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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2010  
Volume 17 Number 1



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## DANIEL RAGUSSIS

**SCREENWRITERS LOOKING** to break into today's competitive market are often advised to concentrate on genre projects, with the observation that tightly focused scripts directed at targeted audiences have a better chance of selling and reaching production.

Given that advice, writing an ambitious period drama on spec would seem to fly against conventional wisdom, but for screenwriter Daniel Ragussis, this approach netted him a \$20,000 payday, among other various awards (including an opportunity to pitch to A-list companies at the 2009 Screenwriting Expo) for winning the Screenwriting Expo Contest, presented by *Creative Screenwriting* last October.

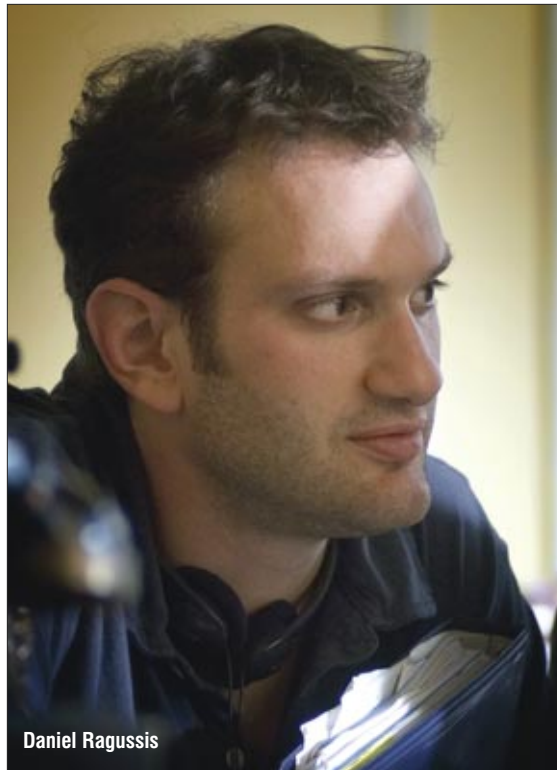
A film enthusiast from an early age, Ragussis first picked up a video camera at age 11 when he was enrolled in a community arts program in the Georgetown district of Washington, DC, where he grew up. He later went on to direct his high school video news network.

As an undergraduate English major at Georgetown University, Ragussis studied film theory and criticism, gaining production experience and shooting short films for classes he was taking at nearby American University. Upon graduating, he enrolled in Columbia University's MFA film program, where he concentrated on directing, although he also studied screenwriting and completed two short films before taking on his thesis.

"I would say up through the beginning of Columbia, I was always more focused on directing than I was on writing," he reflects. "Then when I started to take writing classes I got more interested in screenwriting and began to focus more and more on that."

A Discovery Channel program on German chemist Fritz Haber inspired Ragussis' thesis film. Haber was the Nobel-prize-winning inventor of synthetic fertilizer in the early 20th century, who went on to lend his expertise to the German military in WWI, and ultimately became the originator of chemical weapons.

Ragussis both wrote and directed his 34-minute period biopic *Haber*, and cast two professional German actors in the lead



Daniel Ragussis

roles of the chemist and his wife. A \$20,000 grant from The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation helped him independently finance the project, which took five years to complete and launch on the festival circuit, where it won several awards.

While finishing *Haber*, Ragussis began to consider a project about another historical figure: Dr. Sigmund Freud, the founder of the psychoanalytic method. Simply titled *Freud*, his Expo-winning script zeroes in on a critical phase in the pioneering neurologist's personal and professional development in late 19th century Vienna. "It's the story of how Freud started to become the Freud that we know today," Ragussis observes.

After completing the screenplay in late August, Ragussis sought out script competitions. "I'd known about this [Expo] contest because I've read *Creative Screenwriting* for many years and I've always enjoyed it." About a week before the four-day October Screenwriting Expo, organizers informed him that his *Freud* script had placed among the five finalists and offered to fly him out from New York City to Los Angeles for the Expo's Screenplay Competition Awards ceremony. "I was stunned, I was overjoyed. I thought that was great, because I'd never

entered a screenwriting competition," he recalls.

It wasn't until the October 15 awards ceremony that Ragussis found out he was the winner of the Expo competition grand prize, which came with a \$20,000 check, when *Creative Screenwriting* editor Bill Donovan announced his name. "It was just amazing," he says. "It's a very surreal moment; you just can't believe it."

Among other prizes, Ragussis received a complimentary pass to attend the Expo, where he pitched *Freud* to more than a half-dozen production companies. "I tried to target the ones that seemed to have some sort of focus on the kind of work I was doing," including mid-level companies that typically partner with studios as well as smaller outfits. Overall, he says he received "very positive reactions" to his period biopic.

Ragussis ended up getting "a decent number" of requests for the script, but equally impressive were the calls he received to set up meetings with major talent agencies and management companies — along with boutique players — after Expo organizers sent out a press release about his grand prize win.

Two weeks after the event, he signed with Alan Gasmer, former head of motion picture lit at William Morris Agency. Gasmer began circulating *Freud* to production companies and studios, and is also working with Ragussis to advance a feature version of *Haber* with the two original lead actors attached, which would likely be an American-German co-production. Writing assignments are also a possibility, although Ragussis doesn't plan to jump into any new original projects at the moment.

Regarding his Expo experience, Ragussis says, "It's been a huge boost. It ended up with me getting the representation that I did, and that's ultimately going to be a big part of one of the first stages that helps get the [*Freud*] film made. So it's big. It's very big." **CS**

*For more information on Daniel Ragussis, please visit his site at [www.haberfilm.com](http://www.haberfilm.com).*