

PSYCHIC 101 Divining Story Notes

By P. J. McIlvaine

You've written what you consider to be the world's greatest screenplay, a masterpiece of Biblical proportions. You've sent your baby out into the cruel harsh world and finally managed to get into the hands of someone who thinks it's just as fantastic as you. You're told to sit back and wait for feedback, which, you're quite sure, will be "minor" because your story is already perfect. Right?

Wrong. To your dismay, you quickly discover that your precious child is now under attack from what seems to be a gang of schoolyard thugs. That dialogue you thought was witty and provocative is now derided as lame and flat. Your hero doesn't have enough mythic qualities and your heroine needs to show more cleavage. And the plot hole in Act I becomes a gulf by page 98.

Perhaps some screenwriters labor under the pretense that their words are written in stone, impervious to revision. But such is not the case. Screenwriting, unless you're a Steven Spielberg, is usually a collaborative process, unlike novel writing. In development hell, it seems that everyone wants to get their imprimatur on the script, from the director to the actors down to the cleaning crew.

To a screenwriter intoxicated from that first sale or option, trying to glean the chaff from the wheat can be baffling. How do you make sense of what seems, at face value, incomprehensible?

Veteran scribe and screenwriting guru Larry Brody (www.tvwriter.com) has a drawer full of priceless gems culled over his long and illustrious career:

"This script is great! The only problem is that every scene is about something, but we can fix that."

"This is a wonderful scene. I think we also need this same scene replacing the ones on pages 44-47 and pages 78-81."

"You have to change the hero's name from Brustein. It's in bad taste to be Jewish."

"Can we make this character a woman? Then we won't have to explain all her motivation. The audience will just know it's PMS."

"This scene isn't believable to me. This guy's girlfriend cheats on him and all he does is turn away with tears in his eyes? He's got to beat the shit out of her and then walk out. That's what I do."

John Scott Shepherd, a screenwriter with six movies currently in development stages at major studios (Jim Carrey is attached to his comedy/drama *Henry's List of Wrongs*) and a development deal with Twentieth Century Fox Television, has his own tales of woe. A Producer once told his manager/producer, "I have good news and bad news. The good news is, (A-List Director) wants to do our movie and loves the script just as it is."

"What's the bad news?" Shepherd's manager/producer then asked.

"We won't get to develop the script anymore," the producer replied.

Another time, Shepherd was told that his main character was "simultaneously iconic and pedantic." Shepherd is still scratching his head over that one.

For a novice screenwriter who's trying their best to "give them what they want," the entire process is akin to Chinese Water Torture. "The first couple of go-rounds," Shepherd admits, "it was all about what they want. I would agonize over the difference between what I felt was right, sometimes loving some of the things they said, with what they were asking overall. It was stressful. It was pretty clear that what they want was a swimmy proposition at best. I've been directly burned by taking notes literally."

But with time and experience, Shepherd says he's become more confident in his abilities and "gotten much better at standing up, saying no, asking people to clarify, which often changes the note, and challenging. I've developed relationships that allow me to find favorites, people who I trust. Ultimately, trust is what it's about, because it's so intimate when people start dissecting your heart and soul. It's a little like being a coach, you start to realize their strengths and weaknesses. It's a matter of choosing to be the coach instead of the player. More often than not, now, I manage the meetings instead of just reacting. I don't know if everybody wants that, but I can tell you that many do."

Screenwriters, anxious to make that first sale, might compromise their own values and beliefs and end up emasculating their own work. In Shepherd's view, what many screenwriters often forget is that they do have power—the power to say no. "No, I won't sell this material under these specs. No, I refuse to do this rewrite as prescribed. No, I won't rewrite this person as you've directed. Within other circles, especially directors, we're seen as malleable gold diggers. I hate that. I'm extremely conscious of the transparent efforts to appeal to my ego to get me to do something I shouldn't, creatively speaking. I'm less and less likely to do something just because it will get a greenlight or get me on the air or please Joe the Director or whatever. That's not to say I'm too cool to care ... it's just that sometimes the straight line doesn't really lead where you thought it did."

In other words, signing on the dotted line isn't necessarily the path to the Yellow Brick Road.

"The development process is totally flawed," Shepherd goes on. "Certainly, the notion of interchangeable writers is totally illogical. Stories in any medium have a voice, a point of view, and that's diluted by multiple authors. It shows. It's there. It's palpable. So, too, is the film or program that's a product of too many meetings, too many opinions. These things are clear and true and obvious, written about and talked about so much I can't believe that certain processes still prevail. But that doesn't mean that the notion of development is bad. Even great work can get better. But more often, in my opinion, and the opinion of many, scripts rarely get better because they are developed. Why? I'm not entirely sure, really. My great fear is that notion of not changing something costs us jobs, much like a flat tax. So we change it laterally. We move this here and that there."

However flawed the development process might be, it's Shepherd opinion that in the final analysis, "it's the responsibility of every writer, as an individual, to put (his) or her ego into the work. To do whatever serves the product. If that means killing the darling, great. But if it means doing the hard thing and fighting, you simply must do it."

Cheryl Heuton, who with Nick Falacci (her husband and screenwriting partner) has several features in place at MGM and a TV pilot at Fox, echoes Shepherd's views. "Everybody deals with notes. Everybody deals with stupid notes. You have to push forward your vision and tone without rejecting contributions that might improve the product. Sometimes I hear a note that I don't like, but I can't immediately say why I don't think it will work. What I've learned is to resist the temptation to start giving objections until I can figure out what the exact problem is. If I just start babbling before I know what it is that's bothering me, the executive often comes to the conclusion that I don't really have a good reason for my discomfort. And once they decide that you don't have coherent reasoning behind your objections, you've lost a lot of ground. "

Does this mean that one should take an executive's word as the gospel truth?

Not according to Brody. "I used to carry around a switchblade and flick it open and shut constantly during meetings. When I really hated what was said, I would slam the knife down, point first, into the coffee table or conference table in front of me. Pretty soon, people stopped giving me stupid notes. But it was an empty victory, because they also stopped having meetings with me, faxing me the notes instead. Since we were no longer in the same room together, the execs now felt free to be just as stupid as before." Brody says he got the idea for this unusual technique from watching author/cop Joe Wambaugh, who, Brody claims, used to take out a service revolver and clean it during meetings while "various suits talked their gibberish."

"Executives often have specific ideas on how to fix things. Often their ideas are bad," Heuton admits. "Sometimes they know this, and they'll say "Here's the bad version." It's the writer's job to come up with the good version. Even if the executive thinks his or her specific idea is good, it might not be. And it's still the writer's job to come up with something that fills the need but is better. If you execute every note you get and the script is bad because of it-it's still your bad script. The executive may admit that their note is part of why it's bad, but it's still a bad script, you're still the writer, and the project isn't going forward. "

Heuton and Falacci have found in their studio dealings that "you can ignore almost any specific note if the change you choose to make instead results in a good script, that is, to say a script that impresses the relevant executives. You can even leave something the same-if the script is working. The problem with some writers, however, is that they always think their scripts work just the way they are, and resist making any changes. Whenever I've read scripts by such writers, however, I've noted that the scripts generally could use, well, a lot of work."

Heuton has found that "in general, the more combative people are in the room-whether the writer or the executives-the less productive the process becomes. The less the participants need to boost their own egos, and the more the goal is simply to produce a good script, the better it goes."

As author John Mortimer succinctly points out in his autobiography "Clinging to the Wreckage," when too many cooks are stirring the soup, more often than not "the plot, out of sheer boredom, crept away and died."

Then again, you might experience what Heather Hale, writer of the network cable movie "A Courage to Love" starring Vanessa Williams, did after making her sale. "I wasn't given any notes. They hired another writer and I didn't find out about it until I read it in the trades. I was so excited, it was the first time I (would've been) in the Hollywood Reporter and there was this cool article. You get down to the bottom and it read "Written by so and so." It was like someone had reached down and pulled my heart out through my throat, then blew icy cold air into the hollow it left. I just couldn't believe it. I was numb. I had given birth to this script, researched it, rewritten it, taken critiques from my writers groups, gotten teachers help on it, gotten it to Vanessa Williams, gotten it optioned, and here, some absolute stranger who had either never even touched the script, or had been working on it for months unbeknownst to me (I still can't figure out which is worse) was getting all the credit, in print, in the trades, no less. So tell all those writers who are struggling with them to be happy they're even getting notes!"

Ah well. There's always that switchblade....

PJ McIlvaine's teen comedy, ANNUS HORRIBILIS, starring Eric Stoltz (also making his directorial debut), Mimi Rogers, Karen Allen and wrestling superstar Bret Hart, is slated for a spring 2001

premiere on a major US cable network. PJ currently has a second option/sale pending. PJ has written scripts in a number of genres and can be reached at pmcilvervaine@screentalk.org

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