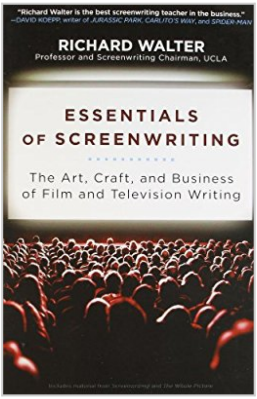

Essentials of Screenwriting: The Art, Craft, and Business of Film and Television Writing

By Richard Walter

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Hollywood's premier teacher of screenwriting shares the secrets of writing and selling successful screenplays

Anyone fortunate enough to win a seat in Professor Richard Walter's legendary class at UCLA film school can be confident their career has just taken a quantum leap forward. His students have written more than ten projects for Steven Spielberg alone, plus hundreds of other Hollywood blockbusters and prestigious indie productions, including two recent Oscar winners for best original screenplay-*Milk* (2008) and *Sideways* (2006).

In this updated edition, Walter integrates his highly coveted lessons and principles from *Screenwriting* with material from his companion text, *The Whole Picture*, and includes new advice on how to turn a raw idea into a great movie or TV script-and sell it. There is never a shortage of aspiring screenwriters, and this book is their bible.

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Editorial Review

Review
“This inspiring and comprehensive book teaches the nuts and bolts of screenwriting with clarity, wisdom, and humor.”—**Alexander Payne, Oscar-winning writer/director of *Sideways***

“In his legendary lectures, and now in this book, [Walter] kicks you in the tail, gets you laughing, and with invaluable specifics, makes that blank page seem surmountable.”—**Dustin Lance Black, Oscar-winning writer of *Milk***

“In the gold rush atmosphere of screenwriting, Richard Walter is a wise guide.”—**Andrew Bergman, writer/director of *The Freshman* and *Honeymoon in Vegas***

About the Author
Richard Walter is a celebrated storytelling educator, movie industry expert and longtime co-chairman of the graduate screenwriting program at UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television.

A screenwriter and widely published author, his books include the novels *Escape from Film School*and *Barry and the Persuasions* and the non-fiction works *The Whole Picture: Strategies for Screenwriting Success in the New Hollywood*, *Screenwriting: The Art, Craft and Business of Film and Television Writing* and *The Essentials of Screenwriting*.

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RICHARD WALTER has been chairman of UCLA’s graduate screenwriting program for more than thirty years. A novelist and screenwriter himself, he lectures and offers master classes throughout the nation and the world.

“The prime broker for Hollywood’s hottest commodity: new writing talent.”

—*Wall Street Journal*

“The Jewish mother of screenwriting.”

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“*Screenwriting* is full of the expertise of someone who knows what makes movies worth writing, making, and seeing . . . [Richard Walter] instructs with wit, common sense, and love for his art and craft.”

—Steven Bach, author of *Final Cut*

“In the gold rush atmosphere of screenwriting, Richard Walter is a wise guide. A lively and provocative book.”

—Andrew Bergman, writer/director of *The Freshman* and *Honeymoon in Vegas*

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—Joe Eszterhas, writer of *Basic Instinct* and *Flashdance*

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ESSENTIALS
of
SCREENWRITING

The Art, Craft, and Business
of Film and Television Writing

RICHARD WALTER

Professor and Screenwriting Chairman, UCLA

Acknowledgments

My experience editing hundreds upon hundreds of screenplays over the decades positions me uniquely well to appreciate the importance of editing and also the qualities characterizing a worthy editor. There is none worthier than Nadia Kashper, wise beyond her years, without whose support this book would constitute not much more than a catalogue of Richie's Greatest Hits.

I salute also the attention and consideration afforded me by my earlier editors at Plume: Arnold Dolin, Gary Luke, and Peter K. Borland.

For my leonine agent, Peter Miller: roars.

Eternal gratitude to my longtime pal and partner in Westwood Professor Hal Ackerman and also to Lew Hunter and all our UCLA colleagues over many wonderful years.

My writing and teaching continues to be informed and expanded by the spirit of my own teacher, the late and legendary Irwin R. Blacker.

Finally, as always, with love to Pat, for reminding me daily just who I am and what it is that truly matters, and for providing me with more fun and inspiration than any mere movie.

When citing movies and television shows, the names of all credited writers are provided the first time the title appears in the book.

Introduction

The God Game

In the early 1970s, while I was still nominally a film student but had been writing professionally for a couple of years, the Writers Guild went on strike.

May I confess here and now that I loved the strike?

By that time I'd written half a dozen feature screenplays for the studios and had earned a steady, even a substantial living. At that precise moment, however, I was "between assignments"—Hollywood's euphemism for out of work—and I did not, therefore, have to abandon any post.

The bright side of unemployment is that you cannot be fired.

It was springtime in Los Angeles and, notwithstanding my still-fresh New York chauvinism, I could not deny the season’s sweetness. I resided in a comfy, cozy cottage with a bright yard and plentiful fruit trees. There were birds, possums, raccoons, and skunks. I even liked the skunks. I noodled around in my head with a notion for a novel, but mainly, from my knotty-pine-paneled, north-light study, I stared serenely at the snowcapped San Gabriel Mountains.

Twice a week Guild members were required to present ourselves at a particular studio—my assignment was Paramount—and walk the picket line for three hours. I eagerly anticipated each round. It got me out of doors and into the sunshine, caused me ever so slightly to utilize my muscles. Best of all, for the first time in my life I met regularly with other writers.

Parading with my colleagues up and back before the studio’s Bronson Gate, conversation was endless. We talked sports. We talked weather. We talked cars. We talked Watergate.

Mainly we talked writing; not the profound, penetrating issues regarding beauty and truth but the hard-bitten nuts/bolts considerations, working writers’ shoptalk: hand-cranked versus electric pencil sharpeners, standard versus legal-size ruled yellow pads, felt-tipped markers versus ballpoint pens, liquid Wite-Out versus cut-rate bulk generic correction fluid available by the half gallon at an office supply outlet on Lake just north of Colorado in Pasadena.

Spoiled brats that we were, as all writers are and have been since the invention of writing in ancient Sumer five thousand years ago, we inventoried the injustices visited upon us by our oppressors: agents, actors, executives, the pal-of-the-producer hack who had rewritten and wrecked our latest draft, the director who had botched and butchered our otherwise flawless triumph, the literary manager who had refused to take or return our calls, the spouse, offspring, parent, pal, pet, or potted plant who had neglected to pay ample homage to our timeless and eternal genius.

Walking that line, talking with my fellows, amid all of the showbiz gossip I discovered a startling, liberating precept. I present it here as the first among many essential principles we’ll underscore from time to time throughout this volume.

Principle 1: All writers hate to write.

It is not I alone who dreads the blank page, who struggles daily to drag himself to his desk, who dawdles and procrastinates and picks lint from the carpet to avoid applying fingers to keys. Those nasty habits belong, I realized, to all writers.

Writers love having written, but we hate to write.

This may appear cynical, but it is simply a statement of observed fact. To sit hour upon hour in an empty room, attempting to fill blank paper—or, these days, glowing LCD screens—with story, character, and dialogue worthy of the time, attention, and consideration of an audience is as lonely as life gets. Writing, like banging your head against the wall, feels terrific mainly when you stop.

On the picket line, putting one foot in front of the other along Melrose, turning the corner at Van Ness, we inventoried the clever and elaborate methods by which the lot of us evade our task. One writer described a technique he had developed whereby he gazed blankly from his window at traffic; as soon as the fourteenth car bearing Nebraska plates drove past, he started writing. Another claimed he would put cool, quiet jazz on the stereo in the background, sharpen all his pencils, lay out neat, fresh stacks of heavy-gauge rag-content bond, test his typewriter ribbon, and then, at long last . . . defrost his refrigerator.

This is not to deny that there are soaring, triumphant moments attendant to writing. Professional screenwriters are paid, after all, for the very same activity that earns civilians reprimand: daydreaming.

To write, however, is far more than merely to dream.

Principle 2: To write is to play God.

As God created the universe, writers create the universe of our screenplays. If we want it to rain, it rains. If we are weary of rain and covet sunshine, out comes the sun. If we get mad at somebody and want to kill him—who has never wanted to kill somebody?—a screenwriter kills him. Afterward, should he experience remorse, with the click of a mouse he can bring him back to life.

After too many decades of auteurism, the alien notion falsely anointing the director as film's first artist, screenwriters are coming into our own, at long last winning the recognition properly due movies' authentic prime movers. The writer is film's first artist if for no other reason than that she is just that: first. The vast, sprawling army of artists and craftspeople who gather to make a movie are lost, every one of them, without the writer. The fanciest state-of-the-art cameras, the latest high-tech editing suite, the finest actors, the most highly respected producers, the whole host of paraphernalia required for the production of a film are useless until a writer writes a plan.

That plan is the screenplay.

Legendary director Frank Capra was asked in an interview to explain precisely how he achieved in his movies that legendary quality called "the Capra touch." In the interview he rambles on about this technique and that one: clues he whispered to the actors, cues offered to the crew, wisdom shared with the editor. Nowhere in the article does he mention the name Robert Riskin, who had merely written all the referenced films.

The afternoon the interview appeared in the press there arrived at Capra's office a script-size envelope. Inside was a document very closely resembling a screenplay: a front cover, a back cover, and one hundred and ten pages. The cover and pages, however, were all blank. Clipped to the "script" was a note from Robert Riskin. It read: "Dear Frank, put 'the Capra touch' on this!"

Writing, like all creative expression, for all its struggle represents ultimately structured, organized, orchestrated dreaming. That's why writers' most basic task—before tale, before character and dialogue—is to learn how to let ourselves dream in a free yet orderly fashion.

Can people really be taught how to dream?

As a screenwriting educator I am frequently asked the twin questions: Can writing be taught at all? Can formal instruction help a writer compete in the film and television industry?

The second answer first. Yes.

There is one strategy—the only strategy—for writers seeking success in film, television, and digital media: good writing. To that end, any support that helps writers structure their narratives, focus their characters, render their dialogue palpable and provocative, any clue that helps writers create screenplays worthy of audiences, ought to help bridge the chasm between amateur and professional.

Can writers be taught to write well?

Again, yes.

Nobody expects an unschooled clarinetist to go into the closet and emerge a professional. No one expects a composer to master musical theory and notation by means of a miraculous religious vision. Even Mozart had a teacher. Likewise, many new painters have mentors, just as experienced painters have protégés.

Like all creative expression, writing depends not upon talent alone but also discipline. Each is rare all by itself. The two in tandem, however, are exponentially rarer still. Copious talent and paltry discipline will not carry a writer nearly so far as the converse combination. Naturally, no teacher or book can provide talent; at UCLA’s Master of Fine Arts program writers are required to supply their own. Neither can writers have inspiration unwillingly thrust upon them; they must discover motivation within themselves. Happily, however, if teachers cannot provide talent, neither can they take talent away. While no book can supply a freeze-dried formula for concocting the perfect screenplay, there are challenges both narrow and broad that can be usefully addressed.

An Overview of the Present Volume

As underscored in chapter 7, “Story: Tale Assembly,” there is a vast difference between assembling a child’s tricycle fresh from the shipping crate and constructing an integrated screen story. Notably, the latter requires a considerable measure of magic.

There is so much more to screenwriting than knowing how far to indent dialogue. Readers seeking to learn proper screenplay format can turn to chapter 11. Format aside, screenwriting’s central challenge remains, as always, finding the writer’s unique voice.

Chapter 13, “The Writing Habit,” deals with writers’ attitudes regarding the daily struggle to structure their dreams into coherent dramatic narratives meriting the time, attention, and consideration of audiences.

And since the movie not produced, the film not released and not viewed by audiences has precisely the same effect as the movie not written in the first place, chapter 17, “Script Sales Strategies,” addresses issues pertinent to integrating screenplays into the professional community—agents, managers, producers, actors, directors, lawyers, the complete cast of craftspeople and collaborators.

Too often these latter items preoccupy the attention of inexperienced writers. For writers to begin writing from the standpoint of marketing is a self-defeating prophesy. There is no marketing of material that has yet to be written. It’s useless for writers to concern themselves about sales before they have something to sell.

Principle 3: Finding an agent is easy; what is hard is writing a screenplay worthy of an agent’s representation.

Finally, having fractured screenwriting into shreds and shards and fragments, we need at the same time to remain mindful of “the Whole Picture”; part 4 of the book puts all those fragments back together again. In the end, screenwriting, notwithstanding its inevitable agonies, and for all its loneliness, is seen also to be a most delicious addiction.

Principle 4: Writing is schizophrenic.

Writing requires its practitioners temporarily to shatter themselves into a widely varying cast of characters, each possessing unique traits. They need also simultaneously to accomplish assorted sets of tasks that endlessly contradict one another.

They must deal with seemingly separate items—story, character, dialogue, and so many others—that are not separate at all but exist only in combination with one another. Writers must wander freely among scattered, chaotic details even as their narratives proclaim a clear, logical, inevitable order. They must write films that are fantastic even as they are plausible. Like all artists, even as they lie through their teeth they must tell nothing but the truth.

Principle 5: Art is the lie that tells the bigger truth.

Chaim Potok, in his timeless novel *The Chosen*, describes a rabbi in conversation with his son. The Hebrew word for God, the rabbi explains, is *mel*, which means also “king” and “head.” The reverse, *lem*, means precisely the opposite: “fool.” *Lem* also has another meaning: “heart.”

If you want to live as a king, the rabbi advises, if you want to emulate God, you must be ruled not by the heart but the head. That is sage advice for a rabbi’s son, but not for a writer.

Writing is a heart-oriented enterprise, more a creation of hands, of belly, of groin, than of intellect. Writing for the screen is from top to bottom a wondrously silly endeavor, a sweetly ridiculous way for grown women and men to ply their trade and live their lives.

If you want to be God or a king, therefore, let your head guide you. Should you wish to write for the screen, however, live by your heart: Seize the courage to be something of a fool.

PART I

Art

Chapter 1

Seven Naughty Words

As longtime Screenwriting chairman and cochairman of UCLA’s Department of Film, Television and Digital Media I possess the authority to compel legions of students to purchase screenwriting books. Not surprisingly, publishers send me every title touching even remotely upon the subject. These seem to flow nowadays at the rate of perhaps two a week. Among all these books some are fine, some are not. Some are serious and self-important, others are lighthearted and breezy. There is a single component, however, uniting virtually all of them: a glossary.

Inevitably the glossaries are replete with precisely the kind of technical film jargon I urge screenwriters to eschew: angles, lenses, camera moves, editing effects, film graphics.

Screenplays should contain nothing besides clear, everyday language. It doesn’t hurt a bit, of course, for a writer to be a genius of invention and imagination. What he needs to know first of all, however, is English. Moreover, he needs to know it quite well, since language is the sole tool available for transporting a screen story from the writer’s head into the heads of others. Of particular importance is precision in the choice of words.

To that end, I present a glossary of precisely seven commonly misconstrued terms. In our modern age these words have taken on new meanings, but here I wish to argue for restoration of their original denotations, as current connotations engender snobbism, a danger to any art, and especially destructive to public and popular art such as film and television.

A note of caution is in order. In some circles the words that follow are considered obscene; reader discretion is advised. Remember also, however, that polite language, as legendary producer Samuel Goldwyn said years ago, makes for polite pictures. Polite pictures violate movies’ one inviolable rule: Don’t be boring.

1. Entertainment

Year after year, upon the release of the latest James Bond installment, the late producer Albert Broccoli offered interviews reassuring the critics that he fully appreciated that his 007 films represent “not *Macbeth*, just entertainment.”

Had he never seen *Macbeth*? Did he not know how entertaining *Macbeth* is? That it has witches and riddles and special effects (“Is this a dagger I see before me?”) and murder, mayhem, lust, greed, intrigue, sword fights, blood, vengeance, and horror?

But surely there is more to *Macbeth*, scholars and critics will remonstrate, than these mere surface tensions. They are not wrong. Indeed, beneath the play’s veneer lie profound insights into the most fundamental aspects of the human condition.

Entertainment and art are not, however, mutually exclusive. To the contrary, they walk together in lockstep. No artist—notably no film or television writer—need apologize for entertaining an assembled mass of people.

Over many years “entertainment” has acquired an undeserved connotation that is pejorative; it has come to signify that which is fleeting, superficial, trivial, insubstantial. Truly to comprehend the term, however, a writer could do a lot worse than to check out a worthy dictionary.

There is none worthier than the *Oxford English Dictionary*, wherein “entertainment” enjoys an honorable, venerable tradition. To entertain is to occupy, to hold, to give over to consideration, as in “entertaining a notion.” This does not mean painting one’s face and performing a tap dance for the notion, but cradling it in one’s cortex, hefting its mass, regarding it, weighing it, investing it with value and contemplation.

“Entertain” derives from “intertwine.” Entertainment is intertwinement in two special ways. First is the weaving of all the elements—plot, character, dialogue, action, setting, and all the rest—into a unified body within a single work. Second is a film’s union with its viewers. Ideally, the viewer of any art becomes in a certain sense part of the creation.

To entertain, it is unfairly asserted, is merely to divert. A film most certainly should achieve more than only that, but it cannot accomplish anything at all unless first of all it entertains.

2. Commercial

“Commercial” derives, of course, from “commerce.” Decent, sensitive, genuine, inspired artists no sooner engage in commerce than in pedophilia. Commerce is, after all, lowly trade. It is not for nothing that respectable homes and hostelries have separate entrances—down the alley, around back, below stairs—for tradesmen.

Ought not the serious, self-respecting writer be free of the constraints associated with trafficking? How else is he to find—and ultimately to share with viewers—the profound truths lying at his core? How do we reconcile worthy art with sucking for bucks?

Once again, turn to the dictionary.

“Commerce,” notwithstanding its most common connotation, means a great deal more than merely dealing. Like “entertainment,” the word possesses a respectable history. “Commerce” means first of all “to communicate physically,” which all by itself is no shabby description of movies. More significantly, “commerce” suggests “intercourse or converse with God, with spirits, passions, thoughts.” “Commerce” denotes “association, communication,” especially with regard to “the affairs of life.” It represents an “exchange between men of the products of nature or art.”

One could travel light-years in search of a loftier, nobler definition of artistic integrity. To be sure, a film’s commercial success alone does not establish its merit. By the same token, however, broad commercial success does not on its face constitute worthlessness. Likewise, remoteness and obscurity do not assure a film’s value.

“A poet,” said Orson Welles, “needs a pen, a painter a brush, and a filmmaker an army.” Armies cost money. Commerce in movies and TV represents the vital mechanism necessary to communicate expression whose production happens to be costly.

Commerce’s lowly reputation, therefore, is undeserved. If a writer is too fancy to slug it out in the down-and-dirty trenches of commerce, that’s his prerogative, but I advise him urgently to avoid trafficking in film and television.

3. Voyeurism

Critics relentlessly assail certain films as voyeuristic, but what are movies if not that? The viewers hide in the theater’s darkness peering through the window of the screen into the personal and private lives of strangers. They paw their effects, scrutinize their moves, eavesdrop on their conversations.

We know better than to prowl real alleys peeping into real houses. That’s why we hire filmmakers to peep for us. If a film appears brazenly, heavy-handedly voyeuristic, it fails to exercise sufficient craft. To condemn film for voyeurism is like reprimanding water for its wetness.

4. Contrivance

Film is the single most contrived enterprise in the history of the universe.

What is more disjointed, manipulated, choreographed, orchestrated, arranged and rearranged than film? As audiences, we view scenes containing intercut shots and seemingly synchronous dialogue, even as we appreciate that the different pieces were recorded in many places and at diverse times.

Contrivance, like all craft, should never show. A skillful screenplay appears, quite falsely, to be seamless. This notion is discussed in various chapters of this book; it is sufficient here simply to say that if you can’t live with grandly crafted appearances, if you disdain fantasy and artifice, you ought not to pursue screenwriting, for it is above all the art of maximum contrivance.

5. Exploitation

As a screenwriter you are in the wrong place, also, if you are too highly bred ever to engage in anything so low class as exploitation.

In fact all art—not film alone—wallows in exploitation. To exploit means simply to make the most of something, to extract the finest, richest resources, to achieve the highest expression. Good scripts are hard enough to construct without pulling punches, for screenwriting is basically a bare-knuckles enterprise. Writers seeking maximum effect need not fear to exploit their resources.

6. Hollywood

Hollywood—which is to say the professional film and television community in Southern California—remains more than ever the center of world filmmaking. Is it the sunshine? Los Angeles has no monopoly on sunshine. Is it tradition? Film is still too young a medium to have much in the way of tradition. Is it the abundance of skilled craftsmen?

Possibly.

Even if most Hollywood films fail, however, if so many among them are shallow and superficial, so also are most books, poems, music, paintings. If you turn up your nose at mention of the word “Hollywood”; if you can’t tolerate tinsel—if you don’t like bright, brash, brassy, attention-craving spectacle; crisp, crazy dialogue; broad, sprawling action; and fleshy, flashy effects—probably somewhere you took a wrong turn in your development as a practitioner of public, popular art.

7. Audience

“Audience” is the naughtiest word of all. It deserves its own chapter.

Chapter 2

Audience: The Status of the Observer

Movies are for audiences.

In elitist circles audience is often disdained.

Should a painting find even a single patron it may survive throughout the ages. Should a poem be published by even the most obscure pushcart press, it may eventually be celebrated by masses of readers.

This is not true for film.

Public and popular art is for the public and populace. To fulfill their natural purpose, movies require a collected group, not an observer but a broad multiplicity of observers, all of them viewing the work together in congregations, the lot of them watching the work unfold at a steady, single pace.

A movie without an audience has the same effect as a movie that does not exist. Of course it may exist in some technical form—clumps of silver halide crystals clouding a chemical emulsion, patterns of light and shadow married to a celluloid base. Without viewers, however, a film has the same effect as if it had never been created. It touches nobody. It moves no one. Without an audience to observe it, all the talent and toil, the art and the craft embedded within it add up to zero.

No screenwriter, therefore, may ignore audience.

Consider a remote radio station of limited broadcast range. Imagine a lone disc jockey with a late-night jazz show. The program enjoys but a handful of listeners.

Just possibly, one night, at one moment or another, there is not a soul listening.

Does the deejay communicate?

To answer this question we have to examine the nature of communication itself. Today there are scores of fancy, convoluted, newfangled models of communication. In my view none comes close to the communications model devised by Aristotle over two millennia ago. Communication, he said, requires three components: a Source, a Message, and a Receiver. Without any one of these core components, communication fails to occur.

Our lonely deejay in his remote radio station with nobody listening does not communicate, because there is no receiver. He hasn’t a clue, of course, while broadcasting whether or not anybody is tuned to the program. On blind faith alone he presumes at least a handful of scattered jazz fan insomniacs are out there, radio dials aglow. He chats his chat, spins his discs, never truly knowing whether his music and his patter are exclusive to himself or actually shared with living, breathing listeners. In either case his behavior is the same.

Yet in one instance he communicates and in the other he does not. His ability to communicate depends not on himself alone but also the existence of an audience.

Screenwriters bear the same burden. In keeping with Aristotle's model, the writer is the Source, his screenplay is the Message, and the audience is the Receiver. No writer knows for certain that his script will be produced. This is as true for the humblest beginner as it is for the most experienced practitioner. This is true even for scripts that are sold for substantial sums.

Studio story department shelves are lined with screenplays—optioned, commissioned, purchased—that have yet to be produced. Even among scripts that are produced, many fail to see the light of screen, even after filming. They may, for example, fail to win a distribution deal. In such cases, which represent the vast majority of screenplay sales, the writers' movies have all the impact they would have had if they had not been written at all.

Screenwriters are compelled to ignore this. They are required to leap a chasm of faith and take as given that what they write is surely to be acted by actors, photographed by cinematographers, edited by editors, and exhibited to audiences. For that, and for other reasons, it's useful for writers to be just a little crazy.

For that, too, it's possible to formulate the screenwriter's first, last, and only commandment: Be worthy of an audience. The good movie is that which merits the time, attention, and consideration of a collected group of people. Write a movie that from beginning to end is not boring and people will queue up around the block; they will stand in line outdoors for hours in rotten weather for the opportunity to trade their dollars for the privilege of spending approximately a hundred minutes with a writer's projected fantasy.

Principle 6: Screenwriting's one unbreakable rule: Don't be boring.

If all that is required of a successful screenplay is to avoid boring an audience, why do so few screenwriters eke out even a middle-class living? Why aren't there thousands, even millions more? How difficult can it be, after all, merely to avoid boring an audience for a couple of hours?

Extremely difficult indeed.

To invent a story and characters worth caring about, to assign them action and dialogue that engage and sustain an audience's interest from eight o'clock until nine forty, is a task that is truly Herculean.

To suggest that a film ought to be worthy of the time and attention of an audience should not provoke any kind of controversy. Nevertheless, legions of scholars and critics disdain and even revile this notion. To acknowledge audience at all, they complain, is to pander. The authentic artist cares not a whit for audiences. His task is surely loftier than catering to the lowest common denominator. Respectable writers do not care if their work plays in Peoria. True artists enter a joyful, spiritual trance; they set their creative juices to flowing, their imaginations to soaring.

There's not a whole lot more to it than that, or so we're told.

When I arrived at UCLA's film school in the 1970s, the third worst thing a writer could do was to write a script that actually sold. To do so was to sully artistic expression with filthy lucre. The second worst thing a writer could do was to write a screenplay that not only sold but was actually produced as a film. That's just copping to the system, working for The Man, becoming a cog in the corrupt and corrosive capitalist machine.

The worst thing a writer could do? Write a movie that was a hit. Audiences aren't smart, pundits and academics opine, they're stupid. Why do so many educators who characterize themselves as Marxist appear to hate the masses?

An authentic film artist at UCLA during the 1960s and 1970s didn’t consider audience at all. You strapped a Portapak on your back, sprayed the camera lens with whatever caught your fancy (I call it the garden-hose school of cinematography), and anything you did was beautiful because *you’re* beautiful.

This is, of course, narcissistic claptrap.

Principle 7: Audiences are not stupid; they are smart.

Throughout the millennia audiences have demonstrated an uncanny knack for finding the worthy stuff. This is not to suggest that all popular movies are good and unpopular ones bad. I’m simply saying that in order to last, movies need to succeed both artistically and commercially.

The burden weighs upon the artist to provide for the audience, and not the other way around. Artists who scorn audience, who regard the public with contempt, should renounce any ambition to write for the screen.

The screenwriter’s basic mission is first of all to divert an assembled mass of civilians from life’s natural and inevitable tedium. If the most we expect from a work of art is that it forever change our lives, the least we require is that it keep us awake.

If from time to time audiences embrace works that are superficial and silly, throughout the ages they have demonstrated also a marked capability for recognizing greatness. Since the earliest recorded popular expression, the ancient Greek classics, among works performed and celebrated century after century not one was unknown or unpopular contemporaneously, none failed to reach audiences during its author’s lifetime.

Oedipus Rex is no obscure, misplaced work that languished in Sophocles’ trunk awaiting the attention of some plucky graduate student in search of a subject for a dissertation. *Hamlet* was not ignored during its own day, finally to be resurrected by modern scholars and critics. Shakespeare’s best plays were broad, brawling, blockbuster hits in his own day. From their earliest performances audiences flocked eagerly and repeatedly to see them.

Certainly I do not argue that a movie is as good as its audience is large. Even Aristotle recognized there is such a thing as misfortune. Picture for picture, the reason particular audiences spark to particular films is forever a mystery. No screenwriter, however, need apologize for reaching people. If past is prologue, a work of public and popular expression that fails in its own time to find an audience, good or bad as it may well be, it will for all time be lost.

Chapter 3

The Personal Screenplay

Self-Revelation

Screenwriting education in recent years has not merely burgeoned but exploded. This phenomenon is by no means limited to accredited film schools. An itinerant army of self-appointed instructors treks back and forth across the nation and the globe. Indeed, so many amateurs now dabble in the discipline that screenwriting might well be considered the new millennium’s macramé.

Certainly there are differences among various teachers’ approaches. One lecturer preaches that the properly constructed screenplay contains five stations on the story continuum. Another refers to these as “plot points” and “turning points” (I’ve never quite figured out the distinction) and asserts that there are not five but nine—or is it eleven?—more or less. Still another pundit identifies no fewer than two dozen “building blocks” at the core of story structure.

These differences all pale, however, beside commonly agreed-upon principles. For example, virtually all the popular screenwriting teachers concur that among the myriad screen elements—character, dialogue, setting, and more—preeminent among them is story. All of us agree furthermore that underlying every story is something called “structure.”

From my own point of view, these other worthy teachers provide merely their own particular spin on Aristotle’s timeless *Poetics,* which argues that story structure is divided into not five or nine or two dozen but just three essential parts. This is often wrongly referred to as the three-act paradigm (a hot word in the academy), but in fact Aristotle never mentions “acts.” Aristotle writes instead of beginnings, middles, and ends. Perhaps the time has come finally to deconstruct all that canonical Greek dogma, but personally, if I have to choose among an array of approaches, I’m going with Aristotle.

I predict the old fellow will last.

We’ll examine this critical issue in chapter 7, “Story: Tale Assembly.”

Even among prickly, crotchety screenwriting instructors there is for the most part agreement on the preeminence of story. One popular pundit, however, suggests a couple of linked notions with which I vigorously disagree. My purpose here is not to engage in a pedagogical turf war but to demonstrate two essential principles that lie at the heart of screenwriting.

This particular independent educator insists that whatever else writers may write, what they must *not* write is their own personal story. Nobody cares a whit, he cautions, about writers’ private, personal plights except, of course, the writers themselves.

Here, then, is our fundamental disagreement. Decades spent writing and teaching have taught me that writers’ own personal stories are the only story they *should* write.

Principle 8: Whenever writers sit down before blank paper or glowing pixels, they should write their own personal story.

Even if a writer attempts vigorously to do otherwise, even if he works on an assignment writing a script for hire based on someone else’s idea, even an idea totally alien to his experience, he will nonetheless end up telling nothing other than his own personal tale. Whatever the original concept, however specific, however narrow, in all instances it is filtered through the peculiar sensibilities of the specific writer. In the end, despite himself, the writer will create a tale that is personal.

Why fight it?

My advice: Surrender.

It is one battle in which defeat actually amounts to victory.

Self-revelation lies, after all, at the center of not screenwriting alone but all creative expression. How can self-protection—that is, avoiding what is personal—serve any purpose other than to suppress, stifle, and suffocate the emotion that resides at the center of all worthy art?

Principle 9: Screenwriters must embrace authentic self-disclosure, no matter how painful, as the organizing principle of their movies.

Writing that is guarded, barren of feeling, evenhanded, objective, and dispassionate might be proper in a corporate prospectus. It might serve adequately for instructions regarding the assembly of a backyard barbecue grill.

As for screenwriting, however, such expression violates that most fundamental artistic principle of all: It's boring.

The Integrated Screenplay

Integration is an essential, elusive quality informing all creative expression. Integration transcends mere parts: tale, character, dialogue, and all the rest. Instead it embraces the whole picture.

What precisely is integration?

Integration is every bit as easy to understand as it is difficult to achieve. The integrated screenplay is one whose every aspect—each bit of action, every line of dialogue—accomplishes simultaneously the twin tasks of (1) advancing plot and (2) expanding character. Perhaps this is just another way of saying that each piece of information needs to tell the audience something new.

Call integration screenwriting's great equalizer. If in an identifiable, measurable, palpable way the material simultaneously advances story and character, all rules are off, all prohibitions are null and void. Integrate your whole picture and you can write anything at all.

Indeed, if from beginning to end a screenplay is genuinely integrated, the writer can successfully do even nothing at all. If that sounds crazy, remember that to no small extent crazy is precisely what art is.

Let us demonstrate.

As a screenwriting educator I preach that scenes in restaurants, for example, are to be avoided. Turn on the TV right now, go to a movie theater, or slap a DVD in the player. Soon enough, indeed too soon, you're likely to encounter actors sitting around tables in restaurants, not acting out the tale but narrating it as they engage in action that is not action at all: sawing away at their meal with silverware.

Lazy writers all too often have their characters narrate the tale while they engage in bogus "action": wielding knives and forks, sipping water and wine, blotting lips with napkins, sprinkling pepper and salt, and, most regrettably, flapping their jaws.

Still worse, such scenes inevitably begin too early, long before the true Aristotelian beginning, that is to say, the point before which nothing is needed. In the rare instance that a writer absolutely must place a scene in a restaurant, he certainly does not need to start with the characters entering the establishment, being greeted by the greeter, seated by the seater, and introduced to the busboys and kitchen staff. One certainly need not have the waiter describe today's specials; indeed, there's no need whatever to have the folks order their food at all. A writer should cut directly to the meat of the scene.

Best of all, again, writers should avoid scenes in restaurants altogether.

Unless they're integrated.

In John Patrick Shanley's *Moonstruck*, the character portrayed by Cher sits opposite a man at a table in a restaurant. The waiter arrives to take their order. Cher's companion wants fish. Paraphrasing, Cher says, "Fish? You're eating fish?"

"Why not fish?"

"Because you're going to be fourteen hours on a plane to Sicily. That fish will sit in your stomach and rot. You'll turn green."

"I don't want fish?"

"No."

"So what do I want?"

Cher prescribes precisely what he should order. "You want a light angel-hair pasta primavera. It'll sit gently in your tummy and digest. You'll be able to sleep on the plane and when you arrive at your destination you'll be rested and alert and ready to go about your sorry task."

Her dining partner nods to the waiter, confirming that this is his order. He turns to Cher. "You're an old-fashioned kind of woman," he says. "You really know how to take care of a man. You're exactly the kind of woman I need. Marry me."

"You call that a proposal?" she protests.

"Yeah, sure. Why not? You want me to get down on my knees?"

"Considering it's a proposal of marriage, down on your knees would be nice."

He shrugs, rises from his chair, then drops to his knees and proposes marriage.

She accepts.

Even though the setting is a restaurant, the characters are not exclusively eating and talking but also taking action. Right there, smack in the middle of the restaurant, amid the astonished diners, the suitor gets down on his knees and proposes marriage.

This is no car chase. This is no saloon brawl. Haven't we had enough—indeed too many—of those in too many movies?

Notwithstanding its restraint, it represents exciting dramatic action. Something is happening, something that is visual. It is so much more than merely a discussion among actors, a recitation disclosing data. It is a scene to be seen, not one only to be heard. It constitutes activity instead of passivity. In many ways, because it is subtle, because it is something small—ordering dinner—that sheds light on something big—the protagonist's character—it represents the most exquisite sort of movie action.

How do we judge it to be integrated?

First, it advances the story. *Moonstruck* is the tale of a woman who falls in love with her fiancé's brother. In order to have a fiancé she must become engaged.

Beyond the scene's lame venue—the restaurant—there is also the forbidden ordering of food. Does the discussion regarding entrees constitute dialogue that is integrated? Yes, because it expands our appreciation of Cher's character. At this early juncture in the picture she is something of an Earth Mother, a woman who knows how to nourish a man in the most traditional, maternal way.

The dialogue regarding the food establishes this nurturing aspect of her character. Indeed, she is a woman who holds romance to be a hoax. She need look no further than her own parents' wretched marriage to know that love is just a joke.

Eventually, of course, she becomes quite another woman. She realizes that a woman is entitled to passion, to steamy, seamy, searing, soaring romance. She'll discover that love is no mere trick, not a trap, not a burden but timeless and eternal joy. Love, Cher's Loretta will eventually determine, is the only reason we are here. Better to burn in hell for eternity than to endure a loveless, empty existence on earth.

In this fashion the characters are rendered fleshy and real. Instead of remaining static they develop, they expand. When Loretta tells her date how to order dinner, instead of lying there like lox the tale moves forward.

Thanks to integration, what is usually prohibited is legitimate. The restaurant setting and the ordering of the meal deliver story and character freight previously unavailable to the reader of the script and the audience in the theater. A scene that offers new information draws the audience closer to the screen very much in the manner of a primitive shaman drawing his tribal brothers and sisters more closely around the fire.

Integration, as I have already asserted, is so powerful an aspect of the well-crafted script that in the truly integrated movie it is possible to do absolutely nothing at all and still advance story and expand character.

How can a scene in which nothing happens advance story and character? Consider *About Schmidt* (Alexander Payne, Jim Taylor, adapting the Louis Begley novel). The movie opens with Schmidt, portrayed by Jack Nicholson, sitting stock-still alone in his office. There is absolutely no motion except for the sweep hand of the clock ticking off the seconds one by one. The time: perhaps a half minute before five p.m. The desk is devoid of clutter. The shelves are empty. The walls are bare; all the pictures have been removed.

In one corner of the chamber is a pile of neatly stacked boxes that can only contain the stuff removed from the desk and shelves and walls. Scoping out the office tells the viewer that Schmidt is retiring.

When it is precisely five o'clock, not a second sooner, Schmidt rises and exits. Presumably his stuff will be sent to him later.

With virtually nothing happening in the scene, without a single line of dialogue, the writers communicate a bounty of story and character information. We learn, as already stated, that after a long career Schmidt is finally retiring. We learn also that he is a stickler for detail; surely no one would have noticed, much less cared, if he had departed earlier in the day. Perhaps the reason he remains until the very last second reflects his reluctance to retire.

Since the scene is integrated, with all of the imagery advancing story and character, it works perfectly well. Indeed, for its economy and efficiency it is masterful.

Another splendid example of integration allowing screenwriters to write dialogue and action that should otherwise be discouraged is found in the made-for-television movie *A Woman Called Golda* (Harold Gast, Steve Gethers). Ingrid Bergman, in the final performance of her career, portrays the late prime minister of Israel. In one scene the chairman of the United States Senate's Armed Services Committee visits her. His mission: to inform her that he can sell only military weaponry that does not measure up to Israeli security requirements.

The senator arrives at the modest official residence in Jerusalem to find himself completely alone with the prime minister—no aides or assistants or secretaries. Her very first act—on its face nothing more than a quick and apparently inconsequential bit of dialogue—seems to violate one of our most stringent screenwriting prohibitions: She offers him a cup of coffee.

Collectively, in terms of person-hours, I do not doubt that fourteen trillion eons have been consumed by audiences across the globe watching actors in films and on television talk about, pour, and drink oceans of coffee. Acres of rain forest have fallen to provide the paper upon which unimaginative screenwriters have inscribed time-squandering, wheel-spinning dialogue surrounding the beverage.

Decaf or regular? Sugar and/or cream? Dairy substitute and/or artificial sweetener? Half-and-half instead of cream? Milk instead of half-and-half? If milk, whole? Skim? Condensed? Powdered? Boxed? Canned? Soy? Extra-rich? Low-fat?

Inevitably it's an unsubtle attempt by a movie writer to stall, to stretch, to fill, to pad, to bloat with air. Or it's an act of desperation by an out-of-ideas writer hoping to kill time until the next commercial.

Principle 10: In life we kill time; in movies time kills us.

Thanks, however, to the writers' skill, in *A Woman Called Golda* even the coffee is integrated and, therefore, justified.

How can the offer of a cup of coffee be integrated?

When the senator accepts the prime minister's offer of coffee, she goes to fetch it, leaving him all alone in the diminutive apartment's cramped living room. He sits on the couch and waits. He waits. He waits. He waits. Perhaps twenty seconds elapse—an eternity on film—in which absolutely nothing happens.

From the audience's perspective those twenty seconds feel like a year or two.

A wonderful tension builds both for the character—the senator—and also for the audience. At long last the senator rises and sets out to find the prime minister. He discovers her in the kitchen. She is just now setting his coffee on the table, along with a plate of pastry. She pulls out a chair, beckoning him to sit.

Even before a line is spoken we receive a lot of information. Subtextually we see that Israel, for all its strategic importance, for all of the attention it receives, is but a speck of a nation, a land so modest, so humble that its prime minister all by herself prepares coffee for high-level official visitors in her downscale one-bedroom government digs.

If that were the end of it, the business of the coffee would be justified because it is integrated; character and story advance some measurable distance. It is not the end, however; it is merely the beginning.

The senator settles in at the kitchen table and begins to consume both the coffee and a slice of the prime minister's home-baked strudel. He mentions the inferior military equipment his government is willing to sell. Golda expresses her dismay. From the mouth of the most unlikely person—an elderly Jewish lady, a former Milwaukee schoolteacher—there now spills military jargon as sophisticated and informed as would flow from a four-star general. She comments upon retrofitting bomb racks with titanium struts, speaks of explosive tonnage, cites statistics relating to radar range and weapons and ordnance and kill ratios, and a host of similar high-tech considerations.

The senator is awestruck. In shorter order he is converted to her cause. Why wouldn't he be? Madam Prime Minister is, after all, a mother. Perhaps still more to the point, she is a Jewish mother. She's got her prey exactly where she wants him: at her kitchen table.

He hasn't a chance!

Thanks to integration, nothing is turned into something. Something trivial is transformed into something profound. A character sits on a couch in a living room engaged in absolutely no activity beyond breathing. Yet the writer wields this apparent inaction so splendidly that the story relentlessly advances. The otherwise mundane pouring of a cup of coffee does not stifle the tale but intensifies it.

It’s almost always a mistake to generalize, but here nonetheless is a broad, sweeping principle that is true in all cases:

Principle 11: If a screenplay is personal and integrated it does not matter what it’s about.

Movies contain, after all is said and done, only two kinds of information: sight and sound. If each sight and every sound genuinely advances the story and enhances the audience’s appreciation of the characters, and if the tale represents the intimate, personal sensibilities of the writer, audiences will be enthralled by it, regardless of its subject or setting.

Integration extends not only to story and character but to every other aspect of a screenplay. Worthy writers wisely choose actions and settings, for example, that synchronize with the rest of the film.

In *The Godfather* (Mario Puzo, Francis Ford Coppola, adapting Puzo’s novel) a rich man defies the mob. How shall they punish him? Burn down his house? Break a knee? Implant an ice pick in his temple? All of the above? Perhaps these are workable after a fashion, but are they truly integrated? Are they fresh? Are they special to this character in this setting?

Definitely not. Instead, hooking into the previously established fact that the character boasts about a champion racehorse he owns, the writer has the man awake in his sumptuous silk-sheeted bed to discover his prize steed’s severed head beside him.

In *Atlantic City* John Guare writes a scene in which a beautiful young woman stands in her kitchen stripped to the waist, massaging fresh lemon juice into her breasts. I acknowledge I don’t mind one bit viewing such a scene even merely for its own sake; as discussed in a later chapter on conflict, eroticism has been a central component of drama since its earliest days on the ancient Greek stage, even if in those years the actors kept their clothes on.

The question arises, however: Is this scene appropriate to this film?

The answer: Yes, absolutely. The same woman has been seen earlier holding a crummy job serving fried fish at a fast-food counter. The fish odor permeates her every pore, serving as a metaphor for her disenchantment with her life, her frustration and self-contempt. The lemon juice treatment offers a humble opportunity temporarily to cleanse herself of this rancid reminder of her sorry station. Sure, it’s erotic, but it’s also much more than that. It properly integrates the movie’s diverse scenes and actions. It isn’t merely added on; it is woven elegantly into the film’s fabric.

The challenge, then, in choosing actions and settings that are truly exquisite instead of merely serviceable, is for writers to look to the rest of their film. In story, character, theme, within the whole body of collective actions they should seek clues to direct them toward invention that is different and fresh compared to the usual material we see in movie after movie.

If action defines character, then character defines action. To determine what action a character should take and in what setting, the writer should study the character. Action and character, combined with dialogue and placed in the properly integrated setting, add up to screenwriting’s single most important element: story.

Even though we’re talking about disparate elements among the challenges confronting screenwriters, the unifying principle is, again, integration. When writers endeavor perpetually to expand character and story, they end up embracing the “write” thing: integration.

Example #1: A Jail Tale

Some years ago I received a letter from a prisoner in a California penal institution. He had heard me discuss screenwriting issues on a San Francisco radio talk show.

“During the past few years,” he wrote, “I have devoted a great deal of energy to learning the craft of screenwriting, and I have completed four scripts.”

This statement all by itself impressed me most favorably. Writers have to write a bundle of scripts just in order to become familiar with the form and the craft, and to find their own voice. That this writer had four scripts under his belt seemed to bode well.

“I write very much from my life’s experiences,” the letter continued, “based upon my rather intimate knowledge of cops and cons and the things men do in the dark.”

If it’s not quite poetry from Shakespeare, it is nevertheless nifty, dazzling, sparkling stuff. It’s punchy and to the point; it feels personal and original. With few words it communicates a lot.

My correspondent went on to explain that he would have loved to attend the screenwriting seminar I was offering in the Bay Area just a few days hence. However, he wrote, upon checking his calendar he’d discovered that on that particular weekend he would once again be a guest of the state at the same luxury facility, exactly as he had been and would be for weeks and months and years to come.

That he could be good-naturedly self-deprecating about his incarceration impressed me even further; writers who take themselves too seriously are the most difficult among a group of naturally difficult creatures.

He asked for permission to send one of his scripts.

That he did not simply enclose the script but sought my permission to send it demonstrated that he was a writer who understood the etiquette regarding screenplay submissions. Despite what one hears regarding “connections,” a truly smart query letter will win the approval of most any agent. The smartly shaped query is the way a writer turns an unsolicited script into one that is solicited.

I granted our prisoner permission to mail me the script.

It arrived, accompanied by a brief cover letter. The letter thanked me for my consideration and went on to discuss the subject of writing in a number of gorgeously crafted sentences.

He wrote:

This work gives me a new life, or a new sense of life in a way that has been, for me, most remarkable.

I have come to believe that any person of talent, any person involved in the great task of bringing that talent to form and life in any worthy piece of work, brings at the same time life and form to his own soul.

The poetic purity of his language left me thinking: Next to this guy I’m just a typist.

His letter continued:

When I write I stand with my future behind me and my past stretches out before me as far as my mind can see.

I could not figure out precisely what he meant but, all the same, the language struck me as transforming.

What followed, however, was the most beautiful part of all.

And all the characters I have known, all the lovers and warriors and barkers and painters and scene-shifters and criminals, come round. And as I look back, I am coming to the conclusion that the rather bitter dispute I've had with the world was never more than a simple lovers' quarrel.

I eagerly awaited receipt of this screenplay. When it arrived at my office, however, my anticipation turned to dismay. The script's length alone—one hundred seventy-four pages—offered ample evidence of its amateurism. Sight unseen, I already knew the writer needed to lose sixty-five pages or more.

Clearly I was under no obligation to read this convicted felon's work. Nevertheless, to ignore so hapless a soul seemed more loathsome than to offer at least a token response. I sat down one night just before bedtime, anticipating that three minutes was about two minutes more than I would spend with the script. I would glance at the first few pages, jump to the middle, scan the conclusion.

Then I would dictate a quick letter saluting the writer's talent and discipline. I would refer specifically to one or two points in the script so that he'd get the impression I had read it more carefully than I actually had. I would advise him that before showing it to potential representatives or purchasers he would need to trim it. Finally, I would wish him well.

Under the circumstances, I mused, surely God in heaven would credit my Good Works merit badge account.

Instead I was up half the night, biting my nails in terror, feeling compassion for the characters, sensing their horror, glory, desperation, courage, greed, selflessness, rage, and love. What appeared at first to be a loss-of-innocence story turned out instead to be a tale of innocence regained.

In the opening, Nasty, a veteran con in his forties, receives a new cell mate, a youngster of nineteen, Richie. Nasty takes a liking to the youth and hopes to educate him in prison etiquette, expecting to spare him at least some of the darkness that can befall a prisoner and cost him not only his soul but his life. All the same, Richie succumbs to dope and gangs. However futile his struggle to save Richie, Nasty learns important life lessons.

At one critical point Nasty receives a letter from his sister notifying him that a year earlier their mother died. Upon learning of his mother's death, Nasty grieves. What's more, his grief is exacerbated by the realization that he has fallen so low as not even to learn of his mother's death until a year after the fact.

Still worse is his sister's accusation that he killed their mother as surely as if he had plunged a knife into her heart. "It was your disgrace," the sister writes, "that destroyed her. Your outlaw life shamed her and brought misery and ruination upon her days."

Nasty goes crazy with grief and rage, torching his cell and earning himself a stint in solitary confinement—the hole. His only warm-blooded company is a rat, with whom he shares his paltry meals.

A confederate working the food detail, delivering the standard bread-and-water ration, whispers to Nasty through the grate, "Hey, Nasty, could you use some dope?"

"I would die for a taste," Nasty responds.

Prison policy routinely grants requests, even from cons in solitary confinement, to attend chapel on Sunday. If he will sit in the chapel's back row, Nasty is told, someone will pass him a package.

Nasty goes to chapel, but before anybody slips him any contraband he becomes mesmerized by the sermon, delivered by an evangelical Christian preacher, a visiting pastor from the local community. She is herself the victim of a rape that occurred years earlier, and has never recovered from the degradation and despair that has enveloped her existence ever since. In an attempt to move on with her life, she has sought refuge in Christ. She ministers to the sorts of souls who victimized her. Perhaps if she can teach violent criminals to seek peace and forgiveness, she, too, can finally achieve closure.

The young woman’s sermon—its eloquence, its poetic lilt—rocks Nasty’s tormented soul. Then and there, in response to her testimony, he forever renounces drugs and all manner of evil. He pleads with God for forgiveness.

He is converted to the faith.

At this point I experienced dismay. Savvy felons appreciate that religious conversion plays well with parole boards. I worried that the writer was falsely posturing in a sophisticated attempt to win early release, and that I was myself being exploited in a probation scam. Certainly it could not harm a prisoner’s cause to have in his corner a university professor available perhaps to write a letter on his behalf or even to testify in person before the parole board in support of clemency and early release.

From a strictly creative standpoint, as a writing educator I feared that the script would become now merely a religious tract that, even if sincere, would be limited by a narrowness of purpose.

The narrative promptly disabused me of this notion. At this precise point the tale moves from Christian faith to Islam. This transition occurs through the good offices of another character—a convicted serial murderer—who has found serenity and liberation through his devotion to Allah. In this manner, by moving from one faith to another, the tale transcends any particular creed and becomes instead a story of faith itself.

Eventually a full-scale riot breaks out, in which our evangelist is taken hostage only to be rescued by a reborn Nasty, who has discarded his prison name and reclaimed his Christian one: Peter.

The change of name offers a poignant example of the power of integration. Normally it is foolhardy to change a character’s name in the middle of a script. What can the writer achieve except confusion among his readers?

Yet here the name change expands the character and the story. It is appropriate that at the time of his conversion Nasty discard his prison moniker and reclaim his Christian name. Again, what is otherwise prohibited becomes licensed by integration.

Eventually the writer was able to trim the draft to presentable size and to win representation. Now long out of stir, he enjoys a successful career as a writer. All of this derives from two items: (1) the tale’s personal nature and (2) its author’s ability to write dialogue and action that is perpetually integrated, consistently advancing story and character.

Example #2: Death by AIDS—a Laff Riot

Another example of a script that appeared at first likely to be unworthy was written not in prison but in another well-regulated institution: the graduate screenwriting program at UCLA.

Our advanced screenplay workshops are the meat and potatoes of our Master of Fine Arts program. Each section enrolls only eight writers and, over our ten-week quarter, convenes once weekly for three hours. There are no assigned readings, no exams. There is but a single paper: a professional-quality feature-length screenplay.

At the first session each quarter far too many writers attempt to enroll. In order to choose the class members, I hear each applicant’s story proposal. Based partly upon my assessment of the tale, I decide whom to admit.

I recall one such class in particular. As usual, we went around the classroom from student to student, listening to approximately three dozen writers pitch their notions. In due course we came to a writer who appeared grim. He had hobbled into the classroom on crutches; his skin appeared pasty and pale. On his face were telltale splotches, the discolorations typical of Kaposi’s sarcoma, a form of skin cancer common among people with AIDS.

His story told of a closeted gay man who, upon learning of his HIV-positive diagnosis, decides at long last to come out and openly confront his sexuality and his mortality.

“Sounds good,” I said, contemplatively stroking my scratchy professorial beard, nodding sagely, before moving on to the next writer.

In fact I lied.

I dreaded yet another tale depicting gay coming-out, all the more so one combined with AIDS. There resides, of course, exquisite drama in such a story. My only gripe was that in the past years there had been so many such stories. Here was yet another. It struck me as redundant.

I thought to myself: Does the world really need yet another AIDS/gay coming-out tale? Had not the subject been wrung dry?

Nevertheless, given this writer’s medical condition, I simply did not have the heart to exclude him from the class. There was no way I could tell someone in such condition that he was not welcome in my course.

Reluctantly, I enrolled him.

When the script was handed to me at the end of the quarter, I put off reading it until I had evaluated all the others. Finally, I opened the screenplay.

What I read astounded me.

First, the story was told with great humor; in fact, it was an unabashed comedy. As I read it, I laughed out loud.

Comedy is, after all, not a lower but a higher form of dramatic narrative, not the least but the most demanding form. Compared with action/adventure or melodrama, for example, it is simply intolerant of any wobbling. With comedy, you’re on the bus or off the bus. Comedy is funny or it is not. People laugh or they do not.

This script was funny indeed. It told of a narcissistic, primping gay man who logs lots of time peering at himself in the mirror. Only in his thirties, he already worries about wrinkles.

Upon his HIV diagnosis, however, he comes to worry not about getting wrinkles but about not getting wrinkles. He no longer worries about growing old; he worries about not growing old.

The script was splendid in almost every way.

The only problem was the unsympathetic treatment of the protagonist’s brother. He was portrayed as a Christian fundamentalist zealot who believed that AIDS was merely Satan’s handiwork, God’s retribution for sinful behavior. In the brother’s view, if the protagonist would only deliver himself to the Lord and beg forgiveness, his AIDS would flake away like so much dandruff. The writer felt, understandably, that his brother’s attitude trivialized his medical issues and, more grievously, denied his identity.

I argued that all characters in a screenplay—including even the most heinous villain—should be rendered somehow human. Unreconstructed monsters from Jupiter are a lot less dramatic than flesh-and-blood human beings right here on earth who remind us not of aliens but of ourselves.

I suggested to the writer that he soften the brother’s attitude.

“But that’s based upon my own real brother,” he insisted, “and that’s the way he really is.”

“I don’t care how your brother really is,” I said as gently as I could. “I care only about what is most dramatic, what is best for your movie. You want your brother to love and forgive you; will you love and forgive him? He did not spring whole in a religious vision from the head of Zeus. Like all of us, he carries the intellectual, emotional, ethical, and psychological baggage that was handed to him. You want your brother to understand you, but will you understand him? What’s it like for him to deal with his own kid brother having a fatal disease, in particular AIDS?”

After mulling it over, the writer revised the brother’s role, producing a far more sympathetic portrait, a more fully realized character who was palpably human and humane instead of stereotypical, predictable, flat.

The new version won not only an A from this instructor, it also won first prize in a prestigious screenwriting competition. Additionally, it won the writer representation at a leading literary agency. By every measure, a promising screenwriting career was launched.

Alas, however, soon thereafter the writer did something profoundly inconsiderate: He died.

At the funeral I was touched to see so many of his classmates from our UCLA screenwriting program. Many offered eloquent testimonials in his memory.

Eventually there arose a man whom I had never met, clearly a member of the writer’s family. In his stumbling but loving way he spoke of the writer, expressing his grief but citing also the joy he had experienced in the last months, during which he had come to know and love him in a whole new way. This could only be the older brother. The process of writing the script had provided spiritual healing for both him and his sibling.

Principle 12: Movies heal.

As surely as our flesh and blood and muscle and bone become distended and misshapen from insufficient nourishment normally provided by vitamins and minerals and protein, so also do our spirits and souls warp when they are starved of creative expression.

This is no mere metaphor.

My onetime UCLA colleague, the late and legendary political journalist Norman Cousins, defied his doctors’ grim prognosis of imminent death. He rented screwball comedies such as those of the Marx Brothers and Charlie Chaplin and Billy Wilder and literally laughed his way back to health, winning for himself extra years of life that his doctors had told him were simply not available.

Example #3: Middle Eastern Adultery

Some years ago I conducted a screenwriting master class for professional writers in the Middle East. The best among their stories was called “The New Room.” In it, a woman in a suburb of Haifa bids good-bye to her husband as he departs their home for an extended business trip. “When you return one month from now,” she tells him, “there will be a surprise for you: a new room.”

“You studied construction at the University Extension and now you believe you can build an addition to the house?” he asks. “Such projects require substantial labor. In Israel construction is typically performed by Arabs. You are a woman, an Israeli, a Jew. Arab laborers will not take orders from you.”

“I will engage an Arab contractor,” she said. “He will hire and supervise the workers.”

The husband cannot persuade his wife to give up her foolish scheme. “Promise me that whatever else you do,” he cautions, “you won’t let them use the bathroom. If they need to use the bathroom, they can go to the pub down the street.”

At this moment the couple’s young child toddles up to his father, who takes him into his arms for a farewell embrace. Before he can quite hug the kid, however, he is repelled by the stench of a badly soiled diaper. He wrinkles his nose and hands his son abruptly to the mother.

Father leaves. A bearded, disheveled, scruffy but affable and capable Arab contractor is engaged. He hires laborers and work commences on the new room. It proceeds apace. Midway through the job, however, at the conclusion of one particular day’s toil, the contractor knocks on the door seeking permission to use the bathroom.

Face-to-face with the contractor who has shown himself to be reliable, respectable, and responsible, the wife cannot find it in her heart to refuse him and, reluctantly, she grants his request.

He enters the bathroom. A minute goes by. Two. Ten. Twenty. The Israeli woman wonders what in the world is going on inside the bathroom, and she regrets having broken her promise to her husband. It is perhaps a half hour before our contractor emerges.

He is unrecognizable.

Combed, scrubbed, clean shaven, now sporting a suit and tie, he is handsome beyond description. Next to this guy, Omar Sharif looks like Danny DeVito. “Forgive me,” he apologizes to his employer, who stands there dumbstruck, eyes agape. “I have abused your generous offer to utilize the bath. My cousin, you see, is getting married in a village a mile from here and I needed to wash up and change my clothes for the wedding.”

The woman stands there, drinking in the vision of the man, as if meeting him for the first time. At this moment the child toddles up to him and latches onto his trouser leg. The Arab moves to hoist the boy into the air for a cuddle.

“No!” cautions the mother. “His diaper is soiled. I was just about to change it. He reeks!”

She reaches to reclaim the child, but the contractor hangs on tight. “Please, madam,” he protests, deeply inhaling the dreadful fumes. “This smell I love like life itself! Why not? Life itself is exactly what it is, no?” He waxes enthusiastic on the subject of children, procreation, the generations, and love. Our housewife is enormously taken with this alluring soul, who presents a stark contrast to her clinical, sanitized, Saran-wrapped, all-business husband.

Soon enough a sensual, erotic, and illicit love story emerges.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Gussie Steller:

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