

Richard Hack's Story

My name is Richard Hack. When I met Troy David Stratos in April 1990, he was a charismatic 24-year-old man who introduced himself as a fledgling film director and the stepson of Grammy-winning jazz singer Nancy Wilson. At the time, I was a columnist for the entertainment trade paper *The Hollywood Reporter* and routinely met new talent in the industry as a course of business.

While I only saw Troy occasionally over the next few years, he reentered my life on a more regular basis after I had co-written and produced several TV mini-series and non-fiction books, and had moved to Maui where I began working on a project called "Plantation."

Troy flew to Maui to request that I rewrite a script for a film he was developing called "The Fight" and, despite his dislike of television production, I sold him on joining me in the "Plantation" project which he bought for several thousand dollars, and indicated to me he would independently finance as a pilot for a TV series.

About the same time, he began working on directing a music video of Nancy Wilson's newest hit, "If I Had My Way," in collaboration with an investor named Dennis Rush. I was on the set of the video shoot, and saw Troy's vision as a director transformed onto the small screen in a highly professional music video.

Soon after the video was completed, Troy's relationship with Dennis Rush dissolved due to what Troy said was Rush's bringing additional investors (who Troy neither knew nor sanctioned) into the project. Rush eventually filed a lawsuit and Troy pledged to fight this litigation, insisting that he had followed the terms of the contract.

Claiming to have made his personal fortune through early investments in AOL stock, Troy told me and others that he had "unlimited capital" from a group of Middle Eastern silent partners who were interested in building a film studio. To that end, Troy began to look at property in Las Vegas and British Columbia, eventually moving to Canada where he opened Next Level Media, a production and real estate development company which was headquartered in the Waterfall Building in Vancouver. The firm had multiple employees, large offices, and gave every impression of being a thriving business entity.

Though now based in Hawaii, I maintained my Hollywood connections and attempted to mentor Troy who I found to be an extremely creative director. He had a passion for music and film, and a dislike for the direction in which both industries were headed. We shared a dream of returning much of the glamour to Hollywood, making movies that were less violent and more romantically themed.

After the death of my father in 2000, I moved to Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and began to write a biography of J. Edgar Hoover. I heard from Troy on an occasional basis with updates on his search for land on which to build a major studio. Near the end of 2003, having shuttered his Vancouver operation Troy arrived in Boston, where he again explored various property of sufficient on which to build a studio. Additionally, he looked at areas of downtown Boston for personal residences plus commercial space for a concept called Washington Street, in the area near the restored Boston Opera House. Troy introduced me to a real estate broker named Jeff Goldman, and I was invited to join Troy and Jeff on multiple site evaluations—both commercial and residential. Additionally, Troy looked at a variety of properties on Cape Cod as residential and real estate investment opportunities. At no time did I doubt the legitimacy of Troy's intentions regarding these properties, or his ability or that of his silent partners to complete the transactions. I was excited by what I saw as a real opportunity to build a production facility, and be paid for my creative vision.

I joined Jeff to develop presentations relating to various areas around Boston and the Cape. More than just time consuming, these proposals required intense preparation and enormous printing costs for which Troy paid, further establishing his legitimacy in my eyes. Jeff has later been quoted as saying that Troy was nothing short of a con artist, and that I had to have known he was not serious in his intent to perform. Such was not the case. I had no knowledge that Troy was anything other than who he said he was as he spent what I believed to be his own capital to develop the concept.

When he made an offer to buy a Provincetown home listed at \$1.2 million, and submitted it was a \$1,000 check, I was thrilled that he had finally found a residence in which he wanted to live. At the time the offer was accepted and the purchase agreement was being prepared, Troy was out of town, and asked that I sign the document as the successor trustee of his STS Trust which was to be the purchasing entity. Troy forwarded a check in the amount of \$209,000 for the down-payment on this property.

He subsequently stopped payment on the check for reasons that were not completely clear to me at the time. He had had some discussions with the property's owners, and had apparently changed his mind about the purchase. To my dismay, the owners began litigation against me, since it was my signature on the purchase agreement—this despite the fact that they knew I was operating at his behest.

I gave a lengthy deposition, swearing to that fact, in the office of the owners' attorney. Given that I had neither written the check nor intended to purchase the home personally, I was convinced that the case would be dropped and was under the impression that it had been.

Soon afterward, Troy enlisted my help to write a treatment for the feature-film trilogy "18D: The Pharaonic Prophecies," based in Egypt during the reign of King Tutankhamen. He intended to personally direct the film with the underwriting to be provided by his partners in the Middle East. We completed this treatment based on his stories in December 2004.

It was then that a brutal winter storm caused me to head for the warmth of Florida and I established my residence in Fort Lauderdale in January 2005. Troy abandoned the cold of the great Northeast himself and settled in the South Beach area of Miami. Once again, he began to explore land sites adequate for a studio as well as lavish homes on Biscayne Bay and in Fort Lauderdale for his personal use. Discovering underutilized areas of Fort Lauderdale, he explored the potential of linking several contiguous properties near the beach for an expansive pedestrian-friendly shopping plaza. Again, given the amount of man-hours devoted to these projects by Troy and several independent hires, and the amount of money spent on this effort, there was no question in my mind of his seriousness or his ability to close these deals. Yet, in each case, there seemed to be zoning, size, or owner issues, which made his eventual purchase undesirable according to his analysis.

In August 2005, based on my work on the "Plantation" script and the 100-plus page treatment of "18D," Troy offered me an \$11 million, eleven picture contract with Next Level Media, Inc. The itemized list of films included action-adventure, musicals, and romance, and was directed at producing family entertainment that would impact positively on the movie-going public. All were being fully financed by Troy's Middle Eastern partners I was told.

As we began to gear up for production, Troy extended me loans secured by my future earnings detailed in my contract. It appeared that we were on track to begin production, when in the early months of 2006, Troy introduced me to his life-long friend Nicole Murphy who was then in the process of divorcing her husband actor Eddie Murphy. Although I was not privy to any of their business meetings or private time together, Troy told me that he took on the responsibility of helping Nicole to establish her independent career as a singer and creator of her own line of celebrity-inspired jewelry which he called "Collection X." He launched her new career via a cover photograph and accompanying article in the magazine *Fitness RX for Women*. He hired talented studio musicians, selected songs and recorded two albums spotlighting Nicole's vocal artistry. Just as in the case of the Nancy Wilson video, these recordings were completed and were professionally excellent, further convincing me of the extent of his creative talent and potential.

Nicole and Troy made several trips to Europe, he moved for months at a time to California for meetings and studio sessions, hired Sheri Farley to handle accounting, opened a joint bank account in the name of their shared trust, established a new company called TroyCo naming himself as president, and generally had what appeared to be a mutually beneficial working relationship with Nicole.

While there were times he was late with reimbursements of money extended on his behalf, Troy always eventually kept his word. In early 2008, however, Troy began to make promises to his staff and friends he did not keep. These promises included house payments, car payments, and rent payments for individuals who had worked tirelessly on his behalf based on their trust in his ability to perform. Over the months, I personally charged tens of thousands of dollars of flights and storage bills to my credit cards as a courtesy.

[REDACTED]

Troy did not return permanently to Florida, but rather traveled to Europe and the Middle East, apparently working on film and real estate projects. In May, I received a telephone call advising me that a press conference had been arranged to announce details of the long-delayed film trilogy "18D" in Cairo and Troy asked me to fly to Egypt for the event. It was originally slated as a three-day trip.

Upon my arrival in Cairo, I was informed that the press conference had been cancelled due to his inability to secure the cooperation of the Egyptian government. Admittedly, it was a rather feeble excuse, and one which I had difficulty accepting. Given the distance I had traveled, however, I agreed to remain for "several days" in order to scout locations for the film. I met with representatives from the public relations firm that Troy had hired for the press conference, several executives within the local film production community, and had tours of various archeological sites—all the while preparing to leave and return to the U.S.

Troy once again began to look at real estate properties to use as production offices and his personal residence during the several years he anticipated pre-production and filming would take for the trilogy of movies. Since Cairo had no modern film stages capable of accommodating a production of this size, Troy pledged that he and his silent partners would build several sound stages and donate them to the country in return for access to historical sites.

My departure from Cairo was interrupted by Troy's chance encounter at the Four Seasons Hotel with a Dubai entrepreneur who was in Egypt to attend the World Economic Conference taking place on the Red Sea. When Troy revealed his plans for "18D," the gentleman invited him to explore shooting "18D" in the United Arab Emirates rather than Egypt, claiming the UAE had superior facilities. The businessman invited us to travel to Dubai aboard his private jet, and though Troy was unable to reschedule multiple meetings he had planned for the next several days, he suggested that I take the trip to evaluate Dubai's progress in establishing itself as a media and production center of the Middle East.

I spent the next several days at Troy's expense exploring various desert locations, the on-going construction at Dubai Land theme park, plus housing alternatives for production staff, crew and stars. When Troy eventually joined me in Dubai, he asked that I prepare a presentation that would adapt his previous plans for a film studio in the U.S. to accommodate available property in the emirate. The studio was to be housed under a giant dome to insulate the facility from the intense area heat. Although I was not invited to his meetings regarding the construction of this studio, it was my continuing understanding that, as before, it was to be completely funded by his silent partners with local businesses utilized to meet regulations regarding construction in Dubai.

It was during this time that Troy came up with the concept to produce a charity event centered on Michael Jackson's 50th Birthday celebration. Troy claimed to have previously worked with Michael, and intended to invite 50 celebrities to Dubai to celebrate the date with a three-day event. He asked me to construct a pictorial presentation of the planned event as he envisioned it, including a list of 50 charities that would benefit from the fund-raising event, which he planned to film and sell as an entertainment special.

Other than several lunch and dinner meetings that I attended with Troy, most of his conferences relating to these plans and his intentions to utilize Dubai as a production center were held in private. At no time did I hear him request funding for any of these projects, nor do I possess any knowledge of the business aspects relating to them.

By this time, he was again looking at residential properties in the area in which to live, and the now-familiar process began to wear itself thin to me. I repeatedly insisted on leaving and returning to the U.S., and was continually asked to remain "just another few days." Fortunately, my mother had scheduled some minor skin surgery on her back, and I was able to use her infirmity as the perfect excuse to leave the country.

It was becoming increasingly evident to me that neither the film production, the planned studio, nor any of the eleven scripts I had been hired to write were any closer to becoming a reality. When I announced to Troy that I intended to stop concentrating on his proposals and dedicate my work efforts toward my next book, he attempted to make me feel guilty that I was no longer devoting every waking moment to him and his projects.

There were still the repeated promises that he had met with his partners and that he had done "life interviews" to satisfy the provisions of the Patriot Act to enable him to transfer funds into the U.S. and fully finance his plans and repay his debts. He had settled in England and was now meeting with real estate brokers there to develop property in the city of Richmond on the outskirts of London, as his finances were being presumably liberated.

Nicole Murphy hired a private investigator to do forensics on money she claimed that Troy had misappropriated from her, and when this investigator contacted me via email, I answered all his questions with the knowledge I had of Troy's business practices. I also received additional reassurances from Troy that he was in contact with Nicole and was working to settle any differences that existed between them.

[REDACTED]

The growing number of individuals to whom Troy owed money had banded together to publicize their complaints on the Internet under this site, IMetTroy. At the time, I did not add my voice to their message, still believing that Troy was going to "make things right" as he continually promised me he would do.

It was not until August 2009 when I received word that Troy had been arrested in Paris based on a complaint brought by an investor named Gary Peters that I realized the extent of Troy's deceptions and the lengths he had gone to keep me insulated from the truth of the situation. He had been living under an assumed name, was borrowing money to continue to live his lavish lifestyle, and quite apparently had no silent partners in the Middle East or real money of his own. Rather than being seen as a victim, I was being judged as some sort of accomplice in his subterfuge.

In September, I received six letters from Troy, handwritten in prison, still proclaiming his innocence and giving me a litany of instructions and people to contact on his behalf. They were the desperate ramblings of a man trapped by his own actions and clearly under stress. Those self-serving letters opened my eyes to his manipulation and total lack of concern for the consequences of his behavior.

In his rush to make excuses for his predicament, he never once addressed the ramifications of his conduct. My trust in him had been rewarded through my own personal financial ruin. Not only did I not receive the benefit of the income from my contract, I had turned down very real book deals in an attempt to remain in compliance with my Next Level Media contract. I was served notice that the litigation against me in Massachusetts had gone to court without my knowledge and that a default judgment in excess of \$209,000 has been levied against me. Because of that judgment and the multiple attorney fees and unpaid credit card bills, I was forced into a humiliating bankruptcy to clear debts that were directly related to Troy and litigation he solely caused.

As for Troy, after several months in jail, he managed to post bail. Although I never received the details, he was able to leave France and return to the U.S., where I believe he remains. I have not spoken to him since just before his arrest. Despite my reluctance to air disputes in a public forum, I join this list of individuals determined to help those who have been victimized. Each of us believed in this man and the dreams he cultivated in us. And while I still have no direct knowledge that anything he did was illegal, the damage he caused is inexcusable.

The larger unanswered question remains why? Why would a man with obvious creative talent waste his gift and his money on propagating an illusion of productivity and wealth without accomplishing a single successfully marketed project? All the effort and all those man-hours signifying nothing except pain, headache, and shattered faith. I will give him this much—he is superb at what he does.

For those that might still feel that I was indeed a knowledgeable and active participant in his schemes, I have attached the response I wrote to him privately on Sept. 21, 2009 while he was in La Santé prison. The words contained in this letter reflect my feelings then as now—more than a year later.

LETTER TO TROY

September 21, 2009

Dear Troy,

I have just received the six letters you sent me from La Santé prison. It is amazing to me that you would have the audacity to send me a list of assignments to accomplish as if I were some sort of hired help. Of that list, I will reach out to your grandparents to provide them what comfort I can. I have also sent a copy of the script for "Plantation." It is the one thing I can vouch for as authentic. Perhaps as you read it, you will see my hope of producing a romantic and entertaining melodrama vanish before your eyes, like the illusion I now know it was.

Your web of lies and deception has done far more than crush my belief that we could make the world a gentler place through quality films. I believed that you would actually give me the opportunity to write eleven films and show the world my talent as a scriptwriter. I believed that you were planning on building a film studio. I believed that you were turning Nicole Murphy into a singing star and were jointly investing in her future. I believed that there was a business called Collection X that I could help guide through creative affairs. But most of all, I believed in you, Troy Stratos, and your ability as a talented and inspired director.

It is interesting to me that in all the pages of excuses and apologies that you provide for the damage you have done to so many innocent people, there is not a single mention of your mysterious silent business partners—those Middle East Texaco oil men who were to my knowledge the source of your capital, and whose approval you sought for each presentation I wrote at your request.

There is not a single mention of the fact that, as late as last month, you swore to me you have received your capitalization from those business partners and were arranging to send it to your attorney to help keep your many broken promises. Yet now, you don't seem to have a single penny to pay an attorney in your own defense. I get sick to my stomach when I realize how I could have been fooled so easily.

While you were promising futures for a host of people who genuinely believed and trusted in you—from Miguel to Derrick to Socrates to Ken to Simon to Adam to Jeff to Karen—you somehow forgot that these were real people with real dreams, who now are dealing with enormous pain and ruin because of you.

While I have yet to figure out the extent of your investment in Nicole or she in you, if even a fraction of what she says is accurate, and I suspect it is, I realize that you are extremely ill. She was your oldest friend, and now-single mother of five children. To have deceived her in any way, let alone the extent to which you apparently have, is inconceivable and inexcusable to my mind. Some people do not behave like this. Have you no conscience or soul?

Forget the hours and hours I spent working to help make what I thought were shared dreams a reality. Forget that I turned down actual work to help you, going into massive debt in the process. Forget that I endured endless criticism and abuse through your ridicule and arrogance. My involvement with you has marked me as some sort of accomplice in a great scheme of which I'm not even aware.

As you know, my entire reputation has been built on my ability to keep my word. You have now devastated that reputation and I will no doubt spend the remainder of my life attempting to regain it. I will do that with my head held high, for I have never once attended a meeting, scouted a location, or written a proposal without firmly believing that the projects were real or, at the very least, possible.

If you should choose to write me again, I strongly suggest that you keep that in mind, and begin your letter with an apology to me—one in which you clearly state that I had no knowledge of any scams, cons or fraud of any kind to which you may have been a party. It is my hope that you seek the psychological help you need to realize the depth of the tragedy you have wrought, and spend the rest of your time on earth attempting to make amends to those who trusted you completely. For the most part, their names are known to you alone, but there are many and they are bleeding.

Sincerely,

Richard

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