

Levy: Write Whatever You Want





SHOW BUSINESS

# Write Whatever You Want

*But if it's about Peggy Siegal's client, do better  
than just spell the name right.*



At the Beverly Wilshire: Tom Luddy, producer for Francis Coppola; James Toback, screenwriter of *Bugsy*; Peggy Siegal; *Vogue* film critic Joan Buck; and *Bugsy* star Warren Beatty. Siegal, a top film publicist, is shown opposite in her Manhattan office.

BY RENÉE GEARHART LEVY

**T**he Hamptons are in full splendor. It's one of those last days of summer, when the sky is so blue, the water so clear, and the heat so thick you'd think the season should be just unfolding instead of sputtering to a close.

With the Georgica beach beckoning mere yards from her back door, and a cobblestone swimming pool even closer, Peggy Siegal is indoors. On the telephone.

"Let's have white pitchers on the tables filled with cosmos," she instructs a staff member in her Manhattan office. "Only there are no cosmos left because of the hurricane, so I don't know what we're going to do."

"There is a meeting with the town police and the theater manager tomorrow afternoon," she continues.

"When you get the photo tip-sheet done, please fax it next door. Oh, and as soon as you get the production piece from the *New York Times*, fax that, too. Then we'll have to get it to Barry and Warren right away." She is working on their new film, *Bugsy*.

Against one wall, 400 black tee shirts promoting the film *The Fisher King* sit in

cartons. A neighbor strolls in with a fax. Peggy's three-year-old niece, Mattie, bounds in and out with her grandmother in tow. The phone rings again.

"Jay and Marla are coming? Terrific," says Peggy. "And Mike Medavoy can't make it?" She looks disappointed.

In four days, publicist Siegal is organizing a special private screening of *The Fisher King*, at the East Hampton Cinema on behalf of the film's studio, TriStar Pictures. She's got 275 great people coming, the "opinion makers," as she calls them: writers, actors, journalists, designers, all of them names.

The same day, a *New York Times* article on the filming of *Bugsy*, directed by Barry Levinson and starring Warren Beatty and Annette Bening, will appear in the Arts & Leisure section. She'll get an advance look when the section rolls off the press later today.

The phone rings. "Yes. Yes," says Peggy. "*Women's Wear Daily* is coming and so is the *East Hampton Star* and the *Post*. Please make sure you talk to Jeannie Williams at *USA Today*."

The screening was planned too late for engraved invitations. Letters were sent from TriStar Chairman Medavoy and followed up with phone calls. But then Hurricane Bob hit, the phone lines were down for days, and no flowers are

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left standing on the eastern end of the island. Things are a little crazy and Peggy's beach house is nerve central.

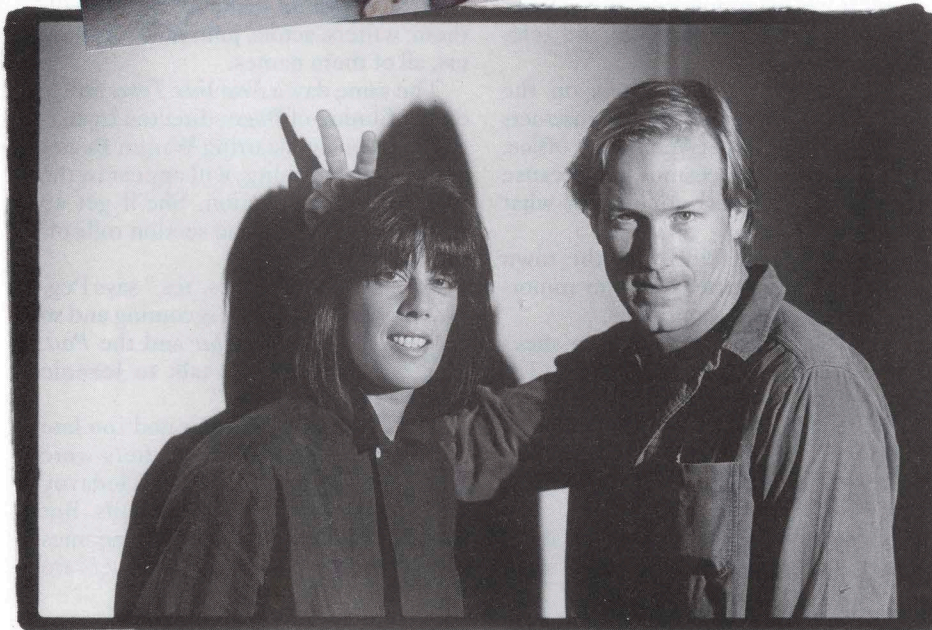
And so it will continue through the Labor day weekend: phone calls and faxes and details and confirmations.

It's business as usual, only Peggy is on vacation.



Oscar eve: Siegal with Michael Douglas the night before he received his Best Actor statuette for *Wall Street*.

Clowning around: Siegal worked with actor William Hurt on *Body Heat* and *The Big Chill*.



Siegal is one of the most sought-after movie publicists in the entertainment industry, with a reputation that spans both coasts and a filmography to match. *Rain Man*. She represented the director and producer, Barry Levinson and Mark Johnson. *Wall Street* and *The War of the Roses*. She represented lead actor Michael Douglas. *Awakenings*. She handled the New York premiere. Movies like *Truth or Dare*; *Total Recall*; *Miller's Crossing*; *Avalon*; *The Untouchables*; *Good Morning, Vietnam*; *Top Gun*; *Beverly Hills Cop*; and *The Big Chill* all benefited from the Peggy Siegal push.

Whether her client is the director, producer, or lead actor on a picture, it's Siegal's job to generate press coverage—to make her product the "must-see" film of the moment.

It's an important role. With the average movie costing \$30 million to make, ticket sales can't be left to chance. Publicity is one the keys—or rather good publicity. All

headlines are not created equal, and how those headlines develop depends a great deal on the decisions made about a film's positioning.

"*Mississippi Burning* was a case where the film was not previewed to the critics properly," says Siegal of a film she had no role in publicizing. "It was a terrific movie but it became too political. The press got on the wrong side of it and scared the audience away."

It's not just how much information to give the press, but what information. "*Terms of Endearment* was about someone dying of cancer. That's not what was said about the film," she says. "You didn't find that out until you got into the theater."

The same control is exercised with the personalities involved in films. Siegal can influence not only what publications will have access to her clients, but also suggest who will write the story and, sometimes, what they will talk about.

"There was a time when the press had a picnic writing anything they wanted about major motion pictures," says Siegal. The big money involved has changed the stakes. There has been a shift in power with publicists such as Siegal gaining more control.

"The days of the \$5-million film are totally gone," she says. "The film talent is responsible for carrying this enormously expensive product. Do they have to reveal the innermost secrets of their personal lives? They don't think so."

"The magazines want to use these people who are extremely valuable in an important industry for *their* commercial advantage *and* then take total journalistic liberties with them," she says. "There's nothing wrong with an actor saying, 'I'll do your story, but I want a writer that I know and like and I want a photographer that I know and like.'" Conflicts lie in the journalist's sense of freedom of the press, she says.

It's not that she's looking for a string of puff pieces on her clients. "We don't want hatchet jobs either, but we'd like a piece that's interesting and well-written and thought-provoking as well," says Siegal.

A lot depends upon the chemistry between the writer and the subject. Therefore, the key is in making the match. "I think that's what this entire company I have is about," she says. "Networking and bringing people together and getting ideas across."



In the lobby of the East Hampton Cinema, Ed Bradley nibbles a miniature quiche out of a brown paper bag. Tom Wolfe chats with Martha Stewart. Calvin and Kelly Klein spy Nora Ephron across the room. And isn't that Jimmy Buffet talking to Fran Leibowitz? At the door, Peggy Siegal greets each guest by name and thanks them all for coming.

TriStar is out to court this arts-and-media crowd. The studio thinks *The Fisher King* will play well to a sophisticated audience. Peggy has culled a list of Who's Who in the Hamptons, developed over 20 years of summering there herself.

It's not just knowing who to invite, she says, but creating an interesting mix and having some sort of relationship with the people to make it happen. "The process involves having a home phone number and being able to call on the phone and not offend them because you have their number," she says. "They know you, they're glad to hear from you."

The crowd is here and every detail is in place. Daisies in blue speckled crocks and mums in white pitchers dot the tables where, keeping with the theme of the movie, hors d'oeuvres are served out of brown bags. Only one miscalculation: the guests aren't in the mood for a serious, somewhat downbeat film (Robin Williams plays a street person). They're more interested in seeing each other.

"The audience was distracted," said Siegal later. "It was the last day of summer. We put the darkest view of New York in front of them when they were in an East Hampton frame of mind."

Nonetheless, it was a good party and the studio was pleased with the publicity generated: items in *Women's Wear Daily*, *USA Today*, *US*, the *New York Post*, *Newsday*, the *East Hampton Star*, the *Daily News*, and a photo out on AP.

"You can double a film's publicity with a good event," says Siegal. "You can get incredible coverage with 50 people if they're 50 of the right people. You can get no coverage with a thousand people if you don't know what you're doing."

The value is in the word of mouth. "If the public sees that all these interesting, bright people are associated with the product, they'll probably want to see what it's all about," she says,

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Two weeks later, *The Fisher King* received two standing ovations at the Venice Film Festival, which shows how *when* and *where* a film is screened can influence an audience.

What may set Siegal apart in this business is not her persistence, which is intense, or her creativity, which is genuine, but her seemingly innate understanding of the right way to get a message across and the boundless energy with which she does it.

It's a team approach that begins with clients. "They know what they're doing," says Siegal. "They usually sit down with me and say, 'This is the film I'm making, this is what I intend to say, and this is what I want you to say about my work.' They're very explicit. They don't get where they are by not being exact."

The challenge for Siegal is to formulate ways to translate that message.

Perhaps there is something interesting about the way the film is being shot, or a brand-new breakthrough in special effects. Maybe there's a uniqueness to the musical score, or the film makes a contemporary social statement. "You could have five or six of those facets of a movie," she says. "The more the director or actor are willing to discuss, the more story angles you have to pitch."

Interviews, says Siegal, are forced situations. "There are maybe a handful of scenarios that exist for what a journalist can do with your client: 'Do you want to go to my favorite restaurant?' 'Do you want to come on the set for five seconds and observe me and then have lunch in my trailer?' 'Do you want to go horseback riding?'"

Siegal researches the reporters as much as they do her clients. "If I can tell a client, 'This is the background of the reporter, this is where he or she came

from, and these are her likes and dislikes in life,' then the client is less apprehensive."

Her role, she says, is to set it up, make it happen, and pray for the best.

She spends her life on the telephone, wielding a handy mobile phone (complete with call-waiting) for taxi rides to work and appointments.

A doctor to whom she complained of back trouble diagnosed the culprit as the angle her head was crooked over the receiver each day. His prescription: using a headset instead. "That lasted about two days," she laughs. The headset now dangles aimlessly from a bulletin board next to her desk, beside instructions for a high-protein diet and a thank-you note from Ivana Trump.

Siegal knows virtually every major magazine editor, every entertainment writer and photographer, and every film critic, not to mention the television and radio personalities. Three rolodexes and a four-inch-thick stack of phone lists grace her desk.

And if she's not in the office, there's nobody better at working a room.

Depending on the season, there might be somewhere to go most nights of the week: screenings, charity functions, dinners.

If not, she retreats to her upper East Side apartment, reverting to her alternate routine. "I have a TV that has two screens, so I've got CNN and something else on. I have lots of magazines on my bed, a tray of food, and I'm on the phone to California," Siegal says. "I've been doing this for years."

Peggy Siegal used to design belts. And handbags. Jewelry. Clothing.

When she was an art student at Syracuse she designed a wedding dress made out of clear vinyl appliqued with daisies, spaced further and further apart down the length of the dress, meant to be worn with white tights. She once said she'd wear it if she ever got married. "It was in my parents' basement in Alpine, New Jersey, for years," says Siegal. "I think they finally threw it away."

When Siegal graduated in 1969 with a bachelor's degree in fine arts, it was a toss-up as to whether she would become a fashion photographer or a designer. She really wanted to be a photographer,

but could only find a job as a stylist ironing clothes. Her grandfather hooked her up with a dress manufacturer friend who offered her a position as a designer's assistant. As fate would have it, the designer was Victor Costa. They were both destined for bigger things.

Around the same time, Siegal met 1966 Syracuse graduate Lois Winebaum Perschetz, who was working as the designer/ready-to-wear editor at *Women's Wear Daily*, "one of the most important fashion journalists in New York," says Siegal.

Through Perschetz, she met many designers. They went to parties. They went to screenings. Siegal met press agent Bobby Zarem. "I was fascinated by him, by what he did, by his connections," she says. Siegal, disenchanted with fashion, asked him for a job. He said yes.

She learned publicity from the ground up. "I had been trained as an artist my whole life and now I was starting out as a secretary in an office," she says. "I remember teaching myself to write, having a dictionary under my arm constantly, and learning as much as I could from him."

She left after she had, eventually landing as assistant to Lois Smith at Pickwick Public Relations. Pickwick

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had an incredible client list, Siegal says, handling everyone from Robert Redford and Steven Spielberg to Candice Bergen and Liza Minnelli. It was there that things fell together for her. Siegal's art background became an asset. "I knew how to choose photographers and to edit photography," she says. "As an artist, I knew how to look at film."

She began to work with directors like Spielberg, Brian DePalma, and Barry Levinson. "I would see their films and then talk to them, and then see their films again," she says. "Sometimes a third or fourth time. After a while it's like reading a book twice: you really begin to get it. You know which scenes work and which don't. You understand the timing and the camera movement."

The first movie she was given to pub-

licize by herself was a film about the Beatle's first appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, called *I Wanna Hold Your Hand*, directed by Bob Zemeckis and produced by a young Steven Spielberg. The movie was not advertised correctly and never reached its audience. After the actors had done many interviews and photo sessions, magazines dropped most of the coverage because Universal Studios had pulled the film. Despite that debacle, Siegal's performance proved she had what it took. Assignments like *Body Heat*, *Blow Out*, *Diner*, and *Poltergeist* followed.

Then in 1982, Siegal was tapped to publicize Spielberg's *E.T.*, a movie whose publicity took on a life of its own. "I handled the film from New York," she says. It still remains one of her favorite projects.

The film was a huge success and Siegal's career really took off. Following a brief stint working for Spielberg in Hollywood and four years in partnership with Smith, Siegal formed the Peggy Siegal Company, primarily representing producers and directors.

"It's much easier with them," she says. "It's easier for them to talk about their work and people are not as interested in their personal lives."



Recently, she's gotten involved with more events and special projects: a western-style hoe-down for the New York premiere of *City Slickers*, an event to launch the new editor and columnists of *Esquire* magazine. She mailed a thousand Phillipe Starck toothbrushes to mid-level studio executives for friend and fellow SU alumnus Ian Schrager to promote his three hotels, the Royalton, Paramount, and Morgans (Starck designed the interiors). She's also a consultant to Home Box Office.

**T**o know Peggy Siegal is not necessarily to love her. That should not be taken as a comment on Siegal's character, but rather a symbol of how she operates.

"She really knows how newspapers work and magazines work and what people are looking for," says her old friend Perschetz, now a free-lance writer and editor after 13 years with *Women's Wear Daily* and *W*. "And she knows what's enough information for somebody to have and when to hold off."

"It's very hard in this business when the columnists are calling you and everyone wants to know the latest inside scoop—to know what to say and what not to say," says Siegal. "I mean, here you are, supposedly the agent of information, but you have to know how much and when to give it out, which is not what the press wants to hear. They want nothing edited."

This is sometimes frustrating to columnists and publications like *Vanity Fair*, *GQ*, and *Premiere*, Siegal says. She can live with that. Her function is to serve her clients first, and she is *very* loyal.

That loyalty is returned by the people who value her services. In fact she lists many of her clients among her friends. She has done eight films for Barry Levinson, seven for Brian DePalma, and four for producers Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer. Michael Fuchs, chairman of HBO, to whose publicity staff Siegal serves as a full-time consultant, provides her with office space.

"Peggy doesn't understand or even hear the word *no*," Bruckheimer has said. "She's good to have on your side."

And it's not always Siegal who's calling the shots the media doesn't like. Sometimes the gag order comes from the client itself.

"The studios go through love/hate relationships with the media," she says. "They're best friends if they're selling an Oscar-quality film. If they've got a turkey on their hands they just lock the doors as tightly as possible."

**T**he phones at the Peggy Siegal Company are ringing off the hook. Peggy is en route to the office, so her four employees field the calls, funneling anything important to her. "Patricia Hearst just called you from home," one staffer tells her. "She says you won't believe the news she has for you. I gave her your portable-phone number."

Another employee is busy calling various celebrities and socialites, verifying what designer they will be wearing to Princess Yasmin Aga Khan's "Black & White Magic" event coming up on Halloween night. Isabella Rossellini will be wearing Giorgio Armani. Deborah Norville plans to sport Marc Jacobs.

The event is the seventh annual Rita Hayworth benefit for the Alzheimers Association. This year, on the 25th anniversary of Truman Capote's famed *Black and White Ball*, the organizers have chosen to recreate one of the great galas of the century. Seventh Avenue's finest have been recruited to design black-and-white gowns for the celebrities. Siegal was asked to help with publicity.

She whirls into the office and is instantly on the phone with Sonia Braga, confirming the actress's dress fitting. Next she calls Chanel, to straighten out a misunderstanding about whether the design house will loan dresses.

The phone rings again and this time it's California. There's a big meeting at TriStar this morning and the studio wants a list of all publicity that's been generated or scheduled for *Bugsy*.

Siegal switches gears instantly, rattling off a list to her assistant: cover stories in *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vanity Fair*, *Premiere*, and *Film Comment*. *Details* plans to do a Q&A with Bill Graham, who plays Lucky Luciano in the film. *Allure* wants to do a piece on the real Ben Siegel's fascination with his appearance. *Condé Nast Traveler* and *Elle* plan to run photo spreads of the old Flamingo Hotel and the "new" Flamingo that's been recreated for the filming. *GQ* is going to do a

fashion spread in the Las Vegas desert using supporting actors Joe Mantegna, Ben Kingsley, and Lewis Van Bergen wearing gangster-style suits.

Nearly all this publicity is the result of the combined efforts of Siegal and a west coast associate, Andrea Jaffe, who have had persistent discussions with the writers and editors at the various magazines. "It's knowing their personalities and interests and pitching the right story to the right person," she says.

It's that kind of personal attention—the hours and hours of phone calling, note writing, and detail attending—that make her services in demand.

**B**ugsy is Siegal's "baby" of the moment. "It's an excellent script, great talent, and a departure from the gangster genre, with humor and romance," she says of the movie that debuts in December.

She believes the finished product will be Oscar-caliber. "This is a well-crafted film," says Siegal. "You have to be very careful not to tell people any 'film is an important film because they'll resent you and the film makers immediately.'"

She's about to turn her attention to Levinson's next movie, *Toys*, a satirical look at the toy industry starring Robin Williams. After eight films, she's still flattered to be put on Levinson's projects.

"Even though you build up a client list, they still have to go to the studio every single time they do a new film and ask the studio to hire you," says Siegal. "It's always a struggle to get the studio to add additional money to their budget for outside offices. It's the biggest drag of life."

She may not like it, but it doesn't seem to be keeping her down. New projects are rolling in daily: *Man Trouble*, starring Jack Nicholson and Ellen Barkin, which she's doing for producer Bruce Gilbert; *The Double Life of Veronique*, which opened the New York Film Festival. And she hopes to be put on client Michael Caton-Jones's next movie. The director of *Scandal*, *Memphis Belle*, and *Doc Hollywood* will direct the film version of SU creative writing professor Toby Wolff's book *This Boy's Life*, produced by Art Linson and starring Debra Winger and Robert DeNiro.

"The studio is Warner Brothers, and they don't usually hire outside offices," she says. "But I'm working on it."

And what Peggy wants, Peggy usually gets. ■

On the set of *Wise Guys*: film critic Roger Ebert, star Danny DeVito, producer Aron Russo, an unidentified crew member, Siegal, and unit publicist Larry Kaplan.