

What is a Faith Film?

By Dan Gordon

Let There Be Light Co-writer and Producer

“Faith Film” is an interesting phrase. In the motion picture business, it has a definite meaning. It is a film intended for a niche audience; people of faith. And the faith for which it is specifically intended is Christianity, and the audience is its adherents.

But, let’s face it, every film is, in some way a “faith” film, in that it depicts primarily the world view of its auteur – the filmmaker – and that world view is, for all intents and purposes, the filmmaker’s faith. Storytelling is the sharing of faith, because every story has a point of view.

However, there is one other kind of faith film, the kind of film not only intended for a faith audience, but a film literally made by faith.

Let There Be Light is exactly such a film.

To start with, there was not only never really a chance of seeing it get made, there wasn’t even a unanimous intent on getting it made.

I’ve been a screenwriter for longer than I care to admit. In May of this year, I will mark my fiftieth year, as they say, in the biz. I have always been a studio writer, and have written such films as *The Hurricane*, with Denzel Washington; *Wyatt Earp*, with Kevin Costner; *Passenger 57*, with Wesley Snipes and *Murder in the First*, with Kevin Bacon. *Let There Be Light* marks my seventeenth feature-length film. I have also done around two to three hundred hours of network, cable and premium cable television along the way, starting out as head writer of Michael Landon’s *Highway to Heaven* on NBC, over thirty years ago.

In each and every case, absolutely without exception, either I had an idea for a movie and pitched it to a studio, or independent producers or a television network, if the project was intended for that medium; or, someone contacted my agent and said, “We’ve just optioned a book or the subject of a life story, and think Dan Gordon might be right for this.”

I was one of a shortlist of writers: I put together my “take” on the subject, then went to the studio and pitched my idea. I basically auditioned for every job I got, one way or the other.

Those are the only two ways it works in Hollywood.

Or, at least, those are the only two ways it’s ever worked, in my career.

That is, up until Let There Be Light.

From the beginning, Let There Be Light fit no mold and proceeded, neither according to my plan, nor that of any studio or network but, I firmly believe, according to God's plan. That's an awfully arrogant statement to make, I know. But, since I've spent my life as a storyteller, let me tell you a story.

One day, I get a call from Sam Sorbo, wife of Kevin Sorbo. They're a lovely couple and we were introduced by a mutual friend. And we flirted with a television series idea, or two. As I recall, we even pitched one of them. And, as is the case with more than ninety percent of all the projects I've ever been involved with, absolutely nothing came of it.

Actually, that's not true.

A deep friendship I have come to treasure came of it. But that doesn't pay the rent, keep the lights on, or get a film made. And that kind of friendship, many times, crashes on the rocks of the pressures of actually making a movie.

But, from the get-go, this one was different.

I get a call from Sam Sorbo. She says, "Would you be interested in writing a screenplay with me?"

"No."

"How come?"

"Because I don't write with other people. And, in kindergarten, I never shared my toys or played well with others."

"Well, would you consider meeting with me for coffee?"

"No."

"How come?"

"I don't drink coffee."

"Tea?"

"Don't drink tea. But, I'll meet you, and I'll bring a bottle of water. You can drink what you like." So, I meet her at a shopping mall in Calabasas, and she tells me a story. A really good story that got my attention, immediately. So I said, "OK. Here's what I'll consider doing. There's something

in this. You write the first draft and then give it to me, and I get to do what I want. And then, we'll both look at it and see if we think it's a movie."

Sam answered, "Deal," with a smile.

Well, as she commenced to writing the screenplay, incredibly, at almost exactly the same time we were meeting, Sean Hannity called Kevin Sorbo, who had appeared on his show on FOX News a few times, plugging God's Not Dead and his other faith-based films, and Sean says, "If you ever have a faith-based movie that you think I might be interested in, bring it to me, because I think movies can do more than anything else to influence culture, and that's something I'd be interested in."

Now, may I say, that's just plain goofy. The money never chases you. You ALWAYS chase the money and, usually, you run out of breath before it does.

But here's one of the most well-known television personalities in the entire world saying, "If you've got something, I'd be interested in financing it."

But, of course, we didn't have something. All we had was the story that Sam and I had agreed to write which, of course, we had not yet written.

So, the three of us fly to New York and we pitch Sean in his office, at FOX News. Now, outside of the President of the United States and a one-armed paper hanger, there is probably no person on earth busier than Sean Hannity. He doesn't have a lot of time, and he doesn't like to spend a lot of time just talking. He is a very dynamic doer. So, I've got basically twenty minutes to a half hour, between his three-hour radio show and his one-hour nightly television show, in which to pitch him the story of a screenplay which doesn't exist.

But, it is a heck of a story.

Its genesis was in Sam's pure heart and, for me, it was probably one of the most personal stories I've ever done. It dealt with the death of a much-loved, first-born child. It contained a heartbreaking bitterness of two people, who once loved each other, who have been torn apart by loss. It dealt with lacking faith, and finding faith. It delved deep into the hours I have known of PTSD, of washing down pain pills with vodka and still feeling the pain. Of what F. Scott Fitzgerald called, the "real dark night of the soul", where "it is always three o'clock in the morning, day after day."

On those nights, after a rather nasty car accident which tore my rotator cuff, fractured a collar bone and triggered some horrific memories both of my son's fatal car accident, and of wars in which I've participated, I would sit, zonked out in a chair, since I could not sleep lying down for three months, blitzed out of my mind, watching infomercials. And the next day, I would find, to

my amazement, I had ordered six cases of whatever the previous night's huckster had been selling.

So, the story contained a combination of the purity of Sam's soul and a few hard-won truths. It also contained the story of a pal of mine, who used to be a mobbed-up wiseguy and found Christ in solitary confinement, during the time he was euphemistically residing in government housing. It made a heck of a story. And I managed to tell it before Sean had to go on the air for his radio show, or start prepping his nightly television program.

There are a lot of indecisive people on earth. A lot who do not follow the truth of their own convictions. And even more who have no convictions to follow. Sean Hannity fits into none of those categories. He said, "OK." On the spot.

He asked what the budget was, and we told him.

He simply said, "OK." Just like that.

He then said, with the hard glint in his eye of an Irish construction worker, "Don't come back to me for a penny more because you're over budget."

And, as easy as that, we were in business.

But, without realizing it, the Big G was orchestrating everything, all along. People came to be a part of our film, not just because it was another gig, but because it was their heart-wrenching story, as well.

Our story touches upon cancer, because my brother died in my arms of a brain tumor. And, as he did, his last words were about what he was, apparently, catching a glimpse of. "It's so beautiful," he said. "It's so beautiful!" I had never seen a smile like that before on his face.

And so, a young actress, who was to play a pivotal role in the film, auditioned for us. But, it wasn't just a gig for her. Because, despite her youth, she was a cancer survivor, and this was her story, as much as ours.

Another young woman, who turned in a magnificent performance, would have to be done by a certain hour, because she needed eight hours of dialysis. It was her faith that kept her going, and she poured every ounce of hers into it.

Our producer slash line producer was nothing less than a Jedi warrior. He made miracles happen on the set. Usually, you search for locations. Our locations searched for us, and found us.

Every step of the way, through every crisis, the Big G made it better, and there was always a lesson for all of us to learn.

Sam had never produced a movie in her life, and she carried this one across the finish line... On faith.

Kevin had to carry the load of starring, and directing, and he did them both... On faith.

And Sean Hannity was the best boss anyone could ask for. He left us completely alone. He never visited the set, never even called. He just said, "Bring me back a good movie." And he did it... On faith.

The end result is a film that makes audiences laugh, cry, stand up and cheer and, I do believe, renews in them that most precious of all commodities... Faith.

Let There be Light is, you might say, a faith film.