

Nashville Independent Film Festival Seminar - June 2002

TO SHOOT OR NOT TO SHOOT, WHAT A QUESTION!

a.k.a. Is Your Script Really Ready??

or

It's A Personal Film! You're Not SUPPOSED To Understand It!

"The fact that no one understands you does not make you an artist."

bumper sticker

All will be on my website. willakers.com

Miramax looked at 300 finished feature films last year. They bought three. Finished feature films means they were shot, edited, scored, answer printed. Done. In the garage, and they didn't get bought.

How many films are submitted? 936 short narrative, feature, documentaries

NIFF shows about 10%

less than 2% in short narrative in SF festival

Why?

Tough question.

Simple but grim answer, which I will repeat: "Just because it's of interest to you, doesn't mean anyone else is going to care."

The worst thing you can do is waste time and money! Don't find out at the screening you should have done five more drafts of your script!

Bad karma.

If you raise money and blow it, it poisons the well for the next filmmaker. Be responsible. If you make this film, will you be hated by younger filmmakers?

***GENERAL**

This is very, very difficult stuff.

Patti Smith / 10,000 Maniacs discussion.

Why are you worried about shooting in 16 or 35, God forbid, if the story's not there?

No shortage of good looking films.

Sound, lighting, production design, actors, SPFX... so what?

Rewriting costs you nothing.
Rewriting once you've shot, which is called editing, is brutally expensive.
Throw a scene out on paper, not on film or tape. Ugh.

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Shorts are the same as features. Only shorter. Same elements. What I say is interchangeable.

Anything I say may be wrong. Except this:

The only rule: You cannot be boring. You don't have to worry about anything else.

Problem, with independent filmmaking, is you have total control.
What's boring TO YOU doesn't count.

You have to remember the audience.

Just because you think it's a great idea doesn't always mean it's a great idea.

*IDEA

What were they thinking?

Most important. If this isn't there, all else is a waste of time.

On X-FILES, a writer would sometimes work 10 hours a day for five to six months to come up with one idea that would become an episode.

For God's sake, have something to say.
Why do you want to write? Why are you passionate? Why make a film if YOU have nothing to say?

Just because you took the time to make it, is anyone going to want to see it? Really and truly?

Just because you've managed to extract \$700,000 from dentists, doesn't mean you're going to be able to sell the final product.

Why would anyone other than your backers want to see your film? And you have to be harsh here. In what way does your story provide a viewer something they can relate to in some way?

It's NOT about camera and lighting and can we get a steadicam...

Is your idea a good idea?

Is your idea a stupid idea?

When you tell people, what do they say?

Do they get enthusiastic or do they say, "That's really interesting."

In writing, learn to understand something that is bothering you. You'll be richer for it.

When you pick a topic, think about "what are you fighting to understand?"

Yourself. Not your biography. Your feelings. Emotions. Write about your feelings. Use them to develop your theme. Billy Bob Thornton made faces and came up with the character in SLING BLADE.

Ask yourself... has it been done before? Has it been done better? Can I make it mine?

Can you get people thinking?

Can you make them angry?

Is the idea cinematic? Is it dramatic, visually?

Is there a visual image of what the story is about? CHINATOWN is about water.

Does the hero (and us) learn something worth knowing?

Make it ABOUT something. THE scene or line that is the core of the movie.

SHOW CLIP FROM CINEMA PARADISO 2:16

As we move to character, keep in mind:

Is it a movie? Does it MOVE?

Are the stakes high enough in your story?

Life & death, losing a kingdom, going to prison

ORDINARY PEOPLE -- it's about world domination

JAMES BOND

The hero must be in jeopardy, the crusher, harm's way. Read Clear and Present Danger then see the video. Jack Ryan doesn't even go to South America in the book.

"The first draft of everything is shit."

Hemingway

Work it work it work it. Don't be satisfied.

FACE-OFF, 35 drafts. X-MEN, 100.

1.) Your hero must be active. They must seize control of the action, their problem, their destiny and struggle without cease until they have triumphed over the Bad Guy. A hero

who is not active will never engage the audience or the reader. THE FUGITIVE never gives up. No matter what problems are thrown at him, he finds a solution and continues the struggle. A passive main character is a one way ticket to Palookaville.

2.) Your hero must have a well defined problem. We need to know basically what is going on very quickly. They really only need one main problem, as that is what the movie is about. Keep it simple. One problem.

3.) Their problem must be interesting to an audience.

4.) Hero must solve his/her own problem. They can have allies, but in the final battle, the hero faces down the forces of evil (eeevil if you're English) on their own.

*CHARACTER

Rule Number One:

Make it appeal to actors. They have to want to play the role.

Even for free. Especially for free!

Tape this to your monitor because this is what you're writing: "Actor bait."

"I almost always begin with a character and work from there. Whenever I try to begin with a concept as opposed to a character I end up getting stuck. Otherwise, I don't have enough to work from in order to create a COMPLEX story about COMPLEX people. If you know your characters really well you always have TOO MUCH material to work with. If you're just trying to service a concept it's just a matter of making up things that happen. It doesn't matter WHO it's all happening to. It's like porno."

Scott Frank, GET SHORTY

Screenwriting has to be externalize. No interior monologues. What you say, has to be on the screen. Cultivate ways to show the audience what's going on in the character's head. In action.

A character is what he does.

When Mrs. Mulwray is nervous, she lights a cigarette, and she's already got one going. Shows her internal state. You find ways to reveal action.

In THE COMPANY OF MEN, a man steals change from his friend.

A character can say, "I volunteer all the time. I make meals for the homeless, etc." She's promoting herself. But if you see her going into a soup kitchen and peel potatoes... you define her as charitable without having to go into detail about it.

Who is main character?

What do they want? -- what propels them through the movie, pursuing a goal, active.

Why are they having trouble getting it? -- obstacles you are throwing in the way.

Best description of how to set up a character comes from the Rolling Stones:

"You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you just might find, you'll get what you need."

What do they want? this will drive them through the story.

What do they need? they won't know this, but it's what we see they need to recognize about themselves.

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE. He wants to leave town desperately. Get out of Bedford falls. He needs to help other people.

It has to be strong and will drive the whole movie. It must also be simple. THE TRIP TO BOUNTIFUL. She wants to go home. DRIVING MISS DAISY -- she wants independence and her son wants her not to drive, forces chauffeur.

Deeply conflicted.

Ask a producer from Los Angeles what she looks for in a script: Is the hero tortured?

Does the character have a fear?

Character's journey. Do they end up in a different place than they began?

Backstory How do they feel about what happened to them in the past? Why are they the way they are now?

Don't spend a lot of time talking about it. Iceberg. Layer it through the story, not in a couple of speeches.

Character doesn't need to be likeable, but character needs to be fascinating.

Richard III was the worst s.o.b. in the world, driven, dislikable, disgusting. How many times have they made that movie? RESERVOIR DOGS... who there is likable? They are fascinating.

On SEINFELD, the characters are not likeable. They are funny. Funny is money.

BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES, book is about a sleazy guy... and the movie makes him likeable. And it went down the tubes.

Character must be not be faced with black and white decisions, but must be faced with moral decision: 1.) I love my wife but I want to be a priest, 2.) A good man kills a bad one. Do you hang him?

Characters must be in a crucible and whatever decision they make must affect them for the rest of their lives. It has to be of CRITICAL IMPORTANCE or it won't matter to the viewer. It also is much much much easier to write.

Last Thought on Character:

Minor characters.

Make all the characters, even in small roles, have character.

When you finish the first draft, pull out all the secondary character's dialogue. Make them a character, don't let them have a function. Make them more interesting. Give them attitude.

Have a waitress bring coffee over, and say "here's your damn coffee."

Slim Pickens character from THE GETAWAY. I saw the film twice, twenty years ago, and could still quote the guy's dialogue.

SHOW CLIP FROM THE GETAWAY c. 5:30

*BAD GUY

Does he feel he's the hero of his movie?

Is he or she active, taking steps to get what they want?

Not just thinking evil thoughts, but doing it for a reason. WHY is he doing it? What is his agenda?

There should be an emotional component to what he wants.

in SHAWSHANK, he wants order in the prison
in FERRIS BUELLER, he wants order in the school.

ROONEY

What's so dangerous about a character like Ferris Bueller is that he gives the good kids bad ideas. The last thing I need at this point in my career is fifteen hundred Ferris Bueller disciples running around these halls.

SECRETARY

He's very popular, Ed. Sportos, motorheads, geeks, sluts, pinheads, dweebies, wonkers, richies, they all adore him. They think he's a righteous dude.

ROONEY

That's exactly why I have to catch him this time. To show these kids that the example he sets is a first class ticket to nowhere.

What about him punches the Good Guy's button?

Always taking action. Action, counter action.

In DIE HARD, Hans Gruber drives that story forward. Plus, he's really, really cool.

ORDINARY PEOPLE.

They can do what they do for good reasons, but it's still bad for hero.

The agent of change. Without opponent, hero will never evolve to who he / she needs to be.

In the clip from SEXY BEAST, before we've even met the opponent, we're scared to death of him. This is a great character introduction.

SHOW CLIP FROM SEXY BEAST c. 3:00

*CONFLICT

Is the hero in a ton of trouble?

Main questions to ask yourself:

1. how soon do I know the action?
2. how soon to I know the counter action?
3. how soon do I know how the tension is building...?

Troubles, troubles, troubles.

Obstacles, obstacles...

Middle is when something goes wrong constantly, not once in a while. It's an obstacle course for hero.

Without dramatic tension, you're out of the ballgame .

In REMAINS OF THE DAY... a subtle example of it, but ingenious. Emma has been trying to be friendly with Anthony, and she can't lighten him up. She comes into his study, and he's nervous, and has a book in his hand. She comes over and asks what the book is... he covers it up and says "Just a book." She asks to read it. He won't let her see it... huge tension. It keeps you glued to the scene, cause the suppressed emotional situation is so explosive.

It comes through fear of conflict, not just fear of danger.

*RISING ACTION

Lots of them.

Keep surprising us in interesting ways, but it has to be in their character.

They have to escalate.

FATAL ATTRACTION

They meet. They have sex.

Alex calls at office. This shocks him.

Her apartment. She cooks. He tells her he's not interested in a future.

Her bed. He has to go. She says she doesn't like it. Rips his shirt. She wants to be told to fuck off. He tells her. She slices her wrists.

His office. Psycho bitch is back!

Inner office. He tells her that it's over. She's got opera tickets. He says no.

His house. Phone rings. Wife answers. No one there.

Later. Middle of night. She calls. "You won't take my calls at office. I have no choice. Set meeting place."

They meet. He tells her she needs a shrink. She says she's pregnant. She wants the child. He wants her to have an abortion.

Dan's apartment. Alex is there, talking with wife about buying the apartment. She's infiltrated his home.

Alex's apartment. He comes. Tells her to stop. She says, "own up to your responsibility." She wants sex, then says to hit her. Then, she shifts personality again, begs him to stay,

then threatens to tell his wife. "If you tell my wife, I'll kill you." After he leaves, she calls wife, breathes heavy, hangs up.

Parking structure. His car's trashed.

He gets package, audio tape. She's on tape, talking about life growing inside her. Crazy. She's very insulting.

Come back to house. Bunny has been boiled.

Dan tells wife about Alex. He packs to leave. Calls Alex, tells her he's told wife. Puts wife on phone, who threatens to kill Alex.

Beth comes to school to pick up child. Gone. Alex and child at park.

Alex's apartment. He attacks her. Threatens her with knife.

Dan locks doors. Beth wipes steam from mirror. Alex in bathroom!

And that battle is her last move...

*STRUCTURE ...

Through emotions, we identify with the person on the screen.

How can I create events that will force feeling from a character?

How fast do we know what the story is about?

Where does the story start? GET ON WITH THE STORY.

Get rid of as much set up as possible. No opening montage to meet the character, just start the story.

How late can you start the story?

You or I, first draft:

A couple is mailed a video of them, in their own bed... eek, scary!

But...

When it's a David Lynch film.

Couple gets

1.) video tape of outside of their house.

2.) video of the inside of house.

3.) video of them, in their own bed...

Deliver the information as slowly as possible... instead of sending #3 video first...

Two weapons: surprise & secrets

When developing the story, ask yourself where the surprises are coming. There have to be lots of them, and you need to guard them. Don't let them out all at once. Drips and drabs is better.

Goldman doesn't blow the delightful surprise that Butch has never killed a man before... it has huge impact. He doesn't tell it at the beginning, where it would be wimpy. And nowhere in the movie, does Sundance say, "I come from New Jersey." Until the end, when it is funny. If you've got some key information, save it. Feed it out on a need to know basis.

You're in the park with a sack of bird seed... you don't just dump the seed on the ground. You, if you really like to watch birds, you sprinkle it a little at a time, and you have an interesting experience. If you dumped it out all at once, then the birds are gone quicker and it's not so interesting.

Scenes

What is the emotional point to the scene?

What's the worst thing that can happen, and not be predictable?

Same rules apply.

Who is main character?

What do they want?

Why are they having trouble getting it?

How do you decide what scene to write... Be sure that:

1. to advance the story
- 2 increase dramatic tension
- 3 necessary
- 4 funny... if it's funny, the others aren't needed.

Drop the curtain sooner. Let the reader work to figure out what will happen next. Don't give away too much, let them keep figuring out what is going to happen.

Cut the last two lines of dialogue.

Layering a scene. Put as many different levels of action in the scene as possible. Allow us to read it three times and still see something new each time. Two torturers are torturing someone. Fine. But they're also watching a TV game show...

The people in the scene need to be very different from each other... two characters who are very different, not just a little different, then add an outside conflict. Now you can write a scene.

THROW MOMMA FROM THE TRAIN -- Danny Devito's coin collection.

*DIALOGUE

re: REMAINS OF THE DAY dialogue -- Emma asks about the book: "He feels threatened and she just wants to get close to him." doesn't say, "My, you feel threatened by my response."

Q & A is death.

Furniture Ad dialogue.

Bad dialogue: V.I. WARSHOVSKY, SHATTERED

Good dialogue: BODY HEAT

PLAY CLIP FROM BODY HEAT c. 4:25

All language is about your theme. BODY HEAT is sex. GODFATHER is all about family and business and honor. Read that dialogue and see how many times they talk about it.

How can you cut it to make it better?

Does the dialogue sound different from character to character?
A-B dialogue.

Subtext

Explain what subtext is. Make the audience work.

SHOW CLIP FROM BANDITS

The text is "our marriage stinks and I have no respect for you."
But they don't write that. They let you figure it out.

*FINAL THOUGHTS

I asked questions of people who work with the Nashville Independent Film Festival and the San Francisco film festival.

If you have a filmmaker in front of you, what do you want to grab 'em and shake 'em and tell 'em...

Get out of the business completely... So many places the film can go wrong, and the script is the bone structure of the film. You can have a good script and make a bad film, but you can't make a good film with a bad script. You can make a good film from a bad book where SUM OF ALL FEARS is an amazing film made from a less than amazing book.

What stories do you hate to see

Laundromat... blind date movies, we're sick of a nerdy guy ending up in a car or an elevator with a cute blonde... competently made films that have nothing to say. They are looking for personality. Someone has to be speaking from their heart. If you are going to the trouble to make a film, you should make your own film, not someone else's.

What tells you a film is good, right away

Has a heart and soul... it can be ineptly made, with bad acting... but it has to be about something. The beauty of the technique doesn't make up for no soul.

What tells you a film is bad, right away

Filmmakers think they have to have something outrageous to grab you... Razzle Dazzle can only take you so far... no matter how inventive the cutting or angles, you still have to have a good script behind it.

If you are using the camera mike

What makes a script mediocre...

What the characters are saying, given who they are and what they are doing, doesn't ring true. Dialogue doesn't seem believable. And the acting is bad.

"Rules" a filmmaker should live by when approaching his script

Shorts are too long. If it's over ten minutes, you have to see if it warrants that. If it's 12, cut it to eight. It is a short after all. You lessen your chances of getting your film in festivals if it's longer. End it already! Length is not going to impress.

Film is not a story written on paper, like a novel. It's different. It's its own language and that's what is important, and the screenplay is the basis of it.

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Finally:

If you want someone to watch it, there has to be a reason, and that reason can't be to be rich and famous.

Don't make the reader, at the end of the script say, What was the point of this?

Be prepared to throw your script away and start another one.

Why do you HAVE to make it?

Why should we HAVE to watch it?

Don't jerk the rug out from under the audience. Make the journey to the end at least satisfying for those who took the journey.

When it's over, don't make us say, "Why did they do that?"

Watch someone read your script. If they turn back to figure something you, you're in trouble. If you have to explain something to them, you're toast.

FOUR FINAL THOUGHTS:

- 1.) Just because you have a song you can use doesn't mean you should use it.
- 2.) Just because you have a crane, doesn't mean you should use it.
- 3.) If your actors don't smoke, and the character does, get an actor who can smoke.
and
- 4.) Just because you're sick of your script doesn't mean it's finished.