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SCRIPTLAND

Former gambler now in the chips

Allan Loeb knows a thing or two about Lady Luck. She's treating him much better lately.

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Scriptland is a new weekly feature on the work and professional lives of screenwriters.

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There are few bets with longer odds than making a living as a screenwriter. And then there's Allan Loeb. A compulsive gambler since age 10, he's currently riding one of the hottest streaks in Hollywood — screenwriting's equivalent of the "It Boy."

The 37-year-old Chicago native's original screenplays — "Only Living Boy in New York" and "Things We Lost in the Fire" — turned up on an anonymously compiled industry Black List of the best screenplays last year, voted there by dozens of talent agents, managers and development execs around town. Loeb basically hasn't stopped typing since March 2005.

"Things We Lost in the Fire," an intermittently mawkish melodrama about family, grief and redemption that took the Black List's top slot, drew the attention of just about every female movie star from Julia Roberts down. It's now a DreamWorks film currently shooting in Vancouver with Oscar winners Halle Berry and Benicio Del Toro.

"A Little Game Without Consequence," which Loeb adapted from a frothy French play (and subsequent film), follows a happy couple that pretends to split up only to have their friends enthusiastically support the idea. It starts shooting next month in New York City with Cameron Diaz and Jim Carrey, who recently suffered his own painful breakup with longtime agency UTA only to immediately rebound with the older, sexier CAA.

Half a dozen other projects that Loeb has touched are actively working their way through development. He's even — contrary to his own best instincts — begun dating actresses.

Just two years ago, however, you might have spotted Loeb hunched at an L.A. bus stop contemplating the spectacular slow death of his dream. He had been a struggling screenwriter for 12 years and lost any money he made on the occasional script sale to the implosion of the tech bubble and a voracious gambling addiction that sometimes swallowed \$30,000 in a weekend and left him with \$150,000 in credit card debt.

In 2004, some found money in the form of an option extension on a thriller called "Protection" that he had sold to Fox years before allowed Loeb to move to New York for a few months to write his "Hail Mary" script, "Only Living Boy in New York." The day he typed "Fade In," his agent called and dropped him.

Upon returning to L.A. once again nearly broke, he was rewriting "New York," a homage to "The Graduate" about a young guy in the city seduced by his father's mistress, with producers Albert Berger and Ron Yerxa ("Little Miss Sunshine") when he finally joined Gamblers Anonymous.

"Literally the minute I quit gambling my writing changed," Loeb says. "It was magical. I had been giving so much emotional energy to gambling that only half of myself was out there writing. Gambling was a time suck, an energy suck, a creativity suck. I started going to GA meetings every Thursday night, and the writing flourished. It had so much more energy and passion."

CAA quickly signed him and sold "Only Living Boy" to Sony a month later. Loeb then worked his struggle to stay clean into the heroin-addicted character Jerry, played by Del Toro, in "Things We Lost in the Fire." Now the versatile writer is feeding his addiction to storytelling, as he develops "Baster," an adaptation of a New Yorker short story by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jeffrey Eugenides; "21," the story of the infamous MIT student card counters that he rewrote; and an original romantic comedy pitch that he's rewriting now for Warner Bros. Loeb and his Scarlet Fire Entertainment producing partner Steven Pearl also just sold pitches for a pair of police procedurals to Fox and FX.

"After getting dropped by my agent, not knowing what to do with my life, feeling like a failure, being a gambling addict who had lost all of his

money ... this was pure gravy," Loeb says. "I wasn't like, 'Well, what if I'm a flash in the pan? What if I'm the It Boy and then I cool?' Those are all elegant problems to have. I'm thankful for the struggle now, I think it makes me a better writer."

Eszterhas on how to be Eszterhas

Does the world still need Joe Eszterhas? In this dark time of diminishing ticket sales and studio slates, cowering development executives, cast-adrift producers and demoralized screenwriters, Joe Eszterhas believes that, yes ... yes it does.

His words long absent from movie theaters, the once-colossal maverick has lately turned to gilding his legacy as a shrewd, trash-talking, astronomically successful screenwriter by giving something back to his brothers and sisters in the trenches. In between testifying before Congress about the dangers of smoking and endeavoring to turn "Showgirls" into an actual Las Vegas revue (a brainstorm so obvious it's astounding that no one has yet made it happen), the Hungarian-born Eszterhas has been recording tales of his bitter, brawling barnstorm of the industry in books like his bestselling 2004 memoir, "Hollywood Animal." His newest confessional, "The Devil's Guide to Hollywood: The Screenwriter as God!," is a self-aggrandizing, dated, scattershot compendium of anecdotes, quotations and settled scores that contains very little actual help for aspiring screenwriters. It is, however, an excellent primer on how to be Joe Eszterhas, which at this point seems to be a screenwriter who hasn't had a produced credit in nine years and whose grungy pugnacity was last relevant during the Don Simpson era.

The useful advice that does appear in the book comes courtesy of the writers Eszterhas has the good sense to quote, masters like Ben Hecht, Dalton Trumbo, Paddy Chayefsky and Robert Towne (though for some reason Eszterhas shows particular contempt for William Goldman, who won Oscars for "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" and "All the President's Men"). Throughout, this "refugee street kid from the West Side of Cleveland" castigates all the slaving dimwits who developed, greenlit, directed and/or performed his words despite the fact that he was paid tens of millions of dollars to write lines like: "She's no butterfly. Tony, she's all pelvic thrust. I mean, she prowls. She's got it!" And yet....

It's certainly true that Eszterhas' scripts for "Flashdance," "Jagged Edge," "Basic Instinct" and "Showgirls" are entertaining beyond their guilty-pleasure status as cheesy relics. They're also often electric with twisted humor, erotic menace and a writer's gleeful embrace of film's more primal joys. And given Hollywood's unrelenting subjugation of them, what a triumph for any writer to have turned himself into an arrogant, narcissistic, overpaid celebrity — why should movie stars have all the fun?

These words are written too

A sign that the Writers Guild of America has a sense of humor came last Wednesday in the amphitheater of Pan Pacific Park, when the WGAW held the first public display of unity in its buildup to contract negotiations next November.

After a series of stirring speeches shot through with measured outrage over lack of decent pay, health coverage or guild protection for reality TV writers and editors, about 700 members and supporters, dressed in their trademark bright-red WGAW T-shirts, marched past the CBS complex with picket signs proclaiming "Reality Shows Are Written," "Sitcoms Are Written" and "Game Shows Are Written." As cars passing on Beverly Boulevard honked their support, one hand-printed placard stood out, perfect in its arch resignation: "These Signs Are Written." Give that guy his residuals already.

Comments and tips can be e-mailed to fernandez_jay@hotmail.com.

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