



**THE FEATURE FILM**  
and the making of

# miracle

by Kate McCallum

What actually happens from the moment the glimmer of a “great idea” enters the mind of its creator to the moment the glow of light coming off a screen first projects that idea to the world? Our new series THE GREAT IDEA will take a demystifying look into the oftentimes complicated and frustrating engine of media-making. We will deconstruct that curious juxtaposition where art meets commerce by offering first-person accounts of how that paradoxical union works. Each article focuses on a case study of a concept through the creative process, the development maze and finally to the screen, big or small. Examples will include the original, remade and/or adapted feature film, the television hour-long and half-hour scripted series, the animation series, the animated feature, the movie and/or mini-series for television, the documentary and the reality show. This premiere article is aptly titled *Miracle* and focuses on screenwriter Eric Guggenheim’s experiences conceptualizing, selling and writing the screenplay for the feature film *Miracle*, a movie based on the true story of coach Herb Brooks, and the Olympic gold-medal hockey team of 1980.

**E**ric Guggenheim graduated from NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts in 1995. Two years later, off the strength of a spec script, he sold his first pitch to Fox 2000 at age 23. Though unproduced, the script was well-received and garnered him an assignment from Warner Bros. to write a drama for actress Neve Campbell. After that, Guggenheim wrote and executive produced a one-hour drama pilot called *The Big* for USA Network, and in 2003 he performed an uncredited rewrite on the acclaimed FX/Fox TV Studios original film, *44 Minutes*, which is to date the most-watched program in FX’s 10-year history. In January 2001, Guggenheim began pitching *Miracle* to producers and studios.

**scr(i)pt:** *When did you first get the idea for this movie?*

**ERIC GUGGENHEIM:** The summer of 2000. My wife and I were contemplating a trip to Salt Lake for the 2002 Winter Olympics, and I started thinking about the 1980 Olympic team and what they did in Lake Placid. I was only six years old at the time, but I remember watching my dad watching the games, specifically the upset over the Soviets. He was so caught up in the moment. Everyone was. So thinking about the upcoming games brought back all those memories of 1980 and I started to think “maybe there’s a movie here.” Unfortunately, all I really had was that game, which was really the third act. So I started researching. What I found out

was the coach of the team, Herb Brooks, had been the very last player cut from the 1960 team, which had been the last team to win the gold medal. So here you had this character who was so close to glory and just missed it, but then 20 years later he got this amazing chance to redeem himself. Once I had that, I had the makings of a movie.

**scr(i)pt:** *So that was the “ah-ha” moment for you? That’s when you got it.*

**EG:** Absolutely. Until that discovery, all I had was a series of great games leading up to this remarkable victory over the Soviets, but there was no movie yet. *Miracle* is a sports movie, but the very best sports movies are those which tell stories that just happen to take place against the backdrop of a particular sport. They still have to be movies, and Brooks’ back story made it a movie. Additionally, through looking at newspapers, magazines and periodicals of the time, I got a sense of this malaise that had taken hold of the country. You had all these problems: the Iranian hostage crisis, gas lines, the Russians invading Afghanistan, skyrocketing unemployment and high inflation. So, of all things, it was a hockey game that lifted people’s spirits. Put in that context, the story was elevated to a movie, instead of just a sports movie.



**scr(i)pt:** *What would you then say the theme is in Miracle?*

**EG:** Certainly redemption. It was Brooks' redemption, and it was the country's redemption.

**scr(i)pt:** *What research did you use?*

**EG:** *Sports Illustrated* had some great coverage as did *The New York Times*. It's well regarded as the greatest moment in the history of sports, so there was enough in the public domain that I found it wasn't necessary to sit down with Herb Brooks or any of the players.

**scr(i)pt:** *What did you do to prepare for pitching?*

**EG:** Initially I created a treatment which was about 20 pages long; then from that I fashioned a 15-minute pitch. Within the treatment almost every scene that was in the script was included. It was pretty detailed.

**scr(i)pt:** *Do you enjoy the pitching process?*

**EG:** I get nervous every room I go into, but I also look at it as free development. You go in and you pitch the story, and there are a lot of sharp executives who will say, "Well, what if you did this?" or, "You don't really need this," so you're getting all this free feedback from them. Even though I am nervous going in, I am pretty well rehearsed.

**scr(i)pt:** *Did you use any supplemental material to enhance your pitch?*

**EG:** I brought along some footage of the games but found it was not even necessary that I show it to them. A lot of the executives I met with remembered watching the games on television. I assembled a sort of highlight reel with all the key moments in the Olympics, and, of course, the game against the Russians, which was not the final game. The game against Finland was actually the gold medal game.

**scr(i)pt:** *Did you "leave behind" anything?*

**EG:** No. When I pitch, I have about five to six pages of notes so I know where I am and all the details I want to hit. Quite often they'll ask me to leave that behind; but I find when you leave something behind, it's kind of giving them a reason to say "no." There was

one studio I pitched to, and the executives loved it. They said they wanted to go to the head of production, so they asked if I could give them a treatment. I faxed a copy to them and then their boss wound up passing anyway. When you are pitching, sometimes it is really difficult to sell a pitch when you are not pitching to someone who can say "yes." I have had this experience recently where I've gone out with a pitch, and every executive to whom we pitched has been really enthusiastic; but then they have to go pitch it to their boss. They're not going to be able to pitch it as well as you can, so I don't mind giving them a treatment if they ask for it.

**scr(i)pt:** *What selling strategy did your agent come up with?*

**EG:** My agents at the time were very skeptical about it. The feeling was, and I did wind up getting this from a lot of studios, "Well, a.) it's a TV movie," which, in fact, it was, and not a very good one. Or "b.) it's a sports movie." That means that it's going to be very difficult making money outside of this country. No matter how hard you say, "No, it's not a sports movie; it's a movie about redemption; it's an underdog film and it's a movie about everything that was going on in our country at the time," the studios still see it as a sports movie and will still be skeptical. My manager, to her credit, relented and said, "It is absolutely a movie; it's about a guy who gets a second chance, it's not a story about hockey," and she just started setting meetings with producers and studios.

**scr(i)pt:** *So your manager actually did more to sell this than your agent?*

**EG:** Yes, originally. Then once there was some positive feedback, the agents were like, "Well, maybe we were wrong about this." and then they got involved and were more supportive.

**scr(i)pt:** *Did you have to acquire any life rights at this stage?*

**EG:** No, I didn't. It was my feeling, and my agents and manager agreed, that it was public domain. Still Disney, after they said yes, thought it prudent to go after the life rights. I didn't realize that something like that was even necessary, but I guess it is. For this pitch that I'm out with right now, we acquired the life rights to the person upon whom the pitch is based.



Screenwriter **Eric Guggenheim**

**scr(i)pt:** *You personally acquired them?*

**EG:** Yes, and that took months. From what I understand, Disney did not have the easiest time getting the life rights to everyone involved in this story either. It's remarkable that they did because you're not just getting the rights to Herb Brooks and the assistant coach, Craig Patrick, you're also getting the rights to Jimmy Craig, Mike Eruzione, Jack O'Callahan and everyone else. To their credit they managed to get them.

**scr(i)pt:** *So how did you clinch the sale ... what happened? To how many different production companies and producers did you pitch?*

**EG:** I literally went into 15 rooms, including producers and studios together, before Disney said yes. In the case of Mayhem Pictures, they had a deal with another studio. I went to Mayhem and told them the idea—my take—and I did the pitch. We then went to their studio and the executive there wanted it; really fought for it, but the head of the studio said, "It's a Cold War movie." *Thirteen Days* had just come out, which I thought was a terrific film, but it hadn't done very well so that was their reason for passing. Then after that pass, Mayhem wanted to take it into Disney. I was actually going to go to Disney without a producer. I had already brought it to a couple of other producers at Disney who had passed, but my manager had set up a meeting with executives there. Since their studio passed, Mayhem asked if they could go into Disney with me because they really liked it, and we agreed.

**scr(i)pt:** *To whom at Mayhem had you originally pitched?*

**EG:** The two producers, Mark Ciardi and Gordon Gray.

**scr(i)pt:** *Then who went with you to Disney and to whom did you pitch?*

**EG:** Mark and Gordon came with me, and I pitched to Mark Vahradian, who is now a producer himself. At the time, however, he was vice-president of production at Disney. He got it immediately.

**scr(i)pt:** *And he was able to say "yes?"*

**EG:** He was. So literally, by the time I left Mark's office and before I even got to my car, I got this phone call that Disney wanted it. It was fantastic because I had gotten passes from five other buyers, and I thought, "Oh my God, I'm not going to sell this and it's such a great story;" but Disney said "yes," and then another studio said "yes." The other studio was actually offering more money, but Disney seemed more enthusiastic and said, "Look, we're definitely going to make this," and that was really the clincher.

**scr(i)pt:** *How soon before you got to start writing?*

**EG:** I was on a tough time frame. I only had eight weeks for the first draft, which is a little fast, because there was going to be a possible writer's strike coming up so they wanted to get started as quickly as possible. They really wanted to make it, so pedal to the metal basically. I did my first draft in eight weeks and it was long. It was about 134 pages, but it's that old adage, I didn't have time to write a shorter draft. So they came back to me and said I would have to cut it. "And you're going to have to cut more than you would ordinarily, because these hockey sequences last a page but on screen they're going to be a lot longer." I got terrific notes back from Disney and they said they wanted another draft back in two weeks, so that's what I did.

**scr(i)pt:** *Did you have to have an initial creative meeting to get you on a certain track, or did they just let you go off and write?*

**EG:** My pitch was pretty detailed; they liked the take I had, what I wanted to do, what I felt I should focus on and what I should ignore. By then, Disney had gotten some life rights, and Mark Ciardi asked me if I wanted to go meet with Herb Brooks or Mike Eruzione. I thought about

it for a bit, then said "no" because I felt if I had to take some creative license, it was going to be that much harder because I'll have met these people personally and there might be a bit of a bond there. I decided not to because I felt I had everything I needed from what I had researched and gathered from the public domain.

**scr(i)pt:** *Did you give your script to Mayhem before you turned it into Disney?*

**EG:** About a week before I gave it to Disney, I gave it to Mayhem. They said that they were very pleased but of course they had a couple of notes. I turned those around pretty quickly; then we handed it to Disney. Then I got on the phone with Mark Vahradian and Brigham Taylor, another Disney executive, and they gave me their notes.

**scr(i)pt:** *From how many people at Disney did you get notes?*

**EG:** Just Mark and Brigham. I don't know whether they showed it to everyone else at the company, but I did get a memo that was about two-and-a-half pages of notes. They ran the gamut; there were some structural notes, and there were a couple of character notes. There was a real interesting note that they wanted more hockey in the first act. So, I went back in and put in more hockey.

**scr(i)pt:** *Then basically everything from an historical and statistical point of view is true, but the characters, their dialogue, their personalities and nature are from your imagination?*

**EG:** Certainly with conversations between characters, you are sort of hypothesizing. Definitely from all the interviews I read I got a sense of their personalities, and from that I was able to get a handle on them character-wise. I didn't need to take much creative license. This is how these people were. Brooks was a bit of a bully. He was a manipulator. Jack O'Callahan was a tough guy, a bit of a street kid. Jimmy Craig was grieving over the loss of his mom, while at the same time worrying about how his dad was coping. Mike Eruzione was desperate to play hockey. He was 24 at the time, so he was sort of over-the-hill.

**scr(i)pt:** *I especially liked that you got into the whole regional challenges between the players.*

**EG:** That was real. There was absolutely a conflict within the team. More than half



the team were from Minnesota, specifically the University of Minnesota. They were sort of rural kids. Much of the rest were from Boston University, so they were a little bit more streetwise, a little more savvy. There was definitely a culture clash, compounded by the fact that there was a major rivalry between U of M and BU. It all stemmed from an incident that had happened a couple years before the Olympics. There was a bench-clearing brawl at a game, so there was still a lot of tension between these two camps that Brooks had to deal with.

**scr(i)pt:** *So you turned in two drafts?*

**EG:** Technically I did three. I did one draft for *Mayhem*, then the first draft that went to Disney was like a second draft, then I did a third draft. Although, not a lot changed between the producer draft and the first draft that went to Disney, so let's say two.

**scr(i)pt:** *When did they start sending the script out to directors and talent?*

**EG:** I'm not exactly sure because after I did my drafts, Disney brought in Mike Rich, who did *The Rookie* for them, and he stayed on through production.

**scr(i)pt:** *From that point on, were you out of the loop as far as what happened to the movie next? Would you speak to that from a writer's point of view?*

**EG:** Creatively it was hard. There was still more I wanted to do. Things I wanted to fix or make better. But the rational side of my brain said, "Well, it's a business ... it's their script now," and the odds are that you're going to be rewritten. It's rare that you have one writer from the beginning of a project straight through until the end. After this project, I did a project where I rewrote someone else, and I was the last writer on that project. It's the nature of the business. More often than not you're either being rewritten or you're doing the rewriting, so in a very rare case are you actually the only writer from the beginning to the end. It's the nature of the business, and it seems to be getting more and more like that.

**scr(i)pt:** *So ... when you sit in the dark and you watch your story being told on the big screen for the very first time, what do you hope to see and feel about the final outcome of the movie?*

**EG:** For one thing, I strove to be accurate, right down to the smallest details of the games. Like I said, there was a TV movie version of

this story, but I found there were some really interesting details that were overlooked. For example, Herb Brooks and his strategizing was absolutely brilliant. I strove to incorporate that into the story and present it in such a way that the lay person would understand what he had done and why it was so brilliant. All the elements that I fell in love with—I hope they're still there: Herb Brooks' redemption, and the big theme for me about the malaise that had taken hold of the country. I hope that theme is still in there because for me, that was a huge aspect of the story—that this hockey team lifted people's spirits which I thought in and of itself was miraculous.

*Miracle* premieres on February 6, 2004, and stars Kurt Russell as coach Herb Brooks, Patricia Clarkson, Noah Emmerich and Eddie Cahill, and is being directed by Gavin O'Connor. Eric Guggenheim received sole credit on the screenplay. (i)

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