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Freelancing, Salon Style

Ugly Editors Use Ugly Tactics

By **Hariette Surovell**

When Salon editor and creator David Talbot published his now-notorious journalistic credo, "Ugly times call for ugly tactics," leading to his complete loss of credibility—and, I believe, to the magazine's inevitable and incipient demise—he didn't just sink into an ethical swamp. As anyone who has had extensive experience writing for the magazine knows, he may just as well have been referring to the sleazy, despicable con games in which the most politically correct publication on the Internet exploits, disrespects and cheats its freelance contributors. I believe that the Salon code-phrases, "We're so chaotic here we can't cut you a check or even discuss money with you now!" and "We like you personally, so we'll pay you twice the amount of our initial kill fee agreement" are totally premeditated, well-rehearsed scams practiced by the diligently instructed editorial staff. I often wondered what Salon staffers did on their "retreats," other than, perhaps, act out "multicultural" dramas. Brainstorming new, ingenious methods of ripping off writers?

I first became interested in writing for Salon at the suggestion of one of my editors at a national glossy magazine, who knew my portfolio of investigative true-crime pieces, film criticism and interviews and humorous columns about weird slices of uniquely New York City life. So he put me in touch with Catherine Seipp, who wrote the acerbic "Hollywoodland" column for Salon's "Media Circus" department. This was in March 1998. I e-mailed Seipp, and she referred me to senior editor Laura Miller, who was departing America's headquarters of political correctness, San Francisco, where Salon is based, to head up a New York City office. I first e-mailed Miller on March 16. She got back to me immediately, letting me know that she was just settling in (both at home and at work) and that the office wouldn't be fully operative for a while. We established a cordial correspondence. On March 23, she e-mailed me that she wouldn't really be able to read any of my clips until possibly as late as April 6. So on March 27, I sent her an e-mail letting her know that I would be sending my clips and pitches directly to David Talbot. Her verbatim reply:

"It's fine, as long as they don't rely too much on the New York City aspect. Not everyone in America is as breathlessly fascinated with New York City Society as New Yorkers sometimes think."

I restrained myself from replying in colorful New York City style. But one thing perplexed me: In her weekly column "Unzipped," Courtney Weaver was constantly making allusions to her sexcapades in obscure San Francisco locales like the Marina Green, places you would only know of if you'd lived there (I had). Did Miller believe that everyone in America was breathlessly fascinated with San Francisco society? On March 30, she penned a piece called "Flux Rules." Its caption read, "Seen from the East, California is still the center of the universe." Imagine my surprise on April 24 when Miller reviewed Seinfeld cocreator Larry David's first movie, *Sour Grapes*. In it, she revealed herself to be not only an inveterate Seinfeld addict but a true Seinfeld maven.

I wrote to Talbot, who forwarded my e-mail to executive editor Gary Kamiya, who e-mailed me back requesting that I send him some clips. Which I did. On April 15, I received an e-mail from senior editor Carol Lloyd, who also requested clips. That's the same Carol Lloyd who, according to her bio in the recently updated "Who is Salon" section, "[i]s a frequent contributor to the 'New York Times Magazine.'" Anyone read any good articles by Carol Lloyd in the Times Magazine recently...or ever?

I established a superb rapport with Lloyd, who praised my writing extravagantly. She's married to a performance artist named Hank Hyena, who also publishes frequently in Salon because...he's married to Carol Lloyd? Lloyd writes reverently about prostitutes, transvestites, "vampires," fetishists; extols open marriage and reviles the heinousness of the institution of Valentine's Day. I wondered why, since she told me that her brief account of her "Honeymoon in Inner Mongolia" took her two years to write, she supplemented her Salon income by teaching workshops instructing people on how to get in touch with their creativity and overcome artistic "blocks." But it wasn't until I read her first-person article "Good Christian Neighbors" that I felt my first premonition of genuine dread. In it, she discusses her "late-night parties, well-pierced friends and feminist drum core meetings" where "we chanted: Keep Your Rosaries/Off My Ovaries."

I sent Carol lots of article ideas, but we eventually settled on a true-crime story that had originally been written for another magazine, "Poor Little Rich Thugs" (http://www.salonmagazine.com/feature/1998/07/cov_28feature.html). The editor at the national magazine who had commissioned, accepted and paid for it had told me that he wouldn't be able to run it due to space constraints, and he encouraged me to sell it elsewhere. It's about the son of a millionaire eye-surgeon father and an art-therapy professor mother, Howard Bloomgarden, who hooks up with a sleazy drug lawyer, his career criminal brother and a posse of University of Miami trustfund "gangsta" wannabes who establish a national drug-dealing business in order to finance Howard's dream of opening a chain of topless haircutting salons; he pled guilty to conspiracy to commit two drug-related homicides. Salon wanted a rewrite featuring fewer gritty details and more sociological speculation.

At first, Lloyd told me that Kamiya and Talbot were offering me \$1500 for the piece, and were considering running it serially, in daily installments. Then they changed their minds, saying it would run on a Monday, heading up a week's worth of "prison stories." They also changed their minds about the price, and were now offering \$800. I told Lloyd I would do it for \$1000. She remarked that it shouldn't make a difference to me, since I had already been paid (handsomely) for the piece by another publication. I countered that that was irrelevant. We agreed on a grand, but I never received a contract, no matter how many times I requested one from Lloyd by either phone or e-mail. S.O.P, I grew to learn, at Salon. I also learned that if Lloyd told me, "I'll e-mail you my final draft by Friday," it meant, well, nothing. If she promised to call me, that meant she would call anywhere between 8 and 11 p.m. Sometimes I wondered whether the SF Salon staff actually realized that there is a time difference between our two cities. Eventually, I was paid \$1250.

My first p.c. conflict with Lloyd came when she asked me to interview Howard Bloomgarden in jail. I told her that, in 10 years of writing crime stories, I had made it a policy to refrain from interviewing criminals. "They lie," I said. "That's why they're criminals." This prompted a lecture about all the unjustly accused and wrongly imprisoned criminals in America, who are, of course, disproportionately black, Hispanic and so on. I told her I'd try, but I knew that Bloomgarden's lawyer, Gerald Shargel, who is also John Gotti's lawyer, would never let his client speak to the press. He didn't.

Next, Lloyd asked me to consult a psychiatrist to obtain a theoretical analysis of why a rich kid would become a homicidal sociopath. So I told noted psychiatrist Dr. Samuel Dunkell that Howard Bloomgarden had been notorious for his habit of drugging and date-raping girls while in college, and that when he owned his own South Beach nightclub he would pour Cristal champagne on women's heads while two and sometimes three at a time competed to give him head. Dr. Dunkell surmised that Howard obviously hated women, and that, therefore, the fact that he ordered the murder of his former best friend may have been a misdirected form of homosexual love (repressed love gets translated into intense rage). This seemed feasible. When Lloyd read Dunkell's quote, she called me immediately.

"Are you implying that gay men are homosexual because they hate women?" she asked, in a tone so incredulous I feared she might stroke out from shock.

"Well, yes, I think many of them do," I replied, equally incredulous as I began to finally grasp the unbridled idiocy that passes for thought in San Francisco.

"Homosexuality is a lifestyle choice and a matter of sexual preference!" Lloyd exclaimed. "It is never a question of hostility toward the opposite sex."

Dr. Dunkell (whose eminently logical response when I told him was, "Well, of course they hate women—they're the competition") didn't make it into the final cut.

The idea of a week of prison stories was dropped. On the date my story was supposed to appear as the daily feature, it was bumped—for a photograph of actress Jennifer Lopez's gargantuan ass and a "serious" essay about the "multi-cultural implications of American mainstream acceptance—or was it actually covert racism" of said body part. I wondered if perhaps Salon was not quite the publication Lloyd had described as "The New Yorker of the Internet."

In the interim, my friend Catherine Seipp's "Hollywoodland" column had been dropped. She learned of its demise when one of her fans e-mailed her to ask why her column hadn't appeared that Friday. She called Talbot and Kamiya on Monday. Kamiya told her that they had made the decision the previous Friday, and that they were going to call her about it but had never gotten around to it. Seipp left repeated messages for Talbot—whom she had initially contacted about writing for Salon—and he never called her back. Claiming to "hate confrontation," Talbot had also never returned any of Seipp's numerous previous calls asking him when he was going to come through with the Salon stock he had promised her. He would either promise to e-mail her, and not do so, or if she reached him on the phone, he would say he was busy, promise to call her back and "forget about it."

"After a while, he made me feel like an idiot," says Seipp.

Salon had also initially paid her \$500 a week. Then they reduced the column to appearing twice monthly and paid her \$1500 a month. The stock was supposed to compensate for the \$500 salary deduction.

Seipp also believes that the whole confrontation with Jonathan Broder over Henry Hyde was to force him to quit so that they could save money. Weaver's "Unzipped" was said to be one of the three most popular Salon columns in a 1998 article in *The American Journalism Review*. According to Weaver's literary agent, she learned about her column's September demise when she read about it in *The New York Times*.

Seipp is still upset that Talbot has never called her to explain why her column was killed. (Nor does her name appear in Salon's long list of "Discontinued Columnists.") During her tenure at Salon, Seipp had two pieces killed (for articles in other categories.) The first time, she got 50 percent as a kill fee; the second, she got the standard 25 percent kill fee.

Since I had never confronted Laura Miller about her unconscionable and gratuitous rudeness, I had e-mailed her on April 29, pitching an idea I thought would be sufficiently p.c. for Salon. I have been writing film reviews and interviewing actors and directors for Cover since 1995. A movie publicist was looking to get publicity for his friend, Tim Kirkman, who had just written, directed and starred in the autobiographical road-trip indie *Dear Jesse*. Kirkman, a North Carolinian, shared many traits with his state's senator, Jesse Helms—except that Kirkman is gay. The movie was, among other things, an examination of Helms' rampant homophobia.

Miller responded that Cynthia Joyce, Salon's new daily music editor (Joyce's credentials: former researcher for Mother Jones; wrote about NAFTA for the *Mexico City News*; *Rolling Stone* online), was "intrigued by the idea and is also from North Carolina so she has a fresh perspective on the situation there."

A fresh perspective, indeed. I was now about to have my singular most surreal Salon experience, one that made Carol Lloyd look like Harold Ross.

Joyce called me and was, oddly, extremely emphatic and angry that this film—and its creator—even existed. "Who does he think is going to see his film?" she ranted. "He's preaching to the converted. I want you to really play devil's advocate with him in your interview and ask him why he's preaching to the converted. Does he know what Jesse Helms' platforms are? Does he know about the tobacco lobby? All the artists I know chainsmoke. Does he think they should be prohibited from smoking? How much does he know about the NEA?"

While talking to Joyce, I also took the opportunity to pitch her an interview with Susan Skoog, the director of a very hip and original movie, *Whatever*, with a release date several months away. She told me to repitch it to her. She promised to pay me \$350 for *Dear Jesse*, but never sent me a contract.

Joyce's instructions were so aggressive that I actually apologized to Tim for being so combative...I told him that I was taking direction from my editor. Kirkman held his own.

I e-mailed Joyce the piece on June 17. The movie would be opening on June 26.

Her partial reply: "Hi There—There's some good stuff there... After I've gone through it, I'd like to send it back to you to re-work the intro a bit... Anyway, we can talk more once I've sent you the edited version—It's really interesting, and I think it'll be a really strong piece."

Can you guess what didn't happen next? She didn't send me an edited version, having e-mailed me her latest decision—she would see the film herself at the Gay and Lesbian Film Festival—before deciding "where to go with it." Then she promised, "I'll be in touch with you early next week."

Guess who never called me?

I finally called her by the end of the week.

Joyce was extremely cavalier.

"I saw *Dear Jesse* at the Castro Theatre and I introduced myself to him afterward. You know, I really feel sorry for him because he's totally clueless. Can you imagine—he was actually shocked that a gay film about Helms got a standing ovation at the Castro. I don't want to run the piece because he's such a loser."

I was sent a check for \$175—a "50 percent kill fee." Seipp was adamant that I should insist to Talbot that I get full fee, that I take them to Small Claims Court, but I was actually too fascinated to bail out of the Salon experience. It would be like walking out in the middle of a Buñuel film.

Lloyd had told me that the travel editor found one of my queries "fascinating," but whenever I asked her for his name and e-mail address, she became more secretive than a New Yorker secretary being asked for an editor's private voicemail number. She did say that, in appreciation of all the extra effort and research I had put into my "Thugs" piece, they were going to give me an assignment that would pay well, and be "quick, easy and fun." Camille Peri, Talbot's wife and the editor of the "Mothers Who Think" section, was apparently intrigued by one of my queries, too. A "Mothers" column, incidentally, can be about being a mother, having a mother, wanting to be a mother, knowing someone who has a mother...or in the case of Sallie Tisdale's recent masterpiece, "Citizens of the World, Turn on Your Television," it can be a totally irrelevant blow-by-blow description of channel-surfing.

I was wary. I asked Seipp if Peri was as incompetent as every other staff member I had worked with. She told me that she knew of one writer who had written for Peri—and that after requesting that she put her piece through three rewrites, Peri paid her "a special 75 percent kill fee."

I was no longer intrigued by these creative and arbitrary kill fees. When I talked to Peri, I told her that I wasn't a spec writer and I would only write my "Mothers" piece for guaranteed full fee and guaranteed publication. Peri, off with Talbot and their kids for a sybaritic vacation in Stinson Beach and the Napa Valley wine country, assured me that the story's subject was so interesting and unusual—how I was often more compatible with my Canadian astrologer mother-in-law, even though she was married to a child-molesting bona fide Nazi who made a pass at me, than I was with my very own Marxist mom—that it would absolutely see print and I'd be paid in full. She sent me a contract with a deadline, Aug. 10. She told me to be as expansive as I wanted to, to take the story in whichever direction it dictated itself, to be very stream-of-consciousness, to go up to 6000 words or longer and that we'd edit it down.

Guess who I never heard from and I waited almost a month for her response?

Guess who never answered my phone calls and e-mails?

When I finally spoke to her, she said, "Well, you know, we've all been very overwhelmed around here because of the book."

What fucking book? "Camille, um, what book are you talking about?"

"Oh, Villard is doing an anthology of the 'Mothers' pieces. Isn't that wonderful? I'll have Lori Leibovich, one of our 'Mothers' editors, work with you."

Guess who never contacted me?

Meanwhile, once again, in the interim, I had e-mailed the erratic and patronizing Joyce. I pitched her the Urbanworld Film Festival—held only in NYC—and featuring "minority filmmakers from around the world." A p.c. dream, I would have thought—but no response from Joyce. On July 8, I e-mailed her that I would be interviewing Andy Dick that week—I would have thought his overt bisexuality and the upcoming News Radio premiere sans Phil Hartman would make him a shoo-in; an interview with Catherine Deneuve; an interview with Tony Gatlif, director of *Gadjo Dilo*; and I repitched Susan Skoog. Joyce replied that she might be interested in Skoog—I should write to her about it in a few days. When I did, she wrote that Leibovich was reviewing *Whatever*. I asked her why I couldn't also interview the director. No response.

Finally, I contacted Leibovich about my "Mothers" piece. She finally e-mailed me back that she had forwarded it to one of the magazine's most shockingly untalented writers, Lisa Moskowitz. On Sept. 28, I received this e-mail from Moskowitz:

"I'm in the midst of editing your piece and I apologize for not letting you know sooner. Looks like we'll try to run it some time in the next month or two. I'll get back to you with comments, etc. by the end of this week."

Guess who I never heard from?

Finally, after repeated e-mails, I received this e-mail from Leibovich on Oct. 16:

"Both Lisa Moskowitz and I looked at your piece and we felt that the writing was somewhat unfocused and that generally, the piece was not strong enough. We didn't think these were problems that could be solved with editing.

"Usually, when we decide not to run a piece that we have assigned and contracted we offer the author, per our contract, 25 percent of the agreed-upon fee. In this case, we will pay you 50 percent, or \$225."

On Oct. 22, I e-mailed Salon's only apparent genuinely human staffer, Suzette Lalime Davidson, editorial office coordinator. I didn't want to go into how Peri had made a verbal promise to pay full fee; or how any story involving Nazis, pedophiles, astrologers and communists had, by definition, to be more interesting than why Sallie Tisdale loves television.

"I wonder if you could tell me how quickly I will be getting my \$250 'kill fee' check for my 'Mothers' piece." I had received an e-mail from Moskowitz on Sept. 28, saying, "Looks like we'll try to run it some time in the next month or two," which clearly constitutes acceptance, and then, surprisingly, an e-mail from Leibovich on Oct. 16 telling me that the piece would not be running, and that I would be getting a \$250 kill fee. "I assume that, given this unorthodox turn of events, this means that the check (for an article submitted on 8/10) has already been sent, or, if not, that it will be mailed out to me immediately. Would you be kind enough to supply the specifics of when I can expect to receive it?"

I received an immediate response:

"I agree that this is not the usual way we do things here. I apologize for the confusion. Lori is out on assignment this week, so I will check with our accountant to make sure her payment request got to him. If so, your check should be mailed this week. If not, I will give the payment request to one of the other Mother's editors to sign off on, and you should still get the payment by next week or so. That is usually how things work."

Guess who never received a check?

So I e-mailed Davidson again on Oct. 30 to tell her that I hadn't received it, and received the following reply:

"My apologies, again. Here is the scoop: Lori Leibovich and the Mothers editors finally agreed on the amount we are to pay you. It will be for 50 percent of the original fee, which will be: \$225. All the check signers were gone out of town this week, so no one got their checks. You should be getting that next week, latest. Thanks for your patience."

But, like, Leibovich had already told me she'd be paying me that amount on Oct. 16. You figure it out.

Meanwhile, I had decided that since Joyce was, frankly, a blithering idiot, I would repitch her my Andy Dick interview, assuming (correctly) that she would forget that she had initially rejected it.

She e-mailed me that she would be interested in seeing my interview and on Sept. 14, she e-mailed me:

"I'd like to run an abridged version of it on the day of the New York premiere (9/23, I think?) I'll call you Thurs. to talk about edits, fees, etc."

Guess who never called?

I left her a message Thurs. at 5:30 SF time, asking her to call or e-mail me Friday. There were potentially litigious quotes from Dick, in which he disses Jon Lovitz and the entire show, and I wanted her to know that he had told me "don't write about this too much," but not, "This is off the record."

When I didn't hear from her by Monday, with the show set to run Wednesday, I finally broke down and left her a voicemail saying she had been disrespectful in not contacting me.

Her infantile return voice message: "In case you haven't been paying attention, we had a bomb scare last Thursday."

Why, no, Cynthia, I hadn't been paying attention because, for some reason, the Psychic Friends Network never contacted me about it and...incredibly, IT DIDN'T MAKE IT ONTO THE FRONT PAGE OF THE NEW YORK TIMES!

Nonetheless, she sent me her incompetently edited copy, along with a snotty note about how "We may have different expectations of a working relationship." Quite astute.

I spoke to her later that day, and she had chilled out. When I asked her if the bomb scare had been really traumatic, she replied, "Actually, it didn't affect me that much because I'm on the other side of the building." She promised to call me later that day to discuss my fee.

Guess who never called me?

Nonetheless, my Andy Dick piece was posted on Sept. 22 (<http://www.salonmagazine.com/ent/int/1998/09/22int.html>).

I know you're wondering why I stuck it out. Perhaps it was because I knew that I would one day be writing this article, and I considered myself to be on a fact-finding mission on another planet.

Anyway, according to my calculations, David Talbot owes me \$500 for bogus "kill fees." But ever since he started hawking t-shirts and tote bags, I've doubt I'll be seeing that money. There's a certain poetic justice to Talbot selling clothes and bags...since Salon's methods seem to be appropriated from the garment business.

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