

An interview with JoJo Henrickson, screenwriter of *Ladrón que roba a ladrón*

By Ramón Valle in Los Angeles
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World Socialist Web Site: *Ladrón que roba a ladrón* is a heist movie and reminds us of previous ones. *Ocean's Eleven* is one. Why did you decide to write it?

JoJo Henrickson: I was at my nine-to-five film editing job one day and I get this call from my good friend, writer-director Joe Menendez. He told me he was going to be pitching some movie ideas to a company that had already been producing Spanish-language films mainly for the US Latino market. He asked if I had any ideas. Skeptical as I am about anyone trying to do anything Latino, I told him no and ended the phone call.

After hanging up the phone, I called Joe back the next day and asked if he still wanted ideas. He was just about to go into a meeting with Panamax Films when I pitched him *A Poor Man's Ocean's Eleven*. It was an old idea that had come to me after seeing *Ocean's Eleven* back in 2001.

I had just finished the first feature that I had written and directed. It was called *The Barrio Murders*. It featured an all-Latino cast and gave me the opportunity to put my money where my mouth was. I had a modest budget of \$100,000, which in yearly salary terms is great, but in filmmaking terms translates into something like fifty bucks.

That experience, albeit educational, was very hellacious; however the end result was exactly what I had wanted to achieve, which was to showcase several of my very talented actor friends and show Latinos occupying more than 75 percent of the roles in a film. I even had a Cuban-American friend play an Aryan Nazi; nobody would have taken him for a Latino. That was cool.

I saw the remake of *Ocean's Eleven*. I had seen the original with Frank Sinatra and remember liking it. I liked what Soderbergh, Clooney and Pitt did, but I couldn't get past how fortunate they were to be given so much money and have the luxury to do what they wanted, something I have yet to experience myself. Hollywood is still not putting any money into anything Latino, and back in 2001 you might as well have forgotten about it. It was even more unheard of. So, in 2001, after seeing *Ocean Eleven*, it occurred to me that I could write something as good, if not better, for my talented Latino actor friends.

WSWS: But why do something that had been done before?

JH: Hollywood always portrays us as a suffering people (or a people ready to kill you with a knife), but I've lead a pretty normal life. I didn't have to cross the border and I wasn't a gang member growing up. Most of my Latino friends have very normal lives with the usual normal problems, yet Hollywood doesn't seem to care about those stories. Its old perceptions still dominate today.

On television, I'd say that about 98 percent of the Latino actors who have been fortunate enough to find work are required to speak with an

accent. The maid, the gang member and the struggle of crossing the border is familiar to most executives in Hollywood—because they have a maid, a gardener or a chauffer who speaks with an accent. Though they hear about the immigration issue on the news, that's all they're aware of.

So, that is what they know. There's an old expression in Hollywood that I've heard for many years: "Write what you know." So, they are writing what they "know." All I'm saying I'm asking them is to move over and let me tell you some other stories. I'm writing what I know and what I know, and what is around me, is mostly Latino in origin or culturally. My family, my friends, my life—I can't escape that, nor do I want to.

WSWS: Can you give us an idea of the process you went through to write the script? What inspired you?

JH: I had already written five scripts, three of which I had already produced myself with the help of my friends. I was not about to wait on Hollywood to find me. I've always been creating my own work because I know there is a market for us, but in the eyes of the moneyed people, it was my first time. Anyway, I owe a lot to the director of the film, Joe Mendez, who convinced the studio to do the film for what is today a paltry sum.

Even though Panamax Films isn't a big studio, they were the money people and they need to control the story and the writing. Because this was a work for hire based on a pitch, they had more involvement in the story. So, I'll be honest and say the final script is a collaborative effort between Joe Menendez, Panamax Films and me, with me being the pack mule and carrying most of the weight.

From the beginning it started out as an outline. I turned that in and people would make comments and offer ideas. If I hated the ideas, I would argue my point. If I couldn't convince them otherwise, I had to come up with ideas to the script that I didn't like but which had to "work."

WSWS: How did the studio option it? What did they demand in exchange?

JH: Again, it was a work for hire, so they had all the control. To their credit they agreed with a lot of what I was able to inject into the film. I'm very subversive with my writing. I like making a statement or putting some sort of subtext into my stories. But I feel that one shouldn't be too much in your face. That's an aspect of Chicano filmmaking that I don't agree with. In general, I like to *ease* my social commentary into a script, but in Hollywood this is an especially necessary approach because, after all, it is Hollywood and we Latinos have to be careful if we want the studios to touch us.

WSWS: What particular changes did it demand? In what ways did it change your screenplay?

JH: Funny thing is, after they felt the first draft was funny, I think, they began asking for more comedy, but their ideas were bordering on silliness. It was never my intention to film it as a silly comedy with goofy characters. The humor in the first draft was more sarcastic funny than silly funny. But, as I've said before, I had to take their ideas and make them work. I tried to maintain some integrity in the characters because they were all supposed to be immigrants.

I have family members that are immigrants and I don't see them as stupid or silly. I see them as I try to see all people, as normal and average. We're all just trying to get by and I don't think life is easy on anyone. But my main goal was to educate Hollywood and the non-Latinos that we are normal. We speak normally. Not all of us are suffering and not all of us are uneducated. There's a difference between book smart and street smart, but in the end it's about being smart. Unfortunately, here in the United States, if you don't have the college degree you're considered dumb or inferior. That's a perception I'd like to change.

WSWS: *Was your original screenplay more political or less so? What did the studio think of its politics?*

JH: There was a line I had in the movie about the Patriot Act that got cut. I was told it got cut because of time, but I have my suspicions. It's at the beginning of the movie when one of the main characters pays to have another main character released from a *coyote* house. In some cases when immigrants are transported illegally, they are held up at a house in the US and relatives are contacted and told to pick them up there. A lot of times the coyotes [individuals who smuggle undocumented immigrants across the border between Mexico and the US] jack the prices up, forcing some of the immigrants to stay longer while their relatives find more money to get them released. So, in this one scene I wanted to show that the Patriot Act was having an affect on the coyote business and I wanted to show that our Latino leads were aware of politics. All in a humorous way, of course, but it got cut "for time reasons."

Again, I still think there is enough of what I wanted to say there and that is evident in several of the reviews already out there. People see it. I wanted to or tried to make the immigrant life a character in the movie as well. Now, as things started to get cut because of lack of money I thought some of that was going to get lost, but it seems in the end some of it is still there and I'm happy about that. Because to me, it's about communicating to people. We don't want to just assimilate, we want to identify with something or someone and I think I focused on making sure people will see themselves and/or people they know. I think I accomplished that.

WSW: *One of the characters—one of the thieves, in fact—says that "we do not rob our own." Why this identity politics statement in a film that otherwise seems to say that our problem in society is class divisions?*

JH: A lot of what I do that seems to be political doesn't usually come from a conscious political level. I just do or write what I'm feeling. If what I'm writing is categorized later as being of this political slant or that political slant, then that's what those people are seeing or feeling. I might agree in hindsight, but when I write, I just try to focus on the truth of the characters. I shouldn't allow my own personal political views to dictate the motivations of a character, especially if the actors are different from that character. If they are the same, then, yes, maybe. I'll put my political slant in there, but again for me it's not about politics.

People will read into what you are doing and see it through their eyes and I'm cool with that. I like that. What makes it art is that it's

left up to the individual to see what he or she can get out of it. Am I purposely trying to sway opinions? Sure. But I can say wholeheartedly the one thing I am completely conscious of is changing perceptions of Latinos.

WSWS: *Was the theme of social class ever discussed in the making of the film?*

JH: I can't remember. I'm sure on some level it was brought up but not in the context of social classes. I remember arguing certain points and making the point that these people are ignored. There's a moment in the movie that our heroes have to break into a very important office in a high rise building. They enter an area where they are not supposed to be. Now the goal was to use preconceived perceptions that immigrants are dumb and just don't get it and use that to get the job done. Our heroes get away with it because they 'play' stupid. They pretend to not understand why they can't be in the office. They flipped the perception and used it on the security guard to get away with it. Not sure if I answered your question, but I'd say, yes, the issue of social class was brought up.

WSWS: *Some people have commented that the theme of immigrant exploitation has itself been diminished by exploiting the immigrant question for comedic purpose. Do you feel that way?*

JH: No I don't. And I respect those people. They're very passionate people. I myself feel the same way, but I think you have to know and be able to use the resources available to you. We can only play the game if we are allowed. That's the reality. Those are the rules.

In my mind I am that guy and I've barely stuck my foot in the door. I knocked with *Ladrón que roba a ladrón* and, before they could shut the door on me, I stuck my foot in. It hurts, but at least the door's not closed. Right now I'm trying to charm the rest of me in.

The characters in *Ladrón*, albeit comedic, still create a sense of normalcy and to me that affects changes in people's perceptions of Latinos. I was cautious not to make them come across as stupid. That was very important to me. There's a whole Screen Actors Guild angle in the movie and one of the objections that arose against that idea was that 'these people aren't going to get it' because it's such an inside-Hollywood thing. I disagreed and fought alongside the director to keep it in. We won a small battle. It was validated when the audience laughed at the subject in the film. Again, to assume people won't know something and not even allow them the chance, at the very least, to learn something new is asinine to me.

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