

A series of articles about what screenwriters do when they're not writing.

The Curator

For Golden Globe®-winning screenwriter Larry Karaszewski, showcasing lost cinematic treasures is a way of celebrating the art form he loves.

Larry Karaszewski has a thing for celebrating real-life figures whom others refuse to take seriously. Together with longtime collaborator Scott Alexander, Karaszewski turned inept filmmaker Edward D. Wood Jr. into the romantic hero of *Ed Wood* (1994), recast pornographer Larry Flynt as a freedom-of-speech crusader in *The People vs. Larry Flynt* (1996), and explored the dualities of comedian Andy Kaufman in *Man on the Moon* (1999).

Karaszewski's history of cultural anthropology helps explain why the busy screenwriter moonlights as the host of an eclectic film series in Los Angeles.

"Film is over 100 years old, and there's a lot to sift through," he says. "It helps to have a person of taste curate that and point out things that may have been overlooked." About once every month, the screenwriter presents a themed double feature at the American Cinematheque as part of a series titled, appropriately enough, "Larry Karaszewski Presents."

In addition to introducing the shows, he hosts onstage discussions with special guests.

"Some of the best evenings are when I have fellow screenwriters as guests—people like Buck Henry and Lorenzo Semple Jr.," Karaszewski says. "It really becomes a conversation between two professionals, as opposed to a moderator and a guest. I can dig a little

deeper. With Buck Henry, I showed *Taking Off*, so we were able to talk about Milos Forman and his working method." Released in 1971, *Taking Off* was the first U.S. movie directed by Czechoslovakian émigré Forman, who later helmed *The People vs. Larry Flynt*. "What was most gratifying that night was to see how well *Taking Off* played 40 years later. Milos had always thought he tried to make

was eager to present a Knotts double feature but needed special guests to boost attendance. After seeing the video on Trailers from Hell, Moninger asked Karaszewski to put together a panel. Karaszewski came through in a big way, recruiting several of Knotts' co-stars and relatives, among others.

"It was a fairly large panel and it was a bit chaotic, but it was well-attended and it led to

the Cinematheque asking me if I wanted to do a regular thing," Karaszewski recalls. "It was really just about me being a fan of the material. That's one of the great things about Trailers From Hell—you can pick out things you think are underrated and champion them, and this is an extension of that idea."

The Cinematheque's invitation was fortuitous because it reached Karaszewski around the time that a venerable screening series at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art was endangered by shortfalls in philanthropy. "That kind of pissed me off,"

Karaszewski says, "because Los Angeles should be able to support these things. So, I thought it would be fun to step up and actually be a part of it. Doing this series reminds me why I do what I do. If you look at some of the films Scott and I have written, they're full of movie love. *Ed Wood* is filled with movie love. So it's great to share my fetishes with other people—



Larry Karaszewski (left) moderates a conversation with composer Richard Baskin at the American Cinematheque

PHOTO: AMERICAN CINEMATHEQUE

one of his Czechoslovakian movies in English, but that night it played like gangbusters."

Celebrating obscure movies in another arena led Karaszewski to the Cinematheque. He has contributed several videos to the website Trailers from Hell, one of which praised the Don Knotts comedy *The Love God?* (1969). The Cinematheque's Grant Moninger

instead of dragging my wife and kids into our living room to watch something, I can share the movie with 300 people in a real theater.”

In addition to his series—for which Karaszewski picks the movies, recruits most of the guests, and helps generate publicity—he occasionally guest-moderates Cinematheque events featuring big-name guests.

“The most thrilling evening was when I moderated Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner together in the sold-out Egyptian Theatre,” Karaszewski says. “Being there with two of the reasons I became a writer—that was a magical night. When you have people like Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner up there, the art is staying out of the way. Let them talk. And that’s true with most of my guests. I don’t try to project myself too much into it. I do a little speech before the movie—a sort of two-minute summation of why we’re here, why the movies we’re showing are interesting, and why the person we’re talking to is important. That’s when I get a lot of my opinions out.

“Because I’m often choosing films that aren’t played that much, it’s very gratifying to see them play well, like *Taking Off*. Occasionally, you do get one that doesn’t play well. I programmed *The Marriage of a Young Stockbroker*, which was an interesting film from the early ’70s, but I’m not sure the movie won many new fans. That was one of the more interesting nights, because I was onstage trying to convince the director the movie was good.”

The series is developing a regular fan base, although attendance still rises and falls with the prominence of the movies and guests on any given night. “The audience is about half and half between people who are fans of the movies I show and people who are seeing this stuff fresh,” Karaszewski remarks. “Even when I program [material] that’s famous, some people haven’t seen it. I had Frank Pierson as a guest and showed *Dog Day Afternoon*, and I asked how many people had never seen the movie. Forty hands went up. There’s always a new generation coming along that needs to be exposed to this stuff.”

Karaszewski says he tries to keep the series fresh by inviting guests from a variety of craft areas. “I had an evening with Richard Baskin, who’s really a forgotten figure—he did all the music for Robert Altman’s *Nashville* and Alan Rudolph’s *Welcome to L.A.* I thought it would

be interesting to look at *Nashville* as a musical, to look at songs as part of character. So Baskin was a great guest, because Altman did an interesting thing—he let the actors co-write the songs to give the film unity. And with *Welcome to L.A.*, Richard acted as a kind of Greek chorus.” Adding to the unique nature of the evening was the presence in the audience of showbiz legend Barbra Streisand.

Karaszewski says that nearly everyone he has invited to appear at the Cinematheque has said yes, with only a handful of people postponing to some indefinite point in the future. He adds that one of the joys of the series is meeting people he has long admired. For instance, Karaszewski had never met Michael Schultz—the director of cult classics *Cooley High* (1975) and *The Last Dragon* (1985)—prior to contacting Schultz about appearing at the Cinematheque for a chat about those films.

“I’m also interested in the occasional evening without a guest,” Karaszewski says, citing a recent program that honored Italian screenwriter Suso Cecchi d’Amico, who died in July; d’Amico’s filmography includes such towering films as *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960). Additionally, Karaszewski hopes to dig even deeper into the vault of movies that weren’t widely seen during their original releases. “I would love to show a French film called *Le voyage en douce* (1980), with Geraldine Chaplin and Dominique Sanda. Nobody knows this movie, and it’s a beautiful, subtle masterpiece. I just have to figure out how to pair it with something that would get people to come. The programming part of it is a lot of fun for me. I was actually a television film critic in Indiana for a year, so programming is not an entirely new [area], but the challenge of figuring out how to put movies together with an eye on spotlighting something fresh is very satisfying.”

Karaszewski originally relocated from Indiana to California in order to attend film school at USC, where he met Alexander. Since then, the duo has built a filmography that also includes *Problem Child* (1990), *That Darn Cat* (1997), *Agent Cody Banks* (2003), and *1408* (2007). Even with all of these impressive accomplishments, however, Karaszewski savors opportunities to draw inspiration from others. “It’s a great thing when you talk to someone like Frank Pierson, who’s been



Karaszewski outside the Egyptian Theatre

PHOTO: PETER HANSON

doing this for so long and who has kept a quality to his work for so long,” Karaszewski says. “It gives you hope.”

And while his primary focus is still his day job—Tim Burton just signed on to produce *Big Eyes*, a biopic of painters Margaret and Walter Keane that Alexander and Karaszewski wrote and will co-direct—he’s having a blast with his side gig. “I love movies, in general,” he says, “so I’m constantly watching older films, constantly reading about films, and I want to share that. The benefit of having a double feature is that you can program a movie that’s well-known and one that’s more obscure. Hopefully, the famous one puts butts in the seats and people stay for the one that needs a little more love.” 🦋



PETER HANSON is the director of the screenwriting documentary *Tales from the Script* and the author of three books on cinema. His screenplay *Savage* recently sold to Picture Road, and he is preparing to direct a feature drama, *The Eulogist*, based on his own script. His website is GrandRiverFilms.com.