

As an aspiring stand-up comic, **Dave Lease** never thought he'd have a shot at selling a spec until he met his writing partner, **Megan Hinds**. Together, they cracked the stingy Hollywood spec market.

DAVE LEASE AND MEGAN HINDS will be the first people to tell you how tough it is to break into the Hollywood screenwriting club. Though both attended college to study film, they each tried different approaches that got them no closer to selling their first script.

Lease spent his days as a middle-school substitute teacher and his nights as a stand-up comedian, writing spec scripts and comedy sketches in between. Hinds, on the other hand, worked in the development department of an entertainment company, where she massaged other people's screenplays and built a network of contacts she hoped would one day pay off as she labored over her own off-hours writing.

And like so many aspiring Hollywood players, they both also worked part-time for a restaurant that happened to sit outside the gates of one of the big studios.

"We actually met each other back when we were both working at a restaurant called Gladstone's at Universal City," Hinds recalls. "We got to be friends there and then the restaurant went out of business like everything at Universal City does after a couple of years. And everyone kind of went their separate ways."

The duo continued their individual efforts to break into the entertainment business, all but forgetting their brief friendship at the restaurant. Lease focused even more on his stand-up comedy, writing sketches for a predominantly African-American sketch comedy group (Lease is white), *The Edgeucation*, and participating in its NAACP award-nominated play, "History of the Black Man."

Soon, Lease found himself on the road traveling to distant comedy clubs. "My best friend, Kyle Erby, and I would go on the road together," he says. "On one trip, we had to drive to Montana. Kyle's a black guy and we'd have these long conversations about everything from politics to race to [sexuality] — everything you could think of." After a while, the two friends felt their conversations were entertaining enough to warrant inclusion into a movie or TV show. So Lease began to develop the idea. At first, he wanted to do a story about two cops, but feeling that that genre was well-covered ground, he decided it

might be better if the two characters were... hitmen. "I wanted to do the hitman route with two guys, both extremely good at their craft, who are forced to work together," Lease says. "It started with these two interesting characters and then the story developed."

Still, a stand-up comic doesn't typically have a lot of opportunities to pitch a script to a Hollywood exec, so Lease continued to develop the story while continuing to work full-time. And it's a good thing he did, because his soon-to-be co-writer, Megan Hinds, found herself at a comedy club one evening staring at a name she recognized. Or did she?



Dave Lease



Megan Hinds

"So I'm thinking, 'Well it's gotta be somebody that I hate,' because I can never remember the names of comedians that I like, only remember the ones that really annoy me," Hinds says. "Then he comes on stage and it's like, 'Oh, it's that dude from Gladstones,' and he was hysterical." Not only that, but after visiting with him after the show, she found out that Lease was also a writer. Figuring that by pooling their resources they might have a better chance at success, the duo decided to try writing together. Their first collaborations were on a few TV scripts, but it wasn't long before Lease brought up his idea for a story about a white hitman forced to team up with an African-American hitman who was hired to kill him, an idea that became *The Black Phantom*.

Armed with creative story kernel, the scribes spent every spare minute away from their jobs writing the script. During the weekdays, they would stew over the current section of the script. Then, on the weekends, they'd collaborate in marathon 12-hour writing sessions to knock out the actual pages.

And while it was grueling at times, their hard work finally began to take shape.

After floating the script to a few trusted non-industry friends who gave it a thumbs-up, the duo handed the script to Hinds' contacts within the industry. "I basically gave it to everyone I knew," Hinds states. "I told them, 'If you like this, please pass it to somebody who can help us.' And it turned into a sort of chain letter."

Yet, as everyone knows, Hollywood is a small town and it wasn't long before agents and managers began to take notice. Manager Britton Rizzio at Circle of Confusion was an instant fan. "They have a very sharp voice. Their dialogue is hilarious. It's like a throwback to Quentin Tarantino," Rizzio says about *Black Phantom*. "It's a fun, fun ride and it's not something you see a lot of these days."

Sold on her enthusiasm, the scribes signed with Rizzio who then passed it along to producer William Packer (*Obsessed*, *Stomp the Yard*) who then gave it to newbie director Doug Aarniokoski, who had just signed on to direct *Red Sonja*. The film-making duo arranged for a lunch with the writers, and Lease and Hinds were more than impressed.

"We asked them what they would like to change, knowing how it works in Hollywood," Hinds recalls. "Everything has notes and everything needs to be changed. Doug looked at us and said, 'Change? What do you mean change?' We were like, 'All right! You're in!'" Lease is quick to point out that the lack of changes had a lot to do with the hard work and energy they poured into their screenplay, something that is sometimes overlooked in the hustle that is the spec screenplay market. For Lease and Hinds, breaking in was all about writing their passion.

"I'm not going to write something because that's what's selling," Lease declares. "I'm not going to write a vampire movie just because everyone's doing vampire movies. If it's hot right now, by the time I sit down and write it, get it finished, completed, it's going to be old news. I think any writer should just write what they think is a good story. Otherwise you're just a spec in a big pile of vampire specs." And that would really bite. **CS**