

Making It in Tinsel Town

By Julie Sturgeon

Larry A. Thompson leaves nothing to chance in his sales presentations. Before meeting with General Food's advertising rep to pitch a special on America's remarkable women last decade, the independent producer even choreographed their entrance to The Bistro - Beverly Hill's hottest restaurant du jour. "When you take clients to a high-profile, spot, you must be very careful to keep their attention among the activity and celebrities in the room. Hollywood awes everyone."

So Thompson arranged 24 hours earlier to have the maitre d escort them through the room to greet the rich and famous but seat them in a secluded banquette near the back. The producer deftly scooted into the bench seat, leaving his prospect staring at him and a blank wall to their right. "I could tell he was a bit disappointed," Thompson chuckles, but he blithely pulled out his charts and began pitching his miracle: a two-hour television special at the Kennedy Center to honor famous women in our century. Why, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis could host it, and he'd arrange to have all living First Ladies in the audience.

"I'm just selling, understand," he says. Suddenly, a hush falls over the room. Then a murmur rises louder and louder. And walking straight toward the meeting is none other than Jackie O. herself, whom Thompson certainly hadn't contacted about her impending hosting duties he'd spouted off. To top things off, the maitre d escorted her to the table next to Thompson's, motioning she sit on Larry's side. "I almost died! My client never looked at me again, never heard a word I said," he laughs. The deal eventually fell through, and Thompson still occasionally pitches the live tribute concept.

But that's show biz. Thompson has chalked up enough successes to finance this 55-year-old Southern lad's Rolls-Royce, Kirk Douglas' former mansion in the famous 90210 zip code, and month-long chartered yacht trips through the Mediterranean each summer. Not to mention that as an independent producer sans studio support, Thompson provided the pot in which to cook up his first deals. The U.S. Television Fan Association didn't vote him "showman of the Year" in 1998 for nothing.

Yet as he quipped to Point of View, the Producer's Guild of America magazine, "When I go into Georgio Armani to buy my suits, I tell them, 'Move the shoulder pads to the knees,' so I can crawl into the network looking good in a \$2,000 suit. I'm

still officially a beggar." Since the average production cost of a two-hour network television movie reaches \$3.5 million - money the network may never see again - risk stalks every sale. To date, Thompson surfs this crest; he spent \$8.3 million in the past 12 months producing *And the Beat Goes On: The Sonny and Cher Story*, *Replacing Dad*, and *House of Blues* pilot. The projects grossed \$9.4 million. His 15 television movies since 1981 grossed more than \$65 million while the two series, three pilots and four motion pictures add \$36 million.

Still, as Thompson describes it, "Producing a movie is like jumping out of an airplane with a bolt of white nylon and a sewing machine. You just have to figure it out as you fall. If you've had success here, your buyer listens a bit longer the next time. But they buy only if they instinctively believe it themselves."

He understands the selling power of a passion, born during the days when he sacked groceries on Saturdays at Liberty Supermarket, which his family owned in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Other boys played golf and tennis with their dads on the weekends, so Thompson fixed his mind on becoming professional to enjoy that luxury. Meanwhile, he listened dutifully to his mother's advice to escape that "graveyard with a stoplight" as she called their town. "I always felt strongly about certain things and knew I could express my thoughts well verbally," he says. "But I never translated that into the salesmanship tools they are."

Through the week, this oldest son of Italian immigrants ditched work to hide out at the Paramount Theater adjacent to the grocery store. Although no one in his family so much as played a harmonica as an artsy talent, the silver screen still fascinated him; young Thompson caught *High Noon* 13 times. But it was *Valley of the Dolls* that provided the lightning bolt: Patty Duke's character turned to a lawyer to get her out of trouble. "I got 'Oh, show business is about two things: show and business. I can be a lawyer for actors!' from that," he recalls.

So he attended Old Miss law school, graduating third in his class in 1968 with an offer to clerk for the Mississippi Supreme Court. But as his colleagues headed to Greenville and Jackson, Thompson struck out for California in a black Buick, his clothes hung across a rod in the backseat and a stack of dog-eared index cards detailing an elaborate who's who course he invented for himself while studying *Variety* magazine on Friday mornings. He reached Hollywood and Vine intersection at 10 p.m. in a pouring rain, and cried with jubilation. The hotel desk at the Holiday Inn sold him a room for three days, which took a scary bite from Thompson's meager \$700 budget.

Thus began Thompson's first round of begging. He held odd jobs while pursuing legal opportunities and eventually convinced Capitol Records - home of the Beatles - to hire him. Thompson's first claim to fame involved negotiating separate recording contracts for each of the Fab Four at their break-up. But that fire seared a new desire: to start his own business. Thompson, Shankman, Bond and Moss - an entertainment law firm and personal management company - was born. To date, Thompson has guided more than 200 artists' careers, including William Shatner, Drew Barrymore, Cindy Crawford, Linda Evans, Robert Blake, and Cicely Tyson. He also purchased New World Pictures with partners (Thompson took that company public and co-managed the studio operations) before opening Larry A. Thompson Organization in 1983. An entrepreneur to the core, he lists just four full-time employees on his payroll and staffs up fresh for each production he successfully peddles to CBS, ABC, NBC, Miramax, and New Line Pictures executives.

A classic Larry Thompson pitch consists of a fireball of enthusiasm for his idea, followed by hard-core financial figures, investor benefits and other business factors only if the prospect says No. "Selling is when you have to convince someone to do something they're not instinctively leaning toward," he explains. "People in my business don't really like to be sold an idea - if you're trying to overwhelm them, they'll resent you. They prefer to believe your story is their idea because they have to take it up to their boss. So the real key is to convert them, not sell them."

That conversion, he admits, would be easier if his product came with taste tests, samples, brand loyalty charts from consumer research companies. Thompson admits he offers air, and must drum up both supply and demand for that invisible commodity. "Nobody is sitting around saying, 'Gee, I hope someone makes a Sonny and Cher movie so I can watch it,'" he drawls. But Thompson approaches his network buyer - who, by virtue of its own contracted producers in the boardroom is also his competition - with the same stealth that led him to study Variety magazine cover to cover.

First mistake to avoid: being first at the plate with a news story ripe for public consumption. "Some producers pick up a phone, call a network and say, 'Did you read the story of that Martin kidnapper? Think that's a movie?' They're so anxious to be the first to pitch, they throw it at them and lay the creative burden on the network," he says. Thompson, knowing the studio execs read the same newspapers he does, prefers to tread a more arduous path. He carefully crafts the story he wants to film, then spins the tale to his listeners, hitting all the emotional drama posts. He sold *Lucy and Desi: Before the Laughter* to CBS in 1991 by merely humming the '50s' sitcom theme song. "My contact then goes in the boardroom and announces,

"Thompson knows how to tell this story we've racked our brains about because he says the crux is when blah, blah, blah," the producer says triumphantly.

That lesson stands out in former development executive Rhonda Bloom's memory. Now the vice president of television for Spring Creek Productions, she uses his advice daily. "Stand up for what you believe in and take care of your own needs," she recites. "Larry taught me by example that you must be responsible for your own success."

To that end, he listens to each creative idea from his team (although he may not accept it) and reads every one of his critics' reviews. "If I advise someone to do something for their career and the critics pan it, I can't Pontius Pilately wash my hands of any advice," he says. "If you set out to design a horse but by committee wound up with a camel, somebody has to take responsibility for this screw-up, and it better be the person who had the idea and started this disaster."

Such driving motivation and sense of honor in earlier days stemmed from a childlike fervor to please his parents; since their deaths he recognizes that knowing 25 million people view his specials is two short of what really matters to him. "But motivation is like rolling a snowball downhill from a mountaintop. One morning you wake up and you're in front of the monster snowball, running as fast as you can to avoid being run over. That's where I am now in my career."

But network powers don't allow this sensitive side to trap them into figuring Larry A. Thompson for a wimp at the bargaining table; the Hollywood trade press long has acknowledged his knack for driving a hard deal. He owns the rights to his productions, licensing out permission to air them to the networks. (for example, ABC shelled out more than \$3 million to broadcast *The Sonny and Cher* story twice within four years.) He merely considers this tact loyalty to the passion that birthed his baby. "In Hollywood we say, 'You can shoot a movie but you can't shoot a deal.' People only respect what they have to pay for," he notes. "For instance, I say to you, 'I want to make a movie about a kid who flies into space' and you reply, 'Hmm, science fiction doesn't interest me.' If I come back with, 'Well, I really wanted a million dollars for my idea but would you want it if you paid \$30,000?' Now you really don't like it because it has no value to either of us. Lowering the price lowers the propensity of converting buyers."

"And it's your conviction in your project that either becomes contagious or reconfirms to the buyer that hell, you were crazy to begin with," he adds. Yes, such laughter stings through his toughened hide, Thompson admits - creative products

ultimately wrap a piece of his soul inside them - but he refuses to allow rejection's companion, depression, to steal his next attempt.

"The Hollywood scene is like gambling in Vegas: You can go for the weekend and make some money. But if you stay there, it will eat you alive. When the press asks, 'Larry, what's your biggest accomplishment?' I say to literally have survived it for 30 years."

[sidebar]

Managing Your Stars

Last decade, Larry Thompson personally managed one of the largest stables of Hollywood names in the business, including that image of notorious bad girls, Shannen Doherty. "I probably know more stars than any one person should ever have to," he says. Such experience, however, puts him on par with every sales manager in Corporate America. His rules for a successfully motivating prima donna egos to reach for your goals:

1. Know the difference between an artist and a celebrity. Artists, attuned to their craft, want to be a team player for the good of the creative picture. A celebrity's goal is their fame. "Examine the person's career choices," he suggests. "Was he there for the event or looking just to have his picture taken?"

2. Find unique strengths. Thompson noticed that Shatner's audience responds best to this actor in authority positions, whether as Capt. Kirk manning Starship Enterprise, policeman T.J. Hooker, or host of Rescue 911. "My job is to manage the person and maximize their potential," Thompson notes. "I can't make somebody something they're not and that's natural. It takes all kinds of colored M&Ms to make a packet of candy."

3. Market their skills in the third person. Stars call it a persona - that public relations perception they create to protect their private lives from a prying public - but in sales it allows all parties to discuss future moves without getting personal. "It's

like a campaign for the presidency," Thompson describes it. "You sell that person's talents as you would any other product.

4. Don't expect them to be normal. "People often say, 'Stars put on their pants like everybody else.' They do not," he contends. "I'm not saying they're better or worse than the rest of us. But they are different." And Tinsel Town knows what many sales managers need to discover: Normal doesn't inspire buyers. "Normal is your next-door neighbor, and no one pays money for that."

5. Commit to their career. Thompson preaches four elements of stardom: talent, rage, luck and a team of believers. Talent is obvious. Rage translates to an absolute tunnel vision rage for success to withstand the competition and rejection. Luck equates mainly to persistence and hard work. Finally, the team of believers (read: sales manager and other company bigwigs) provides professional management advice. "Cut talent and you have a celebrity. Rage and talent creates a working actor. A team and luck spawns a prima donna. You must have all four elements to make true success happen," he sums up.

[sidebar 2/inset of his accomplishments]

MOVIES MADE FOR TELEVISION

And the Beat Goes on: The Sonny and Cher Story
1999 ABC/Hamdon Entertainment
Jay Underwood, Renee Faia

Replacing Dad
1998 CBS/Hallmark Entertainment
Mary McDonnell, Tippi Hedren, William Russ, Eric Von Detten

Face of Evil
1996 CBS/Hallmark Entertainment
Tracey Gold, Perry King, Shawnee Smith

Separated by Murder
1994 CBS/Hallmark Entertainment
Sharon Gless, Steve Railsback

Broken Promises
1993 CBS/Hallmark Entertainment
Cheryl Ladd, Polly Draper, Ted Levine

Lucy and Desi: Before the Laughter
1991 CBS/Republic Pictures
Frances Fisher, Maurice Benard

Little White Lies
1989 NBC/NewWorld Entertainment
Ann Jillian, Tim Matheson

Class Cruise
1989 NBC/Republic Pictures
McLean Stevenson, Richard Moll, Ray Walston, Shelley Fabares

Original Sin
1989 MBC/New World Entertainment
Charlton Heston, Ann Jillian, Robert Desiderio

The Woman He Loved
1988 CBS/New World Entertainment
Jane Seymour, Anthony Andrews, Olivia de Havilland, Julie Harris

Intimate Encounters
1986 ABC/Columbia Television
Donna Mills, James Brolin, Cicely Tyson

Convicted
1986 ABC/Columbia Television
Lindsay Wagner, John Larroquette, Carroll O'Connor

The Other Lover
1985 CBS/Columbia Television
Lindsay Wagner, Jack Scalia, Max Gail

Mickey Spillane's Murder Me, Murder You
1982 CBS/Columbia Television
Stacey Keach, Don Stroud

Mickey Spillane's Margin for Murder
1981 CBS/Hamner Entertainment
Kevin Dobson, Cindy Pickett

TELEVISION SERIES

The Jim Nabors Show
1977

Bring 'Em Back Alive
1984
Bruce Boxleitner

MOTION PICTURES

Crimes of Passion
1984
Kathleen Turner, Anthony Perkins

My Demon Lover
1987
Scott Valentine, Michelle Little

Quiet Cool
1987
James Remar, Adam Coleman Howard, Nick Cassavetes

Breaking the Rules
1992
Jason Bateman, C. Thomas Howell, Jonathan Silverman

[CONTACT LIST for Selling Power]

Larry Thompson
(310) 288-0700
lthomp1811@aol.com

Milton Kahn (publicist for Larry A. Thompson Organization)

Milton Kahn Associates
P.O. Box 50353
Santa Barbara, CA 93150
(805) 969-8555
edgewood9@aol.com

Rhonda Bloom
VP of Television
Spring Creek Productions
4000 Warner Blvd, Producer 7
Burbank, CA 91522
(818) 954-2373