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THE CRAFT AND BUSINESS OF SCREENWRITING

MONDAY, AUGUST 3, 2009

Will Chandler: Blogging from Southampton

“Film is emotional manipulation, not theory. What is the emotional wringer that you want to put your audience through?” I hadn’t even finished my first cup of coffee and screenwriter-instructor Christina Lazaridi already had the gloves off. With only three days of intensive workshops, there’s no time to lose. Connecting with her students, she draws out themes and conflicts from their work. “What is the sense of your main character’s day and what is he moving toward? You want to make the world alive.”

I have the easy job: eavesdrop as Lazaridi asks her students the hard questions and makes them think more clearly about their work. A screenwriter of original work, adaptations and documentaries, including the Academy Award-nominated *One Day Crossing*, Lazaridi is fluent in every type of film project and pushes her students to go deeper. She reminds them to “... pick the top thing that you want the audience to connect with. If your character is pulled in too many directions, the story will feel muddy.”

Throughout the morning, she reminded students how important it is to convey emotion in their work. “If you put emotional brackets around it, we will watch but not feel. What is the emotion that you want the audience to come out of this with? How do you want us to feel?” In the end, it’s emotion that connects us all to a script’s characters. A wise reminder for all writers.

Last night, filmmaker Bette Gordon interviewed screenwriter-director Peter Hedges (*Pieces of April*, *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape*). Hedges shared how he came up with the idea for *Gilbert Grape*. He had just started teaching writing at Northwestern University. On the first day, a student challenged “What, if anything, have you ever written?” Hedges responded “I will write a play tonight, we’ll start rehearsals on Friday and perform it on Sunday.” The student was impressed. Now all Hedges had to do was ... well, everything.

Sure enough, the short play was completed. Students loved it. *Gilbert Grape*’s story was eventually developed into a novel, which was optioned by Lasse Hallstrom. When Johnny Depp signed on, they had a green light and a start date. Now, the only thing Hedges needed to do was something he’d never done before: write a screenplay. He shared many of the ups and downs of that process with the audience.

Hedges said that he loves complex characters in the small moments of life that may not look dramatic on the outside, but from the character’s perspective, can be life changing. He is also fascinated by “how people like us can do the unthinkable.”

Contrasting screenwriting with playwriting, he cited the example of a character who expressed his anger with God in a seven page speech on stage; but in the screenplay, he just grabbed a crucifix off the wall and threw it into the fireplace. “Can you find that gesture or movement that

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conveys the emotional state?"

Hedges also discussed the challenges of writing and directing *Pieces of April*, which lost its funding three times and was eventually shot for \$300,000 in 16 days. The story was inspired by a random meeting with an actress on a subway and his own mother's death from cancer. And while he pointed to specific examples lifted from his life, he also said "writing is what I don't write, what I don't say." Bring your characters to life, then let them breathe and trust your audience to understand them.

Tonight, actor/director Alec Baldwin and screenwriter/playwright Jon Robin Baitz discuss their all time favorite movie scenes.

Read Will Chandler's first Southampton blog [here](#).

POSTED BY SCRIPTMAG AT 7:08 AM

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Peter Hedges' conversation with Better Gordon was great.

The energy he had when speaking of his work was refreshing. And the genesis story of *Gilbert Grape*, shows how sometimes a writer must will his/her work into existence.

I'll be posting some of my own blogs soon about the individual workshops I attended, including Peter Riegert's "Mastering a Scene" and Renee Shafranksy's "What Lies Beneath."

Thanks for sharing!
-Merrel Davis

AUGUST 4, 2009 5:45 AM

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