

WRITE, WRITE, WRITE An Chat With Lew Hunter

By Patrick G. Johnston

Lew Hunter is one of the premiere screenwriting teachers in the world. He has two master's degrees, from UCLA and Northwestern University. He has worked for Columbia, Lorimar, Paramount, Disney, NBC, ABC, and CBS as a writer, producer, and executive. Having taught at UCLA since 1979, he's currently Chair of the Screenwriting Department.

He's the author of the widely acclaimed *Screenwriting 434*, and conducts seminars and workshops around the world. He resides in Burbank, California. After listening and talking to Lew Hunter, writers are inspired to do what they must do to succeed -- *write, write, write*.

How did you first get involved in film and screenwriting?

I saw Fred Astaire movies as a young boy. I was always fascinated with storytelling because it had a lot to do with singing and dancing. Then, as life went on, my mother had me singing and dancing as she played the piano for various women's clubs in Nebraska. I wrote my own patter, as it was then called. As I grew older, I wanted to be the great American novelist, but I felt I didn't have the kind of ego it takes. When you're a novelist, the most important thing is your commentary, your impressions of the blade of grass or a historical event. I didn't think I had the ego to feel that my impressions were that profound.

I then became an actor as an undergraduate. The pureness of the event was probably my more valid talent. Putting someone else's feeling down on paper so I could use that character to speak through. And then I got some entry-level positions at NBC, in the mailroom, etc. until I became an executive, making trailers. I was also always writing screenplays in the closet. I then became a program executive at ABC, working on shows like "Peyton Place," "Bewitched," "Addams Family," and "Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea." I was always self-conscious about the job because I was telling writers how to write and I had never made a living as a writer.

Then I went to Disney and became an executive in their story department. I was having lunch with Ray Bradbury. We were trying to get *Martian Chronicles* going as a Disney movie. I said, "Ray, over two years here I've read two thousand feature-length scripts. Of all these scripts, I would say about ninety percent of them are shit, about ten percent aren't. I really might be in the top ten percent of shit. I want to give it a go." Ray was encouraging. He suggested two books. *The Wisdom of Insecurity* by Alan Watts, a Zen Buddhist, who talked about the psychological aspects, as did a book by Dorothea Brande, called *On Becoming a Writer*. I took a year out of my life and wrote six scripts. At the end of the year, I sold one of those scripts and that started my career as a writer.

How did the transition from writer to teacher come about?

Bill Froug knew me as an executive at NBC and had seen some of the things I had done. He expressed appreciation and admiration. He had a year's sabbatical and said he was looking for someone to take his place. The head of the department was John Young, who had been my advisor. I had gotten a master's degree at UCLA in '59-'60. John suggested me, and Bill Froug said he knew me. I had done guest lecturing at UCLA when I was at NBC and Disney. They had me come -- literally three days before the class started.

I had done some lecturing over the years. As I said, I had a master's from UCLA in "Cinema," as they called it at the time. My other master's was from Northwestern in Radio and Television. So I had done a number of one-shot lectures, but never anything on a continuing basis. At the end of

my first quarter, I walked into John's office and said I loved it and would be terribly disappointed if they didn't ask me back. They did. Teaching has since been a concurrent career with screenwriting. Now I'm Chair of the Screenwriting Department.

You wrote in the Preface to your book *Screenwriting 434* that one out of two students in UCLA's three-year writing program make a living behind a keyboard. How do you account for this high rate of success?

Well, it's actually now closer to two out of three. We mostly attribute it to our motto of "writers write." When you come in the program, you've a brief introductory course to get you up to speed with Aristotle's *Poetics* and Lajos Egri's book, *The Art of Dramatic Writing*. These are the "bibles" for us. And we use our own books, Richard Walter's, who is the Fellow Chair, and my own *434*. Our books are ancillary to the bibles. Egri talks about character; Aristotle talks about plot. This gives the student a good foundation of theoretical knowledge. And then, it's practice, practice, practice, as they say in piano at Juilliard, or in other words, write full-length feature scripts.

After the first quarter, students are required to write a script a quarter. It's a two to three-year program so they'll come out with anywhere from five to ten scripts. It's not about exercises, it's simply jumping in the deep end of the pool and swimming. We stress writing, writing, writing. Practically every one of our writers that has gone on to become a professional says "I still feel like I'm doing 434's." That's exactly the way the program was designed. That wasn't true when I first went into the program. Then, the requirement was an outline and 70 pages. I felt that was ridiculous. "As a professional, you've between six and eight weeks to do a script," I said. "Let's get them on a professional rhythm immediately," which we now do on the quarter system. That's the first reason for our success. The volume of material is such it allows the students to experiment, to fail, to succeed, to develop their abilities.

The second reason? We've a tremendous applicant pool. We get between two and three hundred applications. We're able to pick very, very strong people -- twenty out of those two to three hundred. We would have to be pretty dumb not to pick good, "gotta-be" writers. The synergy of good people interacting with each other is wildly productive.

The third reason for our success: All the professors are working screenwriters. They aren't speaking from an academic posture, they're speaking from personal experience and abilities. Last of all, UCLA has such a supportive overall program and the people there are wildly enthusiastic about what we do. We've really become, over the last 15 years, the preeminent screenwriting school in the world, quite frankly. I teach around the world, and there're very few screenwriting concentrations at universities.

Last, UCLA screenwriting is a graduate program. We don't have a strong undergraduate emphasis. Our main program is for the graduate student who has a great deal of life experience. The overall ages are from 25 to 35 -- most around 30. They've lived life. They've experience; they've passion. Screenwriting is really a vehicle to say what you've to say. We find that most undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 22 can only write about the funniest thing that happened at the dorm last week.

I understand you are involved with the screenwriting program at the University of Paris, Sorbonne.

Yes. I helped design the program and I'm on the faculty. I go over there one to three times a year. I'm also on the Croatian Film Academy and sort of the lead teacher of the "Imaginary Academy" that meets in the summer. We just finished our fourth year. I've also done workshops in Copenhagen, Tel Aviv, Nairobi, Beijing, Australia, Alaska, well, on every continent save

Antarctica. A lot of people call from around the United States for a three-hour lecture to a weekend or week-long workshop.

Do you feel there are many differences between American screenwriters and European screenwriters?

The big difference is that the American screenwriter has much more respect. They are not afflicted with the conceit of the New Wave, now an extinguished wave. Internationally, they're now very conscious that the American screenwriter is predominantly a storyteller. The Europeans believe they need to get to the storytelling they had at one time, back with Fellini. Fellini worked with screenwriters. In 1977, Truffaut said if he had to do it over, he would have started his professional life, not as a critic, but as a screenwriter, even though in 1966 he wrote a criticism entitled, "The Irrelevancy of the Screenwriter."

Screenwriting is now being more and more recognized as art. But what we're really talking about is storytelling. They're now accepting that they've got to get on the storytelling path and not write stories for the mirror, but for an audience. In Europe, if there are ten movies playing, eight are American and two are local movies that aren't very well attended.

Once in a while you'll have a breakthrough, like *The Full Monty*, which crosses over and captures worldwide attention. *The Full Monty* was a wonderful story and well done. That was the real reason I was asked to get involved with the Sorbonne. They also are going from seven to 70 TV channels within a three-year period. Now, they're about a year away from that goal. They need writers to fill the time. Ergo, there's more and more appreciation of the screenwriter, and I say "Hurray! More, more!"

What advice could you give to a new screenwriter?

I give the new screenwriter the same advice I give everyone coming into UCLA. I advise them to read everything about screenwriting and to acquaint themselves with classical literature, especially storytelling. There are a number of books outside of the screenwriting pantheon I would suggest. Particularly Joseph Campbell's *Hero With a Thousand Faces*. I also urge them to read the series of books called *Writers at Work*. Yet still, the most important thing is to write.

William Faulkner gave a lecture at Harvard. He shuffled on stage after receiving a glowing introduction, looked at the audience of about 1100 and said, "How many of you here wish to be writers?" Half raised their hands immediately, the other half were a bit more tentative. He took the pipe out of his mouth, jabbed the stem at the audience, and said, "Then you fuckers should be home writing." And walked off the stage. That's the greatest advice, which aligns itself well with my advice from John Steinbeck. I was at Northwestern. Mr. Steinbeck was in the room. After his talk I went up to get a pearl of wisdom. I said, "Mr. Steinbeck, what can I do to be a wonderful writer?" He looked at me, twisted his beard a bit, said "Write," then turned and walked off. He couldn't have given me a better pearl. In terms of storytelling, Jean Cocteau was asked "What can I do to be a better writer?" He replied, "Surprise me." Write stories that surprise people. Tennessee Williams said one character should know something the other doesn't and the author should make something happen that none of them suspect. Surprise. Another pearl.

Another reason the program at UCLA succeeds ties in with the volume of material students write. In my 20 years, we have done over 2600 scripts. We have an average of 50 students in the program. They spread over a three-year period. We have about 150 scripts written a year. Each person writes about three a year. Only five have been made into motion pictures. One was *Backdraft*, by Greg Widen; *Highlander*, also by Greg; *River's Edge*, by Neal Jimenez; Morgan Stewart's *Coming Home*, David Titcher; and *Beautiful Girls*, by Scott Rosenberg. The program at

UCLA is designed to make you write, and not just write a script to get you that first Mercedes, swimming pool, or divorce. Our program is about training, like Juilliard.

Yes, the best advice to screenwriters is to train. To train is to do, ergo, writers write. You build up a body of work, then go through that learning curve. Then the curve starts to level off after four or five scripts. Today, there's so much accessible training material you'd be a fool not to take advantage and absorb everything available. Couple that knowledge with the actual writing, and I think you've got a real good shot. I believe very strongly that in Hollywood, as in life itself, people don't fail, they quit.

Persistence is our most important asset. We all have the equivalent amount of talent. We can say Shakespeare, Einstein, or Churchill had a huge extra turn of the screw, but most of us have the same amount of sensitivity, intelligence, and creativity. It's how we apply these traits that's important. How badly we need to feed the monster inside. The monster I call the writer.

What is the most common mistake that writers make?

Telling too much. They're too verbal. They're too complex in the story and try to tell too much instead of figuring out and telling exactly what the story is about. In *Citizen Kane*, it's about Rosebud, and you stay with that.

In *Sunset Boulevard*, it's professional lust between the William Holden character and the Gloria Swanson character. It's about E.T. going home. It's about Butch and Sundance wanting to get back to a simpler time. A lot of new writers try to tell too much. The story is about this, that, and six other things. As Aristotle says, it should be about one thing: What the hero or heroine is trying to get, period.

Aristotle also says that superior drama or comedy allows us to discover ourselves. Oftentimes writers will use their imagination. They don't draw on their life experiences. Their imagination is generally devoid of personal passion. It's often bloodless. They don't go into their uniqueness. Those who do not write out of their uniqueness and passion inevitably fail because they copy. Willa Cather said she became an artist when she "stopped admiring" -- in other words, copying -- "and began remembering." Remembering the things in her own life lead to Pulitzer-Prize-winning storytelling.

Writers often over-complex the story line, making the script unfathomable. You finish a script and then ask, "What was that all about?" And you don't quite know. That's the most common mistake. Find out what the hero is trying to get and have him or her go for it, confronting obstacles along the way before the goal is achieved. And if the hero doesn't achieve the goal, he or she can still succeed in failure, which is Hamlet, Rick Blaine, Jay Gatsby, Forrest Gump, Scarlett O'Hara, and other classic heroes and heroines.

Every month there are several new books on screenwriting. You can even take a screenwriting class on the Internet. How do you feel about this explosion of information on screenwriting?

Always astonished. When I came into screenwriting and education, the wave was forming. I don't know whether we're at the crest or whether the wave is half-formed. I used to be judgmental about screenwriting books, but not anymore. I tell people not to forget the bibles, Aristotle and Egri, and to buy everything. The tomes become like cookbooks. You get a recipe from here, a recipe from there, and it all helps you become a better screenwriter.

I am constantly amazed and amused with this screenwriting "boom." I think I figured out why screenwriting seems so accessible to people. Everybody seems to be writing a screenplay. See,

people today have been involved in performance entertainment since they were born, mostly via television and motion pictures. People say, "Hey, I can do that." People have so much chutzpa. I think it's quite wonderful. There are many opportunities coming down the line as technology makes it financially feasible for people to buy home video cameras and make a movie. You can now get access to editing equipment and put something together that could turn the world upside down. It's exciting because the technology is more and more available to the entire range of humanity. It's really wonderful. The world needs all the dreamers possible.

The people who put out these screenwriting books are now generally knowledgeable. They well might stimulate you to become a better writer. I encourage people to go to all seminars and workshops. Buy all the books, get all the information you can to become the best you that you can be. That should be the basic motivation of a superior teacher -- not to get the best "them" out of you, but to get the best "you" out of you.

Yes, I know there are classes on the Internet, but I can't imagine how they are very fulfilling. In a classroom, there's inflection in the voice, sparkle in the eye. I can't imagine it could take the place of the face-to-face physical experience of seeing, hearing, talking. Having said that, if you're sitting on a mountain in West Virginia or on a Louisiana bayou, and that's the only avenue available, give it a go. Do it. Then write, then surprise me.

Do you have any new books planned?

Next year, *Naked Screenwriting* will be out. Twenty Academy Award-winning screenwriters bare their art, souls, and secrets. It will be an interview book, from Billy Wilder to Oliver Stone to Callie Khouri to Julius Epstein, who co-wrote *Casablanca*. I had Francis Ford Coppola in my class three weeks ago. The book addresses the question, "How do you write?"

After that I'm going to write *Lew Hunter's Secret Life of Screenwriting*. I'll go inside screenwriting on an emotional and visceral level. My model is the Dorothea Brande book Ray Bradbury suggested, *On Becoming a Writer*. There was a bestseller about two years ago called *Bird by Bird*, by Ann Lamont. My publisher wants me to write something like that for screenwriting.

Do you expect the skyrocketing prices paid for spec scripts to continue their ascent? Are these high prices good or bad for screenwriters in general?

Anything that can cause people to pay attention to the art of screenwriting is good. If alums like Eric Roth and Shane Black get three million dollars to write a script, then they sure as hell deserve three million dollars every bit as much as Tom Cruise, Nick Cage, or John Travolta deserve twenty million dollars to act in their scripts. We would certainly love to have those twenty-million-dollar people in our stories, but they wouldn't have anything to do if they didn't have a screenplay.

Screenplays are them, and verily us.

I think screenplay prices will get higher and higher. When I was an executive at Disney in 1969, Bill Goldman got \$400,000 for his spec script, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. My God, you can imagine the studio heads saying, "The lunatics are taking over the asylum!" Of course now, \$400,000 is a lowball figure for spec screenwriting, even though at the time it was unbelievable. Spec screenplays weren't in vogue. Bill just sat down for six weeks and wrote the piece. He had a wonderful agent, but you should know he was also a well-known screenwriter before because he had gotten a lot of notice on Harper, that starred Paul Newman.

The spec market will grow as we have more and more work for people. About three years ago, Michael Ovitz, then head of CAA, said his focus was to get his people -- meaning actors, writers, and producers -- to get them through the next ten years because he felt there would be an

historical explosion of creative work. Three years have gone by and we see it coming. There are so many more ways, even today, to get something sold. There are not just three networks. There are fifteen different market places as far as television network movies go.

I suspect we are not going to have a lot more movie-movies, but there will be even more markets for small-screen movies. Today, about 150 movie-movies see the light of day, averaging about three premieres a week. We will continue to have that international communal experience of going to the theater, seeing *Titanic* on the big screen, experiencing *Armageddon* roller coaster rides. But one day those big screens will also be in the caves we call homes. On your entire wall, you'll see a car chase with Nick Cage, Eddie Murphy, Bruce Willis or whoever happens to be the action star of the year. The new screenwriter preparing himself or herself right now will be able to take advantage of these opportunities within the next five years, perhaps sooner, but not very much later.

Even with all the money, that big carrot at the end of the stick, nothing can ever supplant a good story. So if you develop yourself as a storyteller, using the screen as your canvas to express what you have to express, and tie that in with your energy and ability, you have a real good shot.

Who is your favorite screenwriter of all time?

Billy Wilder. He had an incredible ability to tell stories, whether comedy or tragedy. We must remember *The Lost Weekend* is part of his repertoire, the alcoholism story starring Ray Milland. Of course *Sunset Boulevard*, and the comedies *Some Like It Hot* and *The Apartment*. He has such a tremendous range. He is so smart. There has never been a better storyteller. He was funny and poignant and, well, everything within the horizonless line of human emotion. If you look at everything he's done, there has never been anybody who has come close. We have people today who are really good storytellers. I've interviewed them for my upcoming book. Francis Coppola, Eric Roth, Oliver Stone, etc. They all say, "Yeah, Billy is the best." But, I know someone reading this will be the McGwire/Sosa to Billy's Ruth/Maris. To him, her, or you, I say "Write on!"

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