however, would have to wait until after deals are struck with both writers and actors. (The Screen Actors Guild contract expires June 30.)

Gudegast and Scheuring are among the lucky ones. Only 51% of the WGA's membership got any work in 1999, according to the union's most recent annual report. Of writers who worked, 25% made less than \$30,000.

Nevertheless, a walkout by the likes of Gudegast and Scheuring would have a devastating impact on Hollywood. The partners quote \$2 billion — the amount the Southern California entertainment industry would lose per month if both writers and actors strike.

The writers realize that a portion of that would be money they would lose.

Their deal with New Line for the sequel to *Diablo* and the other script will gross them \$1.6 million, but even before taxes, the writers had to hand out more than 26% to

their managers, agents and lawyers. The guild also gets a cut. After taxes, the remainder split two ways won't carry either one for a lifetime.

Gudegast and Scheuring have not taken their run of success for granted.

"I try to sock away 80% of my (earnings)," Scheuring says. "You've got to put the food in the fridge for the cold months of the strike."

Gudegast, an intense former semipro soccer player, has concerns of his own. In March, he's marrying his girlfriend, Stacey Smith, a physical therapist.

"We want to buy a house in the summer," he says. "But if the strike keeps going, we're in trouble. We have no idea whether we'll be able to afford it."

Says Scheuring: "I'm going to hold off on that stuff."

Yet, this is Hollywood, where lavish lifestyles are, if not the norm, at least not uncommon. Although Scheuring's two-bedroom apartment isn't extravagantly decorated — no big-screen TV or fancy stereo system in the living room — he pays \$2,500 per month to live on the water in Malibu. And Gudegast, who says he never eats at home, drives a sporty black BMW M3.

Both acknowledge that when they got their big deal with New Line, they bought some toys. Whether they will be able to maintain their lifestyles now rests in the hands of the WGA negotiators, whose progress, or lack of it, is a mystery to these two.

For a while, Scheuring would go to the WGA Web site (www.wga.org) for updates, but he found few details. "We don't really know what's going on," he says. "It's almost as if the leadership doesn't trust the rank and file."

Still, they are familiar with the issues, and on some of them, they disagree with each other. The pair both support increasing writers'

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residuals. "That's the role of the union — to get its membership a better (financial) deal," Scheuring says. "We ask for a dime, they offer a nickel, and you hope that they can meet in the middle."

The most contentious issue for them — like many of the more than 14,000 WGA members — is creative rights. Many writers have long felt that directors have hoarded the glory, so, among other things, the WGA wants restrictions on the "film by" credit for directors.

Scheuring wouldn't strike over this issue. "You can see in the credits who the film is written by and who the director is," he says. "You can read the script."

But Gudegast says he might be willing to strike for a month or two to pressure restrictions.

He points to *Diablo* as an example. He and Scheuring say they have tremendous respect for the film's director, F. Gary Gray (*The Negotiator*), but Gudegast wonders whether it's fair for the movie to be "a film by F. Gary Gray" — a credit the director will receive.

"We were working on the script 4½ years before we sold it. We wrote nine drafts of the film," Gudegast says. "If you are the writer/director, go with God — you deserve the 'film by' credit. Otherwise, it shouldn't be a film by the director."

Despite those feelings, there is no animosity on the *Diablo* set; Gray and the writers warmly greet each other, and the director is eager to have them help map out the final weeks of shooting.

In fact, everybody from the producers to the film's star, Diesel, seems pleased to see the pair. Both writers appear perfectly comfortable on the set, and Gudegast chats with the actors and, at one point, walks off with his arm over

one's shoulder.

That may seem ironic to some, because one of the WGA's creative-rights issues is getting writers better access to the set.

Diablo's filmmakers "get upset if two days go by and we're not on the set," Gudegast says. "I guess we can understand that sometimes writers aren't given access, but we've felt completely welcomed."

Saying goodbye to all of that, even temporarily, is particularly upsetting for the men, because

they worked hard to get where they are.

The UCLA film school grads began writing together in 1992 and took whatever work they could get. That included \$2,500 to rewrite a never-released schlock movie called *Dance to Your Grave*. A low point came in 1996, when they had to rewrite an episode of the now-canceled series *Soldier of Fortune, Inc.*, because producers wanted to change a character that was a nimble operative to a guy in a

wheelchair.

During the lean years, Scheuring held a series of day jobs, including working at a prosthetics factory and serving as an investigator, where he had to confront people who were stealing cable service.

"If I were still working those jobs," he says, "I would just fall back on them if there were a strike."

Now, his future in the event of a walkout is more uncertain.

"There is so much more to lose."