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THE CRAFT AND BUSINESS OF SCREENWRITING

TUESDAY, AUGUST 11, 2009

Will Chandler: Blogging From Southampton

This is the final installment of Will Chandler's blog from the [Stony Brook Screenwriting Conference](#).

Sunday morning, the workshop faculty gathered for a candid, intimate Q & A panel. The room was jammed full of conference attendees who came armed with a wide range of questions.

When asked how important the ending scene is in a film, actor-director Peter Riegert offered "Endings are crucial. But whoever has the power in production will decide what it will be." Using the example of *Local Hero*, a touchstone for many screenwriters, he said that the original ending had his character leaving Scotland and returning to his empty apartment in Houston, looking out on the lights of the city in melancholy contrast to the warmth of the quirky little village that had gotten into his heart. The studio told writer-director Bill Forsyth that he would have to shoot a new ending. They wanted Riegert's oil exec character to fly back to Scotland and tie the story up with a bow. Forsyth would have none of it, but realized that he had to give them something. The studio had to believe that he was doing what they asked.

In the editing room, Forsyth found a stock shot of the village phone booth. He inserted it with the sound effect of the phone ringing. The juxtaposition suggested that Riegert was making the call but Riegert believes that if you were to ask Forsyth about it, he would say that the call had nothing to do with the oil exec or the happy ending that the studio wanted.

"How do I approach rewriting?" Ken Friedman (*Heart Like a Wheel*) thought about it a moment, "You're always tinkering. I may do dozens of rewrites, but I don't rewrite everything each time. I might go through once to make sure the main character is consistent, and maybe one time for the other major characters. Then I might do a dialogue rewrite or look for ways to create imagery in the scene. For each rewrite target something you're trying to achieve."

Malia Scotch Marmo (*Once Around*), who has done dozens of studio rewrites, said that there's a difference between what executives ask for and what they want. "If you give them what they ask for, they will be disappointed. They don't want you to be a 'note taker,' they want to feel like a writer rewrote it." She suggested that writers need to think about why the note is being given and come up with an original solution that addresses the concern.

When the panel was asked if there were other skills that screenwriters should study to improve their craft, Andy Bienen (*Boys Don't Cry*) immediately suggested acting classes, particularly scene study as a way of getting inside your characters.

Not sure if your scene is working, but not ready to have friends or colleagues look at it? Stephen Molton (*The Kennedys, the Castros and the Politics of Murder*) said that he reads his scenes into a recorder and then plays them back. Hearing your words read out loud "helps you work out the story but not dissipate the energy, You're not risking disapproval by an audience or by someone

MARCH/APRIL 2010 ISSUE



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who doesn't understand where you're headed with it."

The room was filled with questions from every angle of screenwriting and students who were energized by the workshops, elective classes and evening events. No one wanted to go home.

The night before, actor-director Alec Baldwin and screenwriter-playwright Jon Robin Baitz shared clips from a few of their favorite movies. The easygoing banter between the two friends was an entertaining mix of what makes a good scene, examples of great dialogue and comparisons between screenwriting and playwriting.

Including clips from *All About Eve*, *Chinatown*, *Being There*, and *Network*, they each pointed out their favorite moments when a strong character conveys the perfect line. Baldwin advised screenwriters to study directing and become hyphenates in order to protect their work. The evening ended with a lively Q & A with the crowd.

When we headed out on Sunday, you could see that everyone was sad to leave, but eager to get home -- and start writing!



Will Chandler, an AMPAS Nicholl Fellowship screenwriter, is the director of the Young American Writers Project (YAWP) through the M.F.A. in Writing & Literature Program at Stony Brook Southampton University. YAWP sends artists into schools across Long Island to teach screenwriting, playwriting, fiction, poetry, and personal essay. Chandler is also a screenwriter, having worked for a variety of studios and production companies as well as selling scripts on spec. Chandler also works as a script doctor with private clients. More information:

[Writers911.com](#), [Twitter.com/ScreenWrite](#).

POSTED BY SCRIPTMAG AT 8:17 AM

2 COMMENTS:

Anonymous said...

"...become hyphenates in order to protect their work."

What in the world is a hyphenate?

AUGUST 18, 2009 1:27 PM



Scriptmag said...

Hyphenates are writer-directors, writer-producers, writer-actor-directors -- persons with jobs joined by a hyphen, each job being of equal importance.

–noun

4. Informal. a person working or excelling in more than one craft or occupation: He's a film-industry hyphenate, usually listed as a writer-director-producer.

AUGUST 18, 2009 1:31 PM

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