

Brass Tacks

by John Kent Harrison

For film professor and award-winning screenwriter John Kent Harrison, it takes more than talent to be a good screenwriter. His nuts-and-bolts approach to teaching the craft is an insight for all those aspiring to write for film.

A friend of mine — a fellow fat on insight, lean on dialogue — delights in reducing the people of the world into two general types: the winners, and wieners. My father — a man long on business experience, short on subtlety — narrows it down to “them what eats, and them what gets et.” If I were to typify the film business, I might be tempted to divide our crowd into the producers, and the writers. But there, for the most part, I’d be getting too simplistic.

It’s far too easy to bandy about the notion that diligent and sensitive writers are constantly maligned, man-handled and mangled by the porky, jewel-encrusted digits of money-grubbing film moguls. If we’re straight about it, there are easily as many screenwriters with uncompromising Chippendale egos as there are producers who bulldoze the smoldering remains of their Monte Cristos through the eggs Benedict after “taking” a breakfast meeting at the Courtyard Café.

In reality, there are only a handful of screenwriters in this country; and even fewer producible scripts (even by those same writers): but Canada’s not unique in that regard. If you think for one minute that they’re chucking producible scripts down the drain in Tinsel Town, think again. For producible script is a commodity in any language, in any country, at any time. Such an item isn’t, repeat, *is not* hammered out by an inspired writer in one six-week blitz. It takes re-writing, criticism, re-writing, feed-back, re-writing all the way to the first day of production. In short, the producer/writer relationship demands collaboration, trust and a mutual understanding of the craft.

And here, at last, we come to the nub of it: understanding the craft.

If you are an aspiring writer and you are looking to get to Square One, you obviously must find a producer interested in your material. Not just any producer, but

someone with a track record of *well-crafted* films, regardless of subject or genre. Be careful! You don’t want a slam, bam, thank-you mam relationship. You want experience. You want to improve. So you want to find someone who understands that *story* is fundamental to narrative film. As fundamental as performance or economy of shooting.

My experience in the last few years tells me that too few producers understand the carpentry of story-telling, and too few screenwriters have any concern for what elements make a movie large enough to sell in the international market-place. The real luxury in our fledgling film community is a constructive working relationship between an experienced producer and an experienced writer, both of whom are educated and enlightened as to the need and craft of the other.

For the past several years I have seen film students float and flail within the sordid pipe dream of a career in motion pictures. Most of them jump into 16mm production after a few Super-8 quickies, produce a “student film,” then lunge head first into the industry thinking they will be the exception to the rule that nobody wants a film student unless he or she can speed-shift a standard or double-cream a coffee. They graduate with a few technical skills and little, if any, grasp of narrative craft.

Fortunately, last year, the tide began to turn, as the students — would-be writer/director/producers — became more cautious, more curious, more sensible. In fact, they became wiser. Why? Because of the introduction of an *obligatory* screenwriting course; a course which

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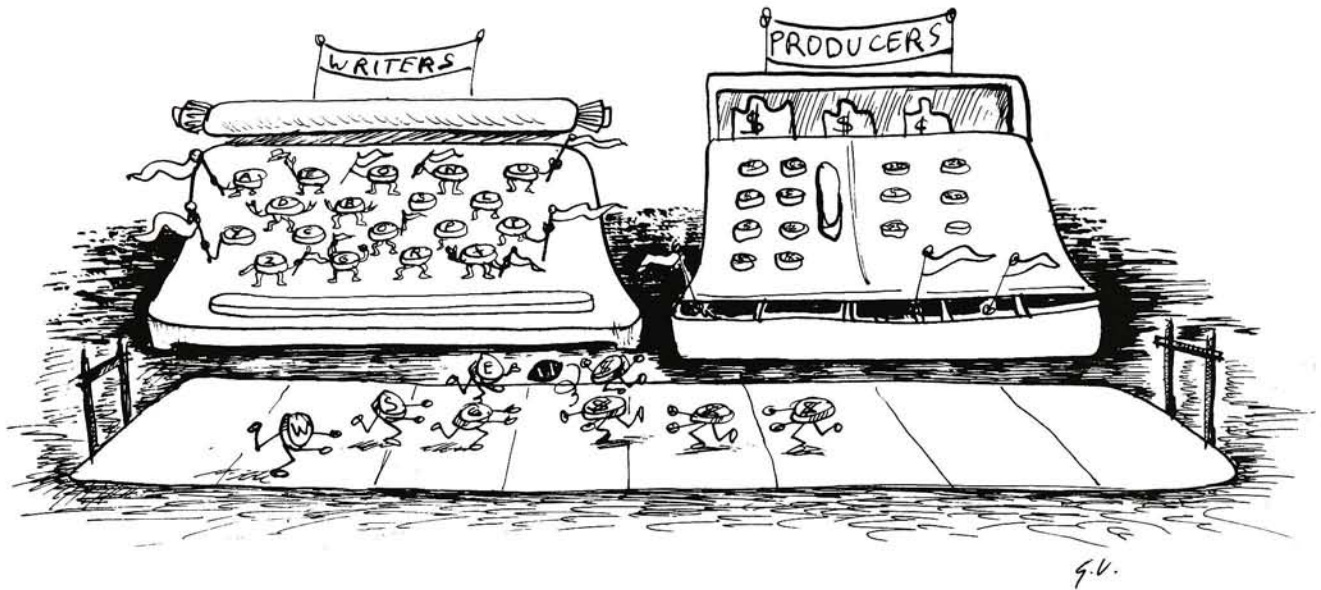


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examined the nuts, bolts, pipes and carpentry of dramatic writing for film. Suddenly celluloid was no longer a god in its own right. Suddenly film was reduced to what it is : a medium, a vehicle to tell a story. Being a filmmaker was no big deal, but ah, being a storyteller... now that was something!

The approach to this course was holistic in that it tried to integrate the various elements which constitute a narrative film : writing, storytelling, dramaturgy, performance, and the nature of the film medium itself. The course ran in tandem with a required production course which examined the differences and similarities between film and video. Some of the writing projects which overlapped with this production course, consequently, provided material for second and third year productions. The whole point of this holistic disposition was to suggest that writing cannot be separated from production. Just as a potential writer must understand how to use a location to tell a story, a potential location manager must understand story in order to compromise wisely.

The course began with the nature of writing in general, and the short story in particular. Reading aloud helped to demonstrate how a writer's perceptions are 'shown' through the use of *concrete detail*. This was an important point to drive home : credibility is achieved through detail. The further away from realism one gets (the western or science fiction) the more accurate those details must be. I found the opening few pages of *True Grit* (the novel) a good vehicle for this. Once the students understood the importance of such details they began to appreciate the value of solid research as a background for any script created outside the world of personal experience.

From there, we moved to the craft of storytelling. First

simplistically : a character with a passionate motivation trying to overcome roadblocks in order to achieve some *specific goal*. On this level people connected immediately with *Alien*, *Jaws*, *A Little Romance*, *Breaking Away*, and, well, a hundred others. Then on to the examination of short stories. I happened to use Flannery O'Connor's *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* which, on the surface, seems abstract, but upon closer inspection is shown to exhibit a simple storytelling technique. In this way students soon realized that to know the "carpentry" of storytelling only provides the tools and license to become more expressive. As my earnestly random colleague, Dennis Murphy, paradoxically suggests, "structure is freedom." O'Connor would have surely concurred, for it was she who said that the art of writing is the art of tempering the imagination with reason.

The third area we looked at was the nature of dramaturgy. Here I can do no better than to recommend *Aristotle's Poetics* and Lajos Egri's marvelous book, *The Art of Dramatic Writing*. Talk about concrete details! The way we applied the text was through the analysis of various plays and films. The two major problem areas for students seemed to be plot construction and character creation.

The analysis of a plot usually revolved around the set-up and pay-off syndrome. That is, if you saw an action, a detail or a piece of business which solved a problem and paid off a scene, you had to ask yourself where and how that piece of information was set up in some previous scene. For example, in *A Little Romance* it was essential to "set up" the fact that the young boy secretly kept track of horse races and was a consistent winner in order to "pay off" the scene where he uses the horse races as the means to raise money for their adventure. A close examination of plots

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will reveal set-ups without pay-offs and a plethora of pay-offs without set-ups. These are what are commonly known as "holes in the plot."

The creation of a unique *fictional* character posed a real conundrum to most of the students. Everyone was able to draw a character based on personal experience, but when it came down to inventing something entirely original, flesh and blood became bark and sap. At best I was only able to offer a few suggestions. For example, character types outlined in behavioral psychology, and the natural conflicts of nuclear and phenomenal clusters are good starting points. Here also is where *concrete detail* is absolutely essential. Outline specific flaws, paradoxical behavior, tags, idiosyncratic consistencies, intelligence levels (students for some bizarre reason always seem to want their characters to have "average intelligence"). Two good films to examine are **Strangers On A Train** and **The African Queen**. Both are straightforward character conflicts which provide much instruction on the nature of creating character through detail.

Before moving along to the subject of performance, two seminal screenwriting maxims are worth mentioning:

- 1) When telling the story of **Goldilocks and the Three Bears**, bring on the bears (courtesy of Stanley Colbert) — i.e. get to the point.
- 2) When telling the story of people lost in space looking for an alien, don't give it to them right away, or all at once — i.e. hold back on the monster.

You might connect with the structure of **Jaws** for example, where the terror of the shark is "brought on" in the first scene but the actual monster is "held back" until the last.

Now, performance. It should be obvious that you cannot write film drama without understanding the needs of an actor. The best way to do this is to try a little acting yourself. For this reason I introduced video-tape exercises which helped students understand physical and psychological objectives, and how emotion can be translated through objects even more effectively than through words. Students had an opportunity to write and act out small scenes which were played back to demonstrate how most writers over-depend on dialogue — at which point it was worth mentioning repeatedly the importance of *action*. The most rewarding outcome of these exercises was that the students began to *trust* the medium. They began to see how a simple close-up could carry the weight of ten lines of rarefied dialogue; how the slightest eye movement could suggest an unspoken back story a mile deep; how behavior took the place of belabour.

The more we examined this relationship between the writer and the medium, the more we were able to establish the meaning of certain camera movements, the impact of distances, the principle of ellipsis within the time frame, the difference between *establishing* and *slowly disclosing* information, and how economy of storytelling is achieved in film through the use of *synecdoche* (the use of a detail to represent the whole). Hitchcock, of course, was about the



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most accessible and articulate filmmaker at this level, and time was well spent analyzing his visual storytelling technique.

Midway through the course students were asked to put together what they had learned about the film medium, the nature of performance, dramaturgy and storytelling, by viewing a different film each week for five consecutive weeks. Each student saw the same film in order to facilitate class discussion. A standard form was provided which allowed space for each person to record observations on *concrete aspects* of the script, which included:

- Goal (passion/urgency)
- Road blocks (physical/psychological)
- Unity of Opposites (credibility of set-up/orchestration)
- Character (motivation/tags)
- Transitional periods (reaction dilemma decision resolution)
- Character growth (protagonist/antagonist)
- Visual quality (use of locations/angles, movements)
- Aural quality (music-leitmotif/special emphasis/sound effects)
- Acting (physical objectives/psychological objectives)
- Dialogue (text/subtext)
- Set-ups and pay-offs (mention five)
- Time clock

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Finally it all boiled down to the big pay-off: grading.

As the approach to teaching the course was based on "carpentry" or "nuts and bolts," it was important to follow through with a grading system which reflected that attitude. In other words, it would be wrong to give a subjective opinion of a student's project if all along you have been suggesting that writing is a craft which can be taught (not to be confused with insights and perception which can't). For this reason all the final scripts were graded according to a blueprint form, similar to the one which the students had used to analyze the films. My criteria included:

- Premise
- A *concrete* goal
- Credible road blocks
- Unity of Opposites (orchestration/credible set-up)
- Character (growth, motivation, originality)
- Visual quality
- Aural quality
- Physical reaction

Those who did well, did so because they had a handle on the craft, while those who did less well, relied solely on their talent. To be sure, there were derivative scripts and pat solutions. But much of that had to do with lack of maturity and experience — and the plain hard truth that it is difficult to write. The significant thing was that the majority of students finally had a grasp of the importance of story in creating a commercially viable film.

Just as the understanding of story is fundamental to good writing, so it is the backbone of good directing, good performing, and good producing. Not every student will become a screenwriter overnight; but every student armed with such knowledge, and such concern, cannot help but contribute significantly to the quality of our films and the future of our industry. This will be accomplished even as he or she is sent to gofer another tray of three regulars, five black and two sugar only.

Oh, and the Scotch and Coke goes to the porky guy smoking the Monte Cristo next to the chorus girls! (While you're over there, why not pitch him a story? He'll listen. And if he won't, there are plenty coming along who will.)