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SCENE STEALER

In Film and in Life, the Story Is King



Peter Guber, who has led an eclectic life in film and sports businesses, has written a self-help book about storytelling's power.

By MICHAEL CIEPLY Published: February 26, 2011

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YEARS ago, when I was trying to produce movies and Peter Guber was the chairman of Sony Pictures Entertainment, I made the mistake of asking him a simple question: What does the studio want?

“Gorillas in the Mist” done sideways,” Mr. Guber replied.

I still haven't figured that out.

But Mr. Guber, 68, who throws off ideas the way a storm hurls bolts at the prairie, has finally found a pattern in what can seem to be the brilliant disorder of his own thinking. Along the way, he's also spotted a few things that the movie industry can teach the rest of us.

“I decoded it, I didn't invent it,” Mr. Guber said — well, shouted, actually — as the energy of telling lifted him several inches above his seat in the second hour of a conversation about his voyage of discovery.

(Some things never change: He still wore a crisp striped dress shirt, open-collared with cufflinks, over black jeans, white socks and moccasins — the expensive movie-guy look.)

“It's like a Seurat painting. Lots of dots,” said Mr. Guber, who talked of his wildly eclectic life in the sports and movie industries, as well as a decades-long commitment to teaching at the University of California, Los Angeles, and the dawning realization that something more than nervous energy held it all together.

“But the logic of it is clear to me now,” he said. That logic has to do with story, and how we are wired to organize our lives around it.

His coming to grips with narrative as a force in his own and others' lives is the stuff of “Tell to Win: Connect, Persuade and Triumph With the Hidden Power of Story,” to be published on Tuesday by Crown Business.

Behind its blunt facade of aggrandizement — it is, after all, a self-help book — “Tell to Win” actually delivers a surprisingly self-aware tour through Mr. Guber's ups and downs.

Born near Boston, Mr. Guber was running Columbia Pictures by the time he was 30, had a fling in the music business with Casablanca Records, became a world-famous producer of “Batman” and was in charge of Sony Pictures at a time when it was criticized as overspending. He got back to producing and eventually built a small sports empire through his Mandalay Entertainment Group; it owns the Golden State Warriors of the N.B.A. and a collection of minor league baseball teams like the State Island Yankees.

While doing that and more, Mr. Guber wobbled through plenty of failures. Even he can barely remember why “The Bonfire of the Vanities” seemed like a good movie idea. But his new Mandalay Vision, an independent film company, popped up just lately with “The Kids Are All Right” — a nominee for best picture at the Academy Awards on Sunday night.

And Mr. Guber's take-away from the great adventure is this: That he succeeded, when he did so at all, “by telling many purposeful stories, face-to-face, over the course of a long career.”

Like a Hollywood movie, he figured out, the stories that drive professional life — the narrative that is part of pitches, résumés, introductions and every conversation about business goals and achievements — work best when they are grounded in emotion. By and large, they require a hero. Dramatic tension and even a few props help.

One of the most effective pitches he ever fielded, he reports, came from Michael Jackson, who sought to prove he had the chops for movie-making with an exercise that involved feeding a live mouse to a snake.

Mr. Guber theorizes that we respond to story — an aspiring executive's self-description in a job interview, a digital entrepreneur's pitch to a potential backer, a team owner's plea for a city-financed stadium — because we can't help it. Eons of genetic and cultural programming compel us toward a narrative form with beginnings, endings and moral lessons, whether or not those are in sync with the random ways of the universe.

In sorting that out, Mr. Guber spent time in Papua New Guinea, watching tribesmen do business, in their way, via story.

From his fellow tribal leaders in Hollywood — an especially tactile culture, where lunch is less a meal than a ritual — he learned one of his more ironclad lessons, that business storytelling must be done in person, by people who, as he puts it, sniffing loudly, “are breathing the same air.”

SCREENS and telephone lines, he said, don't let you flesh out the story with body language, shared emotion and the occasional resort to extreme measures.

In persuading Terry Semel, then a Warner Brothers executive, to back “Gorillas in the Mist,” about the destruction of apes in Africa, Mr. Guber, according to his book, flopped on the floor, arms outstretched, and announced: “I'm a wounded gorilla.”

(Mr. Guber's narrative for Mr. Semel involved the notion that ruthlessly hunted gorillas are actually our relatives, and that audiences would see them that way.)

Mr. Semel tried to get on with his next meeting. But Mr. Guber was still there, and stayed on the floor until he got his “yes.”

But the personal thing, Mr. Guber said, is more than just a selling tool. It is also the point at which a story has its reckoning with the truth — or the storyteller's version of it, at any rate.

“To create that touch and feel you need to change somebody physiologically, psychologically — you need to be in the room,” Mr. Guber said.

But once there, he warned, any lack of conviction will out.

“Truth is a point of view,” he said, reflecting a point of view that is not uncommon in Hollywood.

“But authenticity can't be faked.”

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