The Screenwriter's Café
The Enduring Insights of Alfred Hitchcock - Part I

By Colleen Patrick

The transcript of a 1939 lecture by Alfred Hitchcock given at New York's Museum of Modern Art?

I was intrigued.

I expected to read interesting, but dated, insights of the esteemed director-writer-producer.

I was wrong.

What Hitchcock said more than sixty years ago reflected screenwriting techniques that remain valid today. In his talk, he outlined the decision-making steps that he—probably with his constant collaborator, wife Alma—created for every step of his filmmaking process.

As he revealed each step, I was in Hitchcock heaven. These were the open secrets responsible for making so much of his narrative work great and timeless.

I poured myself a cup of tea and put myself in the front row. I could see him at his podium, looking down his nose at his audience (nothing personal) as he droned his traditional, "Good evening."

This was truly history in the making because, when he gave this talk, the British director was only 40 years old; just beginning to knock on the door of international renown. His most remembered work at that time included the original version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), which featured a strong woman in the lead (Edna Best), not the flummoxed Doris Day supporting character in the later version with Jimmy Stewart, *The 39 Steps* (1935), and *The Lady Vanishes* (1938).

Although *Rebecca*, the film that created a global sensation for Hitchcock, was released in 1940, he made it in 1939, probably around the time of this talk.

Hitchcock worked from a base of pure and sheer simplicity.

His first move: To set out a skeleton of the entire story on a single sheet of large paper. In other words: an outline that takes you from head to toe of the tale.

"When I am given a subject, a book, play or an original," he explained, "I like to see it on one sheet of foolscap. That is to say, have the story, in its barest bones, just laid out on a sheet of foolscap paper."

Foolscap was a standard piece of writing or drawing paper used in Great Britain at that time, so named because of its watermark of a fool's cap. It measured 13.5 x 17 inches.

He explains, “Now you do not have to write down very much, maybe just that a man meets a woman at a certain place, and something else happens. In the briefest possible way, this thing should be laid out on a piece of paper.

“From that, of course, we start to build the treatment of the story—the characterizations, the narrative, and even the detail, until we probably have a hundred pages of complete narrative without dialogue. But I do not mean narrative in the abstract, (I mean) the practical side of what is going to appear on the screen. I always avoid having in the treatment anything that is not really visual.

“In dialogue we indicate it by saying, for instance, that the man goes to the sideboard, pours himself out a drink, and tells the woman that something or other is going to happen to him. We indicate it in the treatment, and this is very full and practically the complete film on paper, in terms of action and movement.

“The particular reason why I prefer to do that is because I don’t like to kid myself. I do not like to let myself think that there is more in it than there really is, because I believe that one should build up. That is why I prefer to start with the broad narrative, and then from that, develop into this full treatment—but purely cinematic treatment. You must not go into anything like a short story, or anything descriptive, like, ‘with half-strangled cries’ and that sort of thing. You just want the actual movement or action, and then indicate the dialogue.”

Today, many producers like to see script treatments written like a short story. Others simply want you to use whatever script treatment writing method works best for you.

Hitchcock continues, “Dialogue is the next phase, and that depends on how much time one has. Once the story line is decided upon and one has a dialogue writer in, one usually deals with it sequence by sequence. After the first sequence, we call the dialogue writer in and hand it to him. While he has the first sequence, we start the next sequence in treatment and build up as we go along. Finally, we have a whole pile of material which is treatment, and a whole pile of material which is dialogue.”

Of course, as a screenwriter working alone, dialogue is your responsibility, as well as the treatment—if you write one. Some writers, when they reach the dialogue insertion stage, prefer to write it out in the formal script format, rather than continue to work on it as a treatment. There is no absolute correct way of creating or combining these elements; discovering our own creative and writing techniques is the greatest challenge and fun of the occupation.

For example, I “hear” characters talking from the getgo, and write out pages of lines I’ve heard them say in my mind, but don’t include most of them in my treatment. In part because not all characters survive the final version of my treatment, or the transition between treatment and screenplay, and in part because characters mature more the longer I work with them and the way they speak—their use of words—changes systematically. Other screenwriters don’t use any of these techniques.

“From this stage, “ Hitchcock continues, “we go into the shooting script by assembling the dialogue and the treatment. We keep building it even further, and adding to it. We do not do this

in a mechanical way, but put up as many ideas as we possibly can. Finally we have a shooting script of the whole thing. Then we cast it, shoot it, and finally it is shown."

He said he wanted you to leave the theater, telling someone about the film you just saw, describing it exactly the way his initial brief explanation was written on the skeleton page. "This is the complete cycle that I like to aim for," he said, "as far as possible, and that is the process one works on in designing a motion picture script."

That is, keep the concept as brief and clear as possible; one that can be described succinctly, but have the actual presentation full of detail, twists and surprises.

Melodrama, the standard dramatic structure of films, especially silent films, before Hitchcock's influence, was scorned by him, and he helped filmmakers distance themselves from its use throughout his career.

Briefly, melodrama is a dramatic form in which the exaggeration of effect and emotion—particularly sentimentalism—is produced. Plot or action is emphasized at the expense of character.

After giving the example of a renowned early French chase film—their American counterpart was the Keystone Cops-type film, he added, "Of course, in those days, and even up to the coming of the talking picture, the characters were pretty well cardboard figures. One advantage that the talking picture has given us is that it allowed us to delineate character a little more, through the medium of dialogue. The talking picture has given us more character, and obviously, in the long run, that is what we are going to rely upon."

He proceeds, however, to criticize the overuse of dialogue by filmmakers to develop character—saying that they came to rely *only* on dialogue to develop characters, much like poorly produced television and motion picture drama does today.

"We have lost what has been—to me, at least—the biggest enjoyment in motion pictures, and that is action and movement. What I am trying to aim for is a combination of these two elements, character and action."

Then he laid the theoretical and cinegraphic groundwork for his forte—superbly crafted thrillers, and the form that would one day be called the action/adventure. He also defined the visual and structural problem that screenwriters and directors still wrestle.

"The difficulty is," continued Hitchcock, "I feel, that the two rhythms are entirely different things. I mean the rhythm and pace of action and the rhythm and pace of dialogue. The problem is to try and blend these two things together. I am still trying to do it, and I have not entirely solved the problem, but eventually, I imagine, it will be solved. The field of the future motion picture story has obviously got to come from character and where the difficulty comes is that character controls the situation.

"That is the one thing that disturbs me a little. You see modern novels, psychological novels, with frank characterizations and very good psychology, but there has been a tendency, with the

novel and with a lot of stage plays, to abandon story. They don't tell enough story or plot. For a motion picture we do need quite an amount of story."

Some would say that the main failing of high-priced, high-powered Hollywood films made in the past few decades is that they have forsaken character for the melodramatic story and action, rather than seeking the balance of which Hitchock speaks.

He goes on: "Now the reason we need a lot of story is this: a film takes an hour and twenty minutes to play, and an audience can stand about an hour. After an hour it starts to get tired so it needs the injection of some dope. One might also say there should be a slogan, 'Keep them awake at the movies!'

"The dope, as one might call it, is action, movement and excitement, but more than that, keeping the audience occupied mentally. People think for example, that pace is fast action, quick cutting, people running around or whatever you will, and it is not really that at all.

"I think that pace in a film is made entirely by keeping the mind of the spectator occupied. You don't need to have quick cutting, you don't need to have quick playing, but you do need a very full story and the changing of one situation to another. You need the change of one incident to another so that all the time the audience's mind is occupied.

"Now as long as you can maintain that and not let up, then you have pace. That is why suspense is such a valuable thing, because it keeps the mind of the audience going."

Now here is where the blend of plot, story and character can coincide well—by changing from one incident to another, you constantly give your characters something to which they must respond, which is the whole idea of most good screenplays. Because the way the characters respond to each situation defines them. I say, "the way we deal with our fears defines who we are." The same is especially true of characters on the screen—as well as how they respond to every other emotion-provoking situation.

Hitchcock: "In trying to design a melodrama with these elements of character, action and movement, of course it does present a pretty big problem, and one has to adopt various methods. One method I have used in the past—I did it with *The Man Who Knew Too Much*—was to select some backgrounds or events that would lend themselves to a colorful melodramatic motion picture. Of course, this is quite the wrong thing to do, but here is an idea: select the background first, then the action. It might be a race or it might be anything at all. Sometimes I select a dozen different events and shape them into a plot. Finally - and this is just the opposite to what is usually done—select your character to motivate the whole of the above.

"Under the present circumstance, people figure out a character or group of characters, and they allow them to motivate the story, the background and everything else. Now you see, you are liable, unless you get a very colorful character, like an engine driver, a ship's captain or a diver, to be led into very dull backgrounds.

"For example, if you take a society woman, she will obviously lead you into a drawing room, into a lot of talk, you see, and there you are! You might choose many characters of that nature, and it

is inevitable if you follow the regular method. I am not advocating that this should be everybody's method, it is only a feeling I have myself because I want to get certain things, you see.

"Sometimes you cannot get the characters you want to take you into these places so you say, 'All right, I will have a society woman.' The next thing (you ask), of course, what will you do with her? You might say, 'I would like to have her in a ship's stokehole.'

"Your job becomes very hard, indeed! You have to be really inventive to get a society woman into a ship's stokehole, to get a situation that will lead that way, and a character who, by reason of the situation, would find herself in a ship's stokehole.

"Of course, I'd bet a lot of you would say, 'It's is too much trouble. Let's put her in a yacht's stokehole. A society woman is bound to go there. That, of course, is radical and you must not do it because the moment you do, you are weakening and not being inventive."

Now there's a Hitchcock trademark: putting familiar types of people in completely unexpected settings. Is this truly inventive dramatic work, or something contrived only to manipulate story, action, character and, ultimately, the audience?

Stay tuned for part two in the next issue of SCREENTALK!

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