

## SABBATICAL REPORT

**Project: A completed draft of a screenplay**

**Timeline: January 2007-May 2007**

### **Project Report:**

I spent the spring semester of 2007 writing a draft of a screenplay which was, initially titled, *The What You Wish 4*, but became something rather different, entitled *Trial by Fire*. However, such a change is actually an important aspect of the process of screenwriting, which is a fluid process that continues until the moment a film is released, and, in some cases (though more often today) after a film has opened. Hollywood is, today, ruled by marketing and marketers—many times a production company will shoot several endings, and those will be included on the DVD which, almost always, rescues a film from the red (*Hide and Seek* includes six separate endings). Eventually, for example, *Heaven's Gate*—Cimino's "disaster"—made a profit, despite losing \$40 million initially.

When you watch a film at the local theater, you must realize that there have been many hands at work—this is never the work of one individual who has sweated in a solitary, dank and dingy garret. One notable exception is *Moonstruck* written by John Patrick Shanley who only allowed MGM to purchase the script if they promised not to change one word. MGM agreed, and the film was extremely successful. At the other end of the spectrum, many films have scenes written even while they are filming, and often major stars (Marlon Brando, Tom

Cruise, Russell Crowe, Nicole Kidman) will demand from their directors that “script doctors” fix certain scenes and lines of dialogue. Robert Towne—famous for his Oscar-winning screenplay *Chinatown*—has been brought in many times to add and change dialogue during a shoot, and he is paid a tremendous amount of money for this. All this being said, I include the above to illustrate that “change” is a great part of what makes up the art of screenwriting. (Indeed, sometimes movie stars demand that they write their own lines as Marlon Brando did for *Apocalypse Now*, and Robert Shaw for *Jaws*.)

So why did my screenplay change so dramatically? There is an old adage in screenwriting which reads: Every screenplay is exactly the same. Now, one might bring to mind unusual films such as *Last Year at Mareinbad* or *Harold and Maude* or, more recently, *Cache*; however, even these films are ruled by one main element: Structure. Structure is the single most binding aspect of all films and in all films it is exactly the same, and although there may be some differences, the essence of the same structure remains intact.

Structure is so dominant that when you go the movies, you usually make up your mind as to whether or not you will “like” the film in the first 10 minutes—this may even stretch to 25-30 minutes, however, because you have “paid so much for that ticket.” The reason for the “10-minute” rule, a common structural device, is that, in every film, there will be an “inciting incident” at around the 10 minute mark. Further, after ten minutes you will have been introduced to the “world” of the film and also to the main characters—sometimes, the protagonist is “kept in the wings” for a while, but this is entirely for dramatic effect (see *Hamlet*, for example). What I came to realize through my sabbatical last spring was that, for one, my screenplay was missing this inciting event—and, even though I had introduced the characters and developed the world the film would inhabit, I did not have any hook to capture

the viewer's imagination.

I mentioned above that the “10-minute” rule can be extended to 25 or 30 minutes, but this is truly the last chance for the screenwriter because by page 30, he needs to have turned the story in a different direction by utilizing a Plot Point. Once again, I had not properly secured Plot Points to the original idea for my screenplay. And, while a script may have a dozen or more Plot Points, there are two which are of the utmost significance: the Plot Point that ends the first act, and the Plot Point that ends the second act. Indeed, before even beginning a screenplay, the writer must have these two “parts” worked out as well as the location of the script's beginning, and the script's ending. With these four elements, the screenplay begins to form because it has a destination. Without one of them, the “table” of the screenplay collapses. Of course, many screenwriters, myself included, believe that structure is anathema to the “creative process,” and it has been this struggle during my sabbatical which has brought about so many changes to my original ideas during my sabbatical.

Further, how many acts comprise a screenplay? Three; although, five (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*—a very Shakespearean approach) and seven (Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover*) are not uncommon. And, of course, these three acts correspond to a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning “sets up” the drama, the middle provides the “conflict,” and the end brings about the “resolution.” And, once more, the end of the second act is punctuated by a second major Plot Point; however, this time the event or action is one which, ideally, places the protagonist as far from his or her goal as is possible.

The sabbatical began swiftly with writing, then re-writing; however, I soon realized

that I was “blocked,” and so I sought out assistance from a variety of sources and devoured them all. To this end, I am grateful to a number of books for enlightening me, and, indeed, I spent a great deal of time reading these books during my sabbatical. The following texts were extremely useful: Syd Field’s *Screenplay*, (and also his *The Screenwriter’s Workbook*), Hal Ackerman’s *Write Screenplays That Sell*, David Howard and Edward Mabley’s *The Tools of Screenwriting*, and Thomas Pope’s *Good Scripts, Bad Scripts*. As I have taught Screenwriting here at FHSU, and, hopefully I shall be able to teach it again in the fall of 2008. I have recently ordered some of these books for the Forsyth library—I had already ordered two of them, and they are now available to students. Further, I have access through a variety of websites to free downloadable scripts from sources such as *The Daily Script*, *Screenplay*, and *Scriptcrawler*. What is particularly interesting is that these websites also provide screenplays which have gone un-produced and by reading through these it was easy to understand why nobody was interested in a particular script.

With regards to marketing scripts that I have written, I have over the past three years been able to develop relationships with several agents including Chris Cook of *Madhouse Entertainment*, Rob Gallagher of the *Rob Gallagher Literary Agency*, and the producer, Mike Medavoy, who is head of *Phoenix Pictures* that has produced *Zodiac*, *Miss Potter*, *Stealth*, *Licence to Wed*, among many others. My development as a screenwriter has also been enhanced through my subscription to the magazine *Creative Screenwriting*, and also both *Variety*, and *The Hollywood Reporter* so that I am able to maintain a sustained vision of what is happening in the screenwriting business and any potential trends which are lending themselves at the present times. I also subscribe to two major Hollywood websites: *IMDPpro* and *Who’s Buying What*. *IMDBpro* is the International Movie Database which contains

everything about any film project all over the world which is either in pre-, post-production, or is currently being filmed. The *Who's Buying What* website is updated daily and shows which studio or production company has purchased which script on any particular day.

So, what have I learned from my sabbatical? Well, I learned how to write a bad screenplay, or rather, I learned what makes a screenplay weak. Further, my sabbatical provided the opportunity to embrace change as one of the dynamics central to effective screenwriting. In a way, the writing of the screenplay is not unlike the building of a house. And with that, I have to come to understand that no matter how wonderful I believe that “third floor indoor-heated infinity swimming pool” will look, it cannot even be contemplated unless there is a firm foundation underneath: a strong “table” of structure, supported by the four legs of Beginning, Plot Points, and Ending. In the long term, when I am able to secure either another sabbatical or a period of reassigned time, I know that my research and writing during this past sabbatical will have proved invaluable when it comes to the “bricks and mortar” art of screenwriting. And in the short term, the knowledge and experience I gained during my sabbatical will translate to improved pedagogy in my screenwriting course at FHSU.