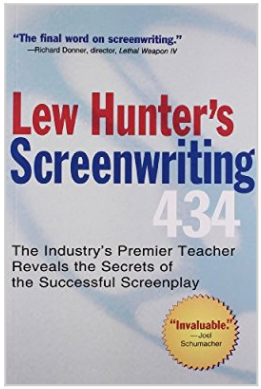

Lew Hunter's Screenwriting 434: The Industry's Premier Teacher Reveals the Secrets of the Successful Screenplay

By Lew Hunter

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Editorial Review

Review
"I wish this book had been around when I was a student. I heartily recommended it. For beginners and pros alike." —**Steven Bocho writer/producer NYPD Blue**

About the Author
Lew Hunter has worked for Columbia, Lorimar, Paramount, Disney, NBC, ABC, and CBS as a writer, producer, and executive. Currently he is Chair Emeritus of the screenwriting department at UCLA, and recently established the Lew Hunter Superior Screenwriting colony in the town of Superior, Nebraska. He lectures regularly throughout the country and internationally.

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Garlands and potted plants to my beloved students,
Bill Froug, and my wife, Pamela.
All beloved but not in that order.

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A tremendous *merci beaucoup* to the above *and the names in the index* for their inspirational roles in my screen and book writing and professing careers.

Lewis Ray Hunter
Superior, Nebraska

FADE IN REDUX

What is different for screenwriting in the ten years that have rocketed by since the first publication of this book? Give up? OK, the answer is: NOTHING!

Yes, little things that relate to the form—and one piece of craft I am going to tell you about in this new introduction—but in the total overall, I repeat, nothing, without caps so I don't get too pushy. Gertrude Stein wrote, "A rose is a rose is a rose"; I write, "A story is a story is a story." We professors are charged by academia and our institutions, UCLA in my case, to "break new ground," "conquer new horizons," clichés that relate more to horticulture or astronomy than screenwriting. Every time someone tries something new, it seems as if they end up making a divertissement for the mirror, for the shelf in a lab or, if they are lucky, something direct-to-video/DVD.

Geoff Gilmore, co-director of that wonder of modern film wonders, The Sundance Film Festival, told me they screen more 1200 feature length films each year and pick about sixty for this seminal American event. The Utah hills are alive with the sound of film music and dialogue but the lab and video shelves groan with the work of those filmmakers who eschew Aristotle's staple of storytelling structure: a beginning, middle, and end. Aristotle did not give us a "formula" in the pejorative sense of that word, but it is a formula that echoes the biological rhythm of The Audience. I cite Aristotle because I still consider his *Poetics* to be one of the two bibles for performance drama/comedy.

The second Holy Treatise is Lajos Egri's *The Art Of Dramatic Writing.* You see, Aristotle did not get much into character as character was devalued in his day. Dramatists as often as not literally covered the actors' faces with masks, hence the origins of the symbol for drama, the masks of comedy and tragedy. The Greek plays were much about gods and goddesses, not quasi-ordinary people such as you and I. And the amphitheaters in which these dramas were staged were not the intimate theaters of today or the big screen that reveals every pout and pore. It wasn't until the late 1800s when Strindberg and Ibsen, later to be joined by the likes of Eugene O'Neil, offered up those "slice of life" or "kitchen sink" plays in which character was king.

Enter Lajos Egri, a somewhat failed playwright/screenwriter who distilled his independent teachings into a marvelous essay on "character" in *The Art of Dramatic Writing*. Of course, in my own teaching and writing, I go on and on about Ari and Egri. And, here in this Redux, I am reinforcing the point that it still doesn't get better than those two cats. If you are grounded in the *Poetics* and the character dictates of *The Art Of Dramatic Writing*, you have the bedrock information. Forget Walter, Seger, Field, McKee, Hague, Downs/Russin, Goldman, Hunter, et al. But, by all means read the self- and publicly acclaimed screenwriting gurus. Our volumes have become like recipe books—recipes to help you build your own personal internal

screenwriting structure. When you couple that knowledge with your individual creativity, voila, you become a screenwriter!

Although I still believe that “nothing is new under the sun,” in spite of Ecclesiastes there is a unique element that infuses every screenplay ... if you let it. *You* are what’s new under the sun. As part of my research for a forthcoming book in which Academy Award-winning screenwriters bare their art, craft, and secrets, I asked Bill Goldman how he writes a screenplay. Bill erupted with: “Oh God, the horror of it all is that we each do it so differently.” “No, no,” I protested. “That’s the glory of it all. I want it to show that writers don’t have to be as good as Bill Goldman. They have to be as good as themselves. Their own uniqueness is the key here. I can’t be as good as you. Ergo, can you be as good as me?”

To prepare for this reissue of *Lew Hunter’s Screenwriting 434,* I reread the whole book with the idea of a somewhat gentle updating—maybe some new thoughts or anecdotes, or examples. About halfway through, my memory flashed on Aristotle and Egri and how the syllabus I devised in 1979 for my original Screenplay 434 graduate class at UCLA, is still intact with Ari and Egri as its centerpiece. Getting students back to Aristotle and Egri was my real teaching job because superior storytelling has not changed since the time of the cave people to which I refer in Chapter One. Some of my rich and famous ex-students have come back for a “434” fix and I often catch them lip-syncing to my dialogue: Stay with the basics. Stay with the bedrock of yesteryear’s seminal storytellers. Stay with E Scott Fitzgerald’s last line in *The Great Gatsby:* “And so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

Now, going into the second half of rereading *434,* I am still concerned about putting in new stuff. When I wrote the book, my intention was to make it as timeless as Ari or Egri. Both maintain the authority of a true sense of validity I think is still paramount in screenwriting knowledge/education.

My appreciation for Ari and Egri is constant. I consciously tried for two things. First, I wanted to make the book on-the-money for basics and second, to really show how ninety percent of working screenwriters develop scripts. I want to give a boy on a bayou pier in Louisiana or a young woman in a fire station tower in Montana access to professional writing even if they had no other book except *Screenwriting 434.* To do so would mean that I have to use timeless examples and not pick “flavor of the month” movies or screenwriting tricks.

I also tried to stay away from assaulting readers with a blizzard of film references to carry out my pedagogy so I insist that readers needs to know only five movies intimately, four of which are timeless classics.

And I wanted to write a “How-To ... ” book. Unashamedly. In Southern California, this concept would be called a “process” book. In Nebraska, we call it a “how-to” book. At the time of the original publication of *Screenwriting 434,* none of the books available told the readers *how* to write a screenplay. They talk *about* writing a screenplay, around it, and give copious examples, but none—even to this day—actually take the reader through the steps that ninety percent of my fellow Writers Guild Of America members utilize.

I again hit the memory bank: Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank Jr. *(Hud, Norma Rae)* were having a turn in one of my 434 classes. Some grad student, surely on his twentieth draft of a current love/hate child, eagerly asked about rewriting. He leaned forward as if pleading for empathy with his own struggle. Irving referred with his eyes to Harriet for what appeared to be her approval to speak for both of them. Her nod prompted Irving to reply, “We like to get it right the first time.”

After my second rereading of *Screenwriting 434,* I questioned whether I had gotten it right the first time. Well, for me, the answer was yes. I teach the same basics that I always have. I still try to take the mystery out of screenwriting. I still ask students for the raison d’etre of the work—the “What’s it about?” I’ll still do anything to get good scripts out of anyone. But, there is one piece of craft I have added to my professing, of

late.

When I am teaching in Europe, people ask me when I'm going to start showing them "the Hollywood way". They question my reference to and reverence for Aristotle and Egri and European films as examples? Surprising, this has not caused me to look west for new material, but to add a layer to the process that that is also as far away from their expectations as Camus. But not Camus, Campbell.

In his landmark *Hero With a Thousand Faces,* Joseph Campbell espouses that legendary heroes (or heroines) take a three-part journey in their stories: 1. The hero *hears* the call to adventure. 2. The hero *accepts* the call to adventure. 3. The hero gives him up for the greater good.

Certainly, the hero hearing "the call to adventure" correlates exactly with my description of what constitutes the end of the first act—the "floating page 17" for those of you who have taken my 434 route. And though the hero giving himself up for the greater good certainly holds true in *Casablanca,* other watershed movies don't always follow this course. However, it is the second point in the Campbell paradigm that really works for me in all classic celluloid tales. The hero accepting the call to adventure is a concept that I had not embraced when I wrote *Screenwriting 434.* The second part of the journey as defined by Mr. Campbell seemed exactly right in describing that moment in seminal film stories when the hero stops being a reactor and actively now takes part in the movie to it's tragic/bittersweet/fulfilling/happy ending. And this heroic decision occurs near the precise center of our most memorable movies—a "floating page 60." In *Casablanca* Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) decides to use the letters of transit. The audience hopes that it is to get passage for him and Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman). Or in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid,* our heros literally depart for Bolivia. Or, the children in *E.T.* decide to get E.T. home. Or, with his fallen comrade in his arms, Forrest Gump dedicates his life to Bubba.

Steven Spielberg and I were once mutually expressing admiration for screenwriter Diane Thomas *(Romancing The Stone).* Steven said that Diane would always say, "It's the second act. Lemme fix the second act." And it is a fact: Nearly all troubled scripts have the most problems in Act Two. I believe those problems stem from the writer having a *reactive* hero predominately or totally throughout. The audience wants the hero to say, "Dammit, I'm going to get Pauline off that railroad track!"

So there you are, gentle reader, my single addition to *Lew Hunter's Screenwriting 434.* I could go on about the "center point" but it would only be elaboration and in my professings, I periodically try to follow my edict for good dialogue—less is more—which I shall do in this redux.

So, we'll happily keep riding the screenwriting wave. Have we crested? Will the swell build any more? I believe as long as there are dreams, your dreams—and we know who you are—the answer can only be a thundering YES!

FADE IN

I have been teaching the 434 graduate screenwriting classes at UCLA since 1979. Prior to then, I guest lectured at universities across the contiguous United States. Since then, I have molested creative minds with workshops and lectures in Israel, England, China, South America, France, Australia, and oh, literally, around the world. In every university, the cry is consistent. "Our weakest link is writing." Not so at UCLA. Why? Let me speak just for myself.

My personal teaching bent is not to dispense excessive theory or hypothetical situations and exercises in screenwriting. I like to get with a small group of well-educated, highly motivated people, roll up our figurative sleeves, and start developing screenplays, from idea through story and script to notes for the rewrite. At the end of that creative tunnel is an original creation: a script that will develop that person's

potential many steps closer to being the finest writer he or she can be. Not a “Hollywood” writer but a writer who can apply quality talent to any possible screen around the globe. From Hollywood to Nairobi. From TV to esoteric video experiments.

Out of my lectures and writings have come many thoughts and passions about screenwriting. Some from fellow writers, some from me, some from clippings about writing I have accumulated, and some from just the mutual hard work between student and professor.

It eventually occurred to me that the current screenwriting volumes do not really grasp the aspiring screenwriter by the hand and lead them through the beat-by-beat journey of driving a worthy idea through the rewrite of the first draft. The books talk and theorize about writing characters, dialogue, plot, and scripts but most readers afterward still feel somewhat panicked sitting before that blank page or phosphorus screen. That’s a good reason for a book. One that would take you step by step and demystify the process, yet simultaneously suggest the profundity of it all. Like my 434 class.

My favorite American play is *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder. It is so simple it can be performed by junior high classes throughout the world as verily it has been translated into multiple languages. Yet Our *Town* is so profound that it’s a staple in the repertoire of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Ergo, “434: Becoming a Screenwriter” is designed to be simple, yet not simplistic. I mean to give you vision, hope, confidence, and a beacon light to shine upon your own special creativity.

What you will be experiencing is no more and no less than what my graduate students receive on a quarterly basis. We tabulate that since 1980, one out of two who write in our three-year program become writers that make their living before keyboards. What you will be reading has demonstrated a batting average of validity that way surpasses Ty Cobb’s record-breaking accomplishments. And writing screenplays may be *almost* as meaningful to life as baseball.

People often say, “We believe anything you write will be beautiful because ... *you* are beautiful.” That hoary phrase of the sixties suggests that structure is secondary to “your own thing.” To counter, I almost gleefully suggest on the first day of 434 that “you are not beautiful. You are ugly, misshapen and not dissimilar to a swamp frog. But ... you are about to be kissed by a princess called the UCLA writing program and a prince who thinks he is visually Robert Redford but periodically confesses to being Lew Hunter.”

I submit you put down your hard- or easy-earned dollars to learn TO WRITE A SCREENPLAY. That is what this book will be about. I and no one can teach you talent. You can be taught screenwriting. But before you close this book weakly murmuring, “I can’t write,” I quote you my own UCLA screenwriting professor of the fifties, Arthur Ripley. He used to suggest to such people they write him a letter telling him they can’t write.

You can do it, Charlie, Jane, Mel, Mary. *All* of you. You do have to want to, though. It’s called “seat” writing: seat of pants to seat of chair.

The Old Testament says, “God sometimes chooses the strangest vessels from which to pour the sweetest wine.” I do consider myself to be a vessel. A vessel of thirty-plus years of trying to persuade audiences to laugh and cry. A vessel of hundreds of writers I have known and brilliant strangers I have voraciously read. I have a reasonable amount of intelligence and a maximum amount of passion. This book aims to merge all these ingredients for wine to make you drunk with inspiration, creativity, and effectiveness.

I am a camera, a vessel, Robert Redford, a farm boy from Guide Rock, Nebraska, who ran out of town to catch a pop fly and never got back. *Most of all I am you.* Another swamp frog. Let us join together and be kissed by the prince and princesses in the following pages. Ribbit.

FILMS TO SEE

Books on screenwriting use a blizzard of film titles as examples of their authors' profundity. There are so many that you often feel left out of the discussion when a point is made. You just know if you could correlate the insight with having seen the film, you'd snare the meaning to life, screenwriting, and sex.

Since I fully expect you to glean from this book your unraveling of all three of these human mysteries, I want you to have a viewing relationship with a mere five movies available at your neighborhood video store. I strongly suggest running the ones you have not yet seen before turning this page. I will mention other movies but they are not "must sees."

All of the following, except for my own movie, *Fallen Angel*, are classics. Yes, there are other classics but these highly accessible movies were chosen to illustrate my main points. The highest rated TV movie (42 share) for 1981, *Fallen Angel* is included because some of you may wonder, "Well, what's the putz done?" To answer, *Fallen Angel* got Emmy and Writers Guild of America recognition and various international awards, none of which are chopped liver. Ergo, with that hoped-for validity, I add *Fallen Angel* to the mix in the never-ending quest for the aforementioned meaning of life.

The fantastic four plus one, in no particular order of preference or significance:

Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid
Casablanca
Citizen Kane
E. T.
Fallen Angel

Chapter 1

IDEAS

When the cave people were sitting around the fire eating hot pterodactyl wings, someone said, "Irving, tell us a story." Irving was always the one chosen because he had the ideas that best held their attention through laughter, tears, and the good stuff in between. The first storyteller, if you will.

In my opening 434 graduate class, I bring in a gaggle of storytellers, small figures from countries my wife, Pamela, and I have visited around the world. I started this collection when I first visited Africa. In Nairobi, I found a wooden man with his finger in the air, as if he were telling a story, and from there my collection grew. I often look at the figures as I write and contemplate my (and their) stories:

A young Russian boy holds a fish and clearly gestures with his free hand about the "one that got away." Buddha strums a mandolin to communicate his tale. A laughing Fiji god can drop his pants to reveal his phallic self on the punch line of an obvious joke. An Aztec god from Mexico City coolly has his hand drawn to his chest, pausing in his drama. A Maori warrior sticks out his tongue for story emphasis. A hula girl rolls her story from supple hips.

For a quotient of reality, all of my storytellers face a plaster of paris Notre Dame gargoyle, his elbows on a ledge, his grotesque chin resting in cupped palms. He is the Audience. An audience that wants your ideas. Your *good* ideas. Ideas that can move them to take their chins out of their hands and tilt that chin forward in

anticipatión of comedy, drama, excitement, inspiration, escape.

THE ANATOMY OF SCREEN IDEAS

Where do you get your ideas?“ That’s easily the query most fielded by professional writers from ”normal“ people. If I am in a particularly off-center mood, I’ll tell them:

“You want a wonderful idea? Let me tell you *exactly* where to go. Every Monday morning get to the Thrifty Drugstore on the corner of Hollywood Way and Magnolia in Burbank. Go around to the alley, in the back. There are two black guys on the loading dock. Every Monday morning at 9 o’clock, these guys give out ideas. You be there.”

As silly as this story seems, I submit the question is equally silly. And everybody really knows it. In life, *you are the most important person in your world.* So it is for screenwriting. Look within you for creation, for inspiration, for ideas.

Someone once suggested to author Willa Cather that Nebraska, her home state, “surely couldn’t be much of a storehouse for literary material.” Cather strongly responded, “Of course Nebraska is a storehouse of literary material. Everywhere is a storehouse of literary material. If a true artist were born in a pigpen and raised in a stý, he would still find plenty of inspiration for his work. The only need is the eye to see.”

Studio chief/professor Peter Guber tells his UCLA students. “God is in the details.” To be a quality screenwriter, you must see the emotional and physical details of your human race.

See the man absently scratching his scrotum while talking to his minister. See the frustration in a woman twisting her wedding ring when her husband goes on and on to others about nothing. See a ringbearer child pick boogers at his sister’s wedding. See the embarrassment in a woman trying to conceal her box of extra-large Kotex in the middle of her overflowing shopping cart. See how Willa Cather saw: read her masterpiece, *My Antonia.* See how John Steinbeck saw: read *Grapes of Wrath.* See how Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, et al., saw. Get the screenplays of *Citizen Kane, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, E.T.,* and see how their screenwriters Herman Mankiewicz and Orson Welles and William Goldman and Melissa Mathison saw. The ideas are out there and right under your nose and inside of you. *You must develop* the eye to see. You can do it. Even more than you already do.

John Gardner once wrote: “A story with a stupid central idea, no matter how brilliantly the story is told, will be a stupid story.”

What are the criteria for your good idea?

1. Conflict

The idea must promise CONFLICT. That’s the heart *and* soul of screenwriting. In his book *Adventures in the Screen Trade,* screenwriter William Goldman *(Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Misery)* repeatedly says screenplays are most importantly “structure.” I say, “Yes, and also most importantly, screenplays are conflict.” One of the goals of my 434 class is to demystify the writing of screenplays and not to cloak the process in a spiritual-academic-psycho-babble-guruish fog. Conflict. Is that demystifying enough? In short, never put two people in the same scene who agree with each other.

Both Hitler and Goering surely wanted to invade Poland. Goering says, “Great, we’ll attack from the east.” Hitler screams “No, no! The north, you dummy!” See what I mean? They may agree with the overall goal but the conflict comes from how-to-get-there.

Norman Lear believes that “the best scenes are ‘why are these two people arguing and why are *both* right?’ ” Remember the wonderful moments with Archie Bunker and Meathead? My fellow UCLA screenwriting professor Richard Walter, on this same subject, proclaims, “Nobody wants to see a story about the Village of the Happy People.”

Mark Twain insisted that “The secret source of humor is not joy but pain.” And pain is *always* the result of conflict. “My wife is leaving me.” “I have cancer.” “My lover came back.” “It’s harder to rob banks nowadays.” “I want to go home.” All of these are classic personal conflicts that have become wonderful drama *and* comedy.

2. Will Your Idea Go the Distance?

The Bibles of the performance writing-arts are Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Lajos Egri’s *The Art of Dramatic Writing.* Now is the time to begin talking about Aristotle’s two-thousand-year-old “beginning-middle-end” structure. Aristotle was the first to put the storyteller’s trade tricks down on paper. The beginning-middle-end concept is in Plato’s *Republic,* but the elaboration of this insight you will find in Aristotle’s *Poetics.* For more demystification, buy that slim volume, read it twice, then pick it up every three or four years and read it during your screenwriting career. Those are the few rules we have and need.

Contemporary playwrights and screenwriters use the “three-act structure” phrase as shorthand for their beginnings, middles, and ends. As you know, plays today are generally two acts in actual length. Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar, Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet,* and many other of his dramas have five acts. Don’t get caught up in the literalization of the three-act structure.

Get caught up in the reality that the contemporary Act One, the beginning, is *the situation.* The idea. Why you call people to their neighborhood multiplex. Act Two, the middle, is *the complications.* The plot must thicken. Cause and effect. Push and shove. The third act, the end, is *the conclusion.* The climax. The catharsis. The wrap-up.

The scripts you release to the outside world should run between 100 and 110 pages. So, though you’re not writing the script yet, you should have a good idea that promises to reveal itself completely around page 17 in estimated page count. That’s your Act One. Act Two should take you from page 17 to approximately page 85. In this act, you develop the comedic or dramatic complications, the quicksand for most writers.

Generally we get Butch and Sundance to Bolivia, or E.T. on the way home, by approximately page 85 for the third act’s unfolding. But the build from Act One to Act Three covers so much paper and thought. Let’s see, page 17 to 85 or so is ... gasp ... at least sixty-eight pages! Therein lies the meaning of screenwriting life and the most necessary component in your accepting your own fabulous idea. Be forewarned. The second act is where many and even most movies get into their deepest trouble.

Pick an idea that promises lots of complications and ways to spin an audience into different emotions. You can’t fill sixty-eight pages with a one-note story or one-joke comedy, so don’t even try. Make sure your idea can carry the whole 100- to 110-page script. To repeat, *the idea is the most important.* The structure is second. Ironically, the script itself is least important. Of course it takes the most time. But a story and script can be “fixed.” The idea can’t.

3. Nothing in the Mind, Please

Don’t pick ideas where most of the drama or comedy happens in the mind. Artists, writers, actors, architects are generally boring heroes because their inner conflicts are not easily dramatized, verbalized, or visualized.

A writer once came to me at Disney to present an idea. He had this story about a box that talked, walked, had arms and legs of a sort, and wore a gray fedora. Emotionally, the box had totally human characteristics. The box came to live with a shy young man and they bonded in an "odd couple" relationship. The box would go out and party while the young bachelor went to libraries. The box tried to get the young human into the life of life without success. The box's climactic adventure caused him to be captured by a governmental bureau (à la the FBI) who decided to destroy the carefree, troublemaking, lovable, and ergo clearly subversive box. "They" put him on a junkyard conveyor belt to be crushed at the belt's conclusion. The machines throughout the metropolis rebelled. Stoplights, jackhammers, hair driers, Mixmasters, and washing machines all went berserk in human-like rebellion for their box-friend. The young man then surpassed his previously exhibited abilities to heroically save his swinging roommate box for a funny and emotional third act.

I thought this tale could be marvelous for Disney, but none of the staff producers responded with equivalent glee. I finally went to producer /writer Bill Walsh, their peer of peers. I explained my dilemma, along with the story I suspect he had already seen. Bill patiently and kindly listened. When I finally concluded, he took a draw on his cigar, wriggled his mustache, and simply said: "Yeah, it's kind of funny, Lew. But have you thought about how that box would play up on screen?"

The sun burst through with rays of knowledge! This is a story idea that plays beautifully in the mind but when you get to the rectangular screen, it will be a box talking to a human and vice versa. It *will not* "play"! The audience has a prior knowledge about boxes. They are square or rectangular. Period. Remember the infamous George Lucas movie *Howard the Duck?* Because we all know what a duck looks like, Lucas could not get an audience to suspend their belief that Howard was a little person in a duck suit. It was a good duck suit but that's all it was and because of that, the thin strand of credibility that exists between seat and screen was irreparably snapped. On the other hand, we truly don't know what an alien creature looks like. This lack of knowledge allowed us to suspend our disbelief with E.T.

4. And No "Talking Head" Pictures

Always pick stories that scream for visualization. Talking heads are for the stage. You are writing screenplays, where the world is your oyster *and* your canvas. The world is yours; use it grandly.

I am almost angry that *My Dinner With André* was ever made. I feel that dinner scenes are among the biggest bores in the world: talk, talk, talk, talk: Yet, *André* was a lovely "small" movie that I would be proud to have in my filmography because of the beautifully written inner conflict and tension between two vulnerable men.

André prompts me to make my customary 434 disclaimer: I'm *always* talking generalities when I make encompassing statements in this opus. There will constantly be exceptions to my pronouncements. But please, please don't invalidate a general filmmaking rule by single or minor exceptions.

What I'm trying to convey are the basic rules. Not Lew Hunter's rules but the rules of screen history stretching back to the American invention of motion pictures by Thomas Edison. I vigorously tell my 434 gatherings it is wildly important to first learn the rules, before you start bending or breaking them.

So, as a rule, stay away from premises that promise drama in the mind or talking-head movies.

5. Sex and Violence

A painter has three primary colors on his palette: red, blue, and yellow. Everything else has kinship to those colors. As a screenwriter, you have two primary *emotional* colors: *sex* and *violence.*

When I first taught, one of the most sensitive students confessed to being actually angry at me for stressing

this sex-violence concept. He thought I was talking about the Roger Corman-Brian DePalma ice pick in the eye-slasher garbage.

I drew out the plot lines of such classics as *Medea, Oedipus Rex, Hamlet, King Lear,* Ibsen's works, and anything by Tennessee Williams to buttress the case I apparently hadn't sufficiently built in his 434 class. Greek theater, Shakespeare, and actually everything of quality known to Western persons has a significant undertow of sex or violence or a combination thereof. To deny it is insane and even worse, wrong.

Freud insisted that sexuality is part of our every waking and non-waking thought. Remember your high school or college Psych 101 equivalent? Look at the movie ads in your local newspaper this very second. Easily eight out of ten ads will appeal to at least one of those basic human emotions. Not prurient, basic.

Rather than using the strong words "sex" and "violence," you may be more comfortable with the terms "sensuality" and "dramatic action." This does not mean blood and gore and naked bodies. Sometimes the most extreme form of violence is psychological violence. Excruciating sexual tension can occur in a scene where not one article of clothing is removed from a body. Tennessee Williams runs those sorts of dramatic bases brilliantly. Consider his *Streetcar Named Desire* or *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.* Or Bergman and his *Wild Strawberries.* Eugene O'Neill and *Mourning Becomes Electra.*

John Wilder, who was the executive producer to my supervising producership on "The Yellow Rose" (an NBC television series), used to insist on "passion and tension" in every scene. That was his way of saying "sex and violence." The writing staff used to say, "Oh, no, we've got to put more P and T in for John." Of course, we all knew it was really for the audience, but John was the drill sergeant and making him happy was our initial hurdle. Passion and tension. Sensuality and dramatic action. It all simply comes down to S-E-X and V-I-O-L-E-N-C-E.

Actually I best like the semantics of sensuality and dramatic action. If you don't have sensuality or dramatic action in the Shakespearean or Greek theater sense of the word, you will likely have to pass out caffeine-laced popcorn to your audience. It will most certainly be "Village of the Happy People" time.

Did I sense your thought that *The Sound of Music* didn't fit the mold? Nonsense! The Nazis were the overall threat; the feelings between Maria and the children's father were sensual as hell. The life and death of the little alien threaten in *E.T.* The emotional violence between Hannibal Lecter and Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs.* The sexual tension and frustration between Archie and Edith Bunker. The list goes on and on.

The bottom line is, make sure your idea has the potential for sex and/or violence. You're then also halfway over the fence as far as your idea goes for second-act story stamina. Most importantly, your idea will now cause an audience to tilt forward in their seats with anticipation.

GETTING YOUR IDEA

In my beginnings as a writer, I had an "idea file" to which I contributed notions every now and then. Scraps like "Judge Parker's hangman." "A man cannot go beneath a certain longitude plane or he will die." "Update *Hunchback of Notre Dame."* The notion of an idea file might be an account as valuable to you as any traditional bank savings account.

There are simply hordes of places for ideas. Places for you to see and go, internally *and* literally.

1. The Library

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