



My Big Break Was a Humble Job in Hollywood.

Darrell Fusaro (March 28, 2010)



People often ask, "How do you break into show biz?" I think I've discovered the answer.

Several years ago I received a letter congratulating me on a short video documentary I produced about the doorman at the Four Seasons Hotel, NYC. It was from the Hollywood Director Joel Schumacher and, in a friendly way, he said, "you are an excellent Director." Somehow this letter activated delusions of grandeur. I decided to leave New York, abandon my art career and move to Los Angeles. "Hollywood here I come!"

My girlfriend, Lori, now my wife, was an actress so it was easy to convince her that this move would be great for the both of us. Within a few weeks we were landing in Los Angeles.



Spotting celebrities and driving by famous locations seen on television, was exciting! Soon we began to suspect familiar looking strangers were celebrities, whispering to each other, "I think that's someone famous." But our excitement diminished as our credit card balances grew.

My focus soon shifted from making it in the movies to just making it, period. What the hell was I thinking? Moving to L.A. was beginning to look like a tragic mistake. To ease my worry I figured out, if worse came to worse, we could survive if I found a job that netted just ten dollars an hour. So, I took immediate action, filling out two applications a day, the only requirement I had for any job was; it paid ten dollars an hour.

As I set out each day I repeated an affirmation I read in the book, "The Game of Life and How to Play it," by Florence Scovel Shinn; "I have a wonderful job in a wonderful way, I give wonderful service for wonderful pay." This would squelch my panic and renew my faith that I would have the right job, at the right time, in the right way, if I just stayed the course. It also helped me accept the fact that even if moving to L.A. was a blunder, nothing happens by mistake, and a wonderful opportunity, if only for growth, would present itself. To be honest, I was still hoping for something better than just growth.

Then, out of nowhere, a neighbor familiar with my situation came with good news. He said his mother was having a difficult time finding an artist for a job she had available and since I was an artist and needed a job, I might be interested. My enthusiasm rose, see, "nothing happens by mistake," I told myself. Maybe I was lead to Los Angeles, not to work in the movies, but to kick-start my art career! I was very excited about this new possibility.

He seemed glad that I was eager and went on to explain what the job would be. He said, his mother needed someone with some artistic ability to paint neon bulbs. What do you mean, paint neon bulbs? He explained that the job was to dip glass neon bulbs into paint and then hang them to dry. What the...? You mean like on an assembly line? I heard the voice inside my head say, "You exhibited with Andy Warhol in New York and now you're gonna work in an L.A. sweatshop? How pathetic." But humility, born out of desperation, coerced me to ask, "How much?" "Ten bucks and hour," he replied.

The next day I was alone wearing protective gloves and a mask in an abandoned airplane hangar dipping delicate glass neon bulbs in paint and carefully hanging them on fishing line to dry. Nothing could be further from my dream to be an art star.

But I accepted it and surrendered to the fact that this was meeting our needs. I decided to swim with the current and continued with my silly little rhyme as I dipped each bulb and hung it to dry; "I have a wonderful job in a wonderful way, I give wonderful service for wonderful pay!"

Soon I began to look forward to my days dipping the neon bulbs in paint. It became a pleasant form of meditation. I started to take pride in my daily output, striving to keep up with the load of unpainted neon bulbs that would be delivered by my neighbor's mom each day. Her name was Barbara Ryan and she always came delivering the bulbs with a smile and complimented me often, telling me how happy she was that I was willing to take the job.

After a couple of months, I had completed about a thousand bulbs when, Barbara, came to inform me that, that was it. I was done painting neon bulbs; my job was finished. For a moment I thought, "Now what will I do?" Believe it or not I really began to enjoy this humble labor. Then she asked, "Can you stay on and work on the set installing them?" Did she just say, "...on the set?"



Barbara explained that all the neon bulbs were for a miniature recreation of the Las Vegas strip to be used in a movie. She also went on to explain that her boss Larry Albright, was a Hollywood legend. Larry Albright, that funny old man who looked like Einstein? I had no idea. He just seemed like a regular guy. She filled me in on how he was responsible for many award-winning lighting effects, including those seen in *Close Encounters*, *Star Wars* and even Michael Jackson's illuminated shirt and sidewalk in the music video for "Billy Jean."

The next day I was on the set, a small airfield in Simi Valley, where a crew was working on the miniature Las Vegas strip. I was shown a 1/15th scale replica of the Las Vegas Hard Rock Hotel sign still under construction. It was my responsibility to install all the neon and illuminate the sign under Larry Albright's specifications.

The movie was titled, "Con Air" and all I knew about it at that time was, we were creating the miniatures for a stunt where a large model C-123 Provider plane - nicknamed the 'Jailbird' - would smash through the Hard Rock Hotel sign just before crash landing on the recreated Las Vegas strip. I was amazed at how real the models looked. This was even better than I imagined it would be. I reflected back to memories of my childhood fascination watching the behind the scenes making of "Star Wars" on TV.

Each day was spent carefully adhering and wiring the delicate neon bulbs on the sign and all the while enthusiastically reminding myself, "I have a wonderful job in a wonderful way, I give wonderful service for wonderful pay." In two months the sign was completed.

When we lit up the sign for the first time the aroma of a fresh clean spring day started to fill the room. Apparently the power packs were emitting some sort of gas. Even though I enjoyed the fragrance, I had a hunch this may not be good to inhale. So, I decided to inform the Art Director, Mike Stuart, and ask him if he knew if the fumes were lethal.

"You would know better than me, you're the electrical engineer." He responded. "What?" I went on to explain that, "I'm no electrical engineer, I got hired off the street to paint neon bulbs in a shed for ten bucks and hour."

"Yeah, right Fusaro." Mike responded and he continued, "In any case, I was hoping you would be able to stay on and supervise the stunt." Supervise the stunt?

Since the sign was completed and Larry Albright's contract was over I'd be jobless if I didn't accept his offer. Once again it was intuitively obvious, "Of course I could stay on." Within ten minutes I was signing contracts with Disney as a 'Special Effects Stunt Supervisor.'

For the final weeks before and up until the actual filming of the stunt, I was on hand during the rehearsals to insure the sign would operate according to plan.

When the day finally came to film the stunt, every crewmember and subcontractor that had contributed to the stunt, including Larry Albright and Barbara, came to watch. At the moment the director shouted, "Action," the model C-123 "Jailbird" suspended by cables high above the airfield was released smoking with engine fire FX. It flew perfectly, heading directly into the illuminated Hard Rock Hotel sign. Immediately upon contact the sign exploded into flames as six high-speed cameras caught the action. When, "Cut!" was shouted the applause and cheers were spontaneous.

Six months later sitting in a theater with Lori waiting to see "Con Air," I realized what an incredible experience this had been and how fortunate I was. I went from painting neon bulbs in an old airplane hangar to Stunt Supervisor on a major motion picture in less than six months. If I snubbed that ten-dollar an hour job I would have missed out on an unbelievable adventure. This is one of those indelible incidents forever reminding me that if I ever feel that a job seems to be beneath me, it may very well be God presenting me with an opportunity that is far above me.



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