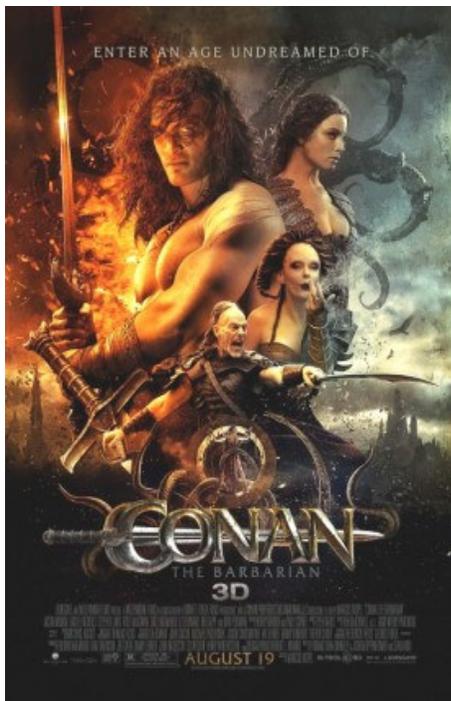


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Sean Hood is one of the four credited screenwriters on the remake of *Conan The Barbarian* released last weekend to [dismal](#) grosses. Today he [writes](#) on the Internet Q&A site Quora about “What’s it like to have your film flop at the box office? Don’t they know how bad it is before it comes out?”:

When you work “above the line” on a movie (writer, director, actor, producer, etc.) watching it flop at the box office is devastating. I had such an experience during the opening weekend of *Conan the Barbarian 3D*.



A movie’s opening day is analogous to a political election night. Although I’ve never worked in politics, I remember having similar feelings of disappointment and disillusionment when my candidate lost a presidential bid, so I imagine that working as a speechwriter or a fundraiser for the losing campaign would feel about the same as working on an unsuccessful film.

One joins a movie production, the same way one might join a campaign, years before the actual release/election, and in the beginning one is filled with hope, enthusiasm and belief. I joined the *Conan* team, having loved the character in comic books and the stories of Robert E. Howard, filled with the same kind of raw energy and drive that one needs in politics.

Any film production, like a long grueling campaign over months and years, is filled with crisis, compromise, exhaustion, conflict, elation, and blind faith that if one just works harder, the results will turn out all right in the end.

During that process whatever anger, frustration, or disagreement you have with the candidate/film you keep to yourself. Privately you may oppose various decisions, strategies, or compromises; you may learn things about the candidate that cloud your resolve and shake your confidence, but you soldier on, committed to the end. You rationalize it along the way by imagining that the struggle will be worth it when the candidate wins.

A few months before release, “tracking numbers” play the role in movies that polls play in politics. It’s easy to get caught up in this excitement, like a college volunteer handing out fliers for Howard Dean. (Months before *Conan* was released many close to the production believed it would open like last year’s *The Expendables*.) As the release date approaches and the tracking numbers start to fall, you start adjusting expectations, but always with a kind of desperate optimism. “I don’t believe the polls,” say the smiling candidates.

You hope that advertising and word of mouth will improve the numbers, and even as the numbers get tighter and the omens get darker, you keep telling yourself that things will turn around, that your guy will surprise the experts and pollsters. You stay optimistic. You begin selectively ignoring bad news and highlighting the good. You make the best of it. You believe.

In the days before the release, you get all sorts of enthusiastic congratulations from friends and family. Everyone seems to believe it will go well, and everyone has something positive to say, so you allow yourself to get swept up in it.

You tell yourself to just enjoy the process. That whether you succeed or fail, win or lose, it will be fine. You pretend to be Zen. You adopt detachment, and ironic humor, while secretly praying for a miracle.

The Friday night of the release is like the Tuesday night of an election. “Exit polls” are taken of people leaving the theater, and estimated box office numbers start leaking out in the afternoon, like early ballot returns. You are glued to your computer, clicking wildly over websites, chatting nonstop with peers, and calling anyone and everyone to find out what they’ve heard. Have any numbers come back yet? That’s when your stomach starts to drop.

By about 9 PM its clear when your “candidate” has lost by a startlingly wide margin, more than you or even the most pessimistic political observers could have predicted. With a movie its much the same: trade[s] call the weekend winners and losers based on projections. That’s when the reality of the loss sinks in, and you don’t sleep the rest of the night.

For the next couple of days, you walk in a daze, and your friends and family offer kind words, but mostly avoid the subject. Since you had planned (ardently believed, despite it all) that success would propel you to new appointments and opportunities, you find yourself at a loss about what to do next. It can all seem very grim.

You make light of it, of course. You joke and shrug. But the blow to your ego and reputation can’t be brushed off. Reviewers, even when they were positive, mocked *Conan The Barbarian* for its lack of story, lack of characterization, and lack of wit. This doesn’t speak well of the screenwriting – and any filmmaker who tells you s/he “doesn’t read reviews” just doesn’t want to admit how much they sting.

Unfortunately, the work I do as a script doctor is hard to defend if the movie flops. I know that those who have read my Conan shooting script agree that much of the work I did on story and character never made it to screen. I myself know that given the difficulties of rewriting a script in the middle of production, I made vast improvements on the draft that came before me. But its still much like doing great work on a losing campaign. All anyone in the general public knows, all anyone in the industry remembers, is the flop. A loss is a loss.

But one thought this morning has lightened my mood:

My father is a retired trumpet player. I remember, when I was a boy, watching him spend months preparing for an audition with a famous philharmonic. Trumpet positions in major orchestras

only become available once every few years. Hundreds of world class players will fly in to try out for these positions from all over the world. I remember my dad coming home from this competition, one that he desperately wanted to win, one that he desperately needed to win because work was so hard to come by. Out of hundreds of candidates and days of auditions and callbacks, my father came in... second.

It was devastating for him. He looked completely numb. To come that close and lose tore out his heart. But the next morning, at 6:00 AM, the same way he had done every morning since the age of 12, he did his mouthpiece drills. He did his warm ups. He practiced his usual routines, the same ones he tells his students they need to play every single day. He didn't take the morning off. He just went on. He was and is a trumpet player and that's what trumpet players do, come success or failure.

Less than a year later, he went on to win a position with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, where he played for three decades. Good thing he kept practicing.

So with my father's example in mind, here I sit, coffee cup steaming in its mug and dog asleep at my feet, starting my work for the day, revising yet another script, working out yet another pitch, thinking of the future (the next project, the next election) because I'm a screenwriter, and that's just what screenwriters do.

In the words of Ed Wood, "My next one will be BETTER!"

<http://www.deadline.com/2011/08/conan-the-barbarian-screenwriter-answers-whats-it-like-to-flop-at-the-box-office/>