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Interview with Christina Hamlett

Script Consultant/Instructor/Mentor

Background questions

1. How did you become a professional script consultant?

It was actually an offshoot of the mentoring and consulting I was already doing for aspiring novelists and playwrights and helping them to discover which medium best suited their writing styles and plot concepts. Over the course of interviewing agents and producers for magazine articles, I began getting requests to look over some of the screenplays they were receiving and offer my two cents on their quality. One thing led to another. To take it back even further, though, my very first job out of high school was being a movie critic for a weekly newspaper and advising readers whether new flicks were worth their time and the price of admission.

2. What made you want to become an instructor/mentor who teaches workshops around the country?

It's my way of giving back to all the great instructors I had throughout school. I've also never felt it made sense to hoard knowledge or advice that could help shorten someone else's journey.

3. What classes do you teach on Wow! (Women on Writing)? What is the success rate of the students who take these classes? What feedback do you receive from students about the classes?

I've only recently started offering screenwriting and playwriting classes through WOW so the results aren't in yet insofar as what my students will go and accomplish with what they've learned. Their energy and enthusiasm for the material is very high, however, and they're not shy about asking questions or wanting to do assignments over based on my recommendations of how they could be improved. One of the things that distinguishes my teaching style from other screenwriting instructors is that they usually don't encourage participants to consider any other platform to express their ideas. Over the years, I've had a number of clients who initially would never have thought about turning a plot into a stage play or a book but have now dropped screenwriting altogether because they've found success doing something that's a better match for their talents.

Screenwriting questions

1. What makes screenwriting appealing to writers?

Fame and fortune are probably the biggest lures. When they see the salaries that movie stars command and get caught up in all the glitz and glamour of Hollywood, they want to be able to quit their boring day-jobs and become a part of it. Since what they see up on the silver screen or on television looks so easy and seamless, they mistakenly assume that anyone can put words in

actors' mouths and become an overnight success. It's a lot harder – and more time-consuming – than it looks.

2. How does a person break into screenwriting? How difficult/easy is it?

One word: Perseverance. It means studying the craft, paying attention to the rules, and learning from your mistakes. Doing well in prestigious screenplay contests, attending pitch sessions and engaging the services of an agent will give you an advantage but none of these are a guarantee of success, especially in light of a downward spiraling economy that has not only impacted the number of films being produced but also made industry decision makers more reluctant to take risks on unknown writers. The Internet has certainly facilitated access to studios from anywhere in the world but, unfortunately, the informality of email has contributed to a significant decline in professionalism and courtesy. As an example, I routinely receive unsolicited emails that read: "Hi, Christina. I've attached my 200 page screenplay that will rescue Hollywood from all the crap it's been churning out. Can you read it in your spare time and send copies to anyone you think would like it?" These are matched in volume only by those who send text messages that read, "Hey there! I have a great idea but don't have time to learn how to turn it into a screenplay. Can you write it for me and we'll split everything 50/50?"

3. What skills are needed for screenwriting?

Well, I've always found intelligence to be useful, coupled with an active imagination and a keen awareness of what has already been produced. (I can't tell you how many scripts I receive that revolve around (1) beautiful young women impregnated by the devil for a cult, (2) extraterrestrials left behind by the mother ship and making friends with kids in suburbia, (3) whatever elements were present in the most recent slate of Oscar winners.) In addition to being good storytellers, aspiring screenwriters need to have a solid command of the English language, a sense of humor, the flexibility to compromise, and an excellent ear for dialogue (which is why anyone who has ever acted on stage is better at penning smart and snappy conversations than those who write novels).

4. How does a college or university degree make a difference in a writer's screenwriting? Is a degree necessary?

For one thing, it depends on the quality of the instruction received and the reputation of the academic institution that issues the degree. For another, it looks nice on a resume and is an affirmation of diligent study and hard work but prospective producers are more interested in whether a person has something fresh, entertaining, edgy and/or compelling to say to the target demographic. I've actually put this question to several accomplished screenwriters and they've all delivered essentially the same answer: being in the day-to-day classroom company of like-minded spirits is energizing and fosters relationships that can create employment and partnership opportunities with one another in the future.

5. What makes a great screenplay **or teleplay?**

A story that has the power to stir your emotions and allow you to recall details years after you've read it.

6. What makes a weak screenplay or teleplay?

One that makes me say, "I'm not being paid nearly enough to read this."

Whether it's a movie, a television show, a play or a book, there has to be (1) a cast of characters that audiences will genuinely be intrigued by/relate to/care about and (2) a strong conflict that's not only predicated on reward, revenge, escape (or a combination thereof) but is sustainable enough to keep moving things forward. Too often I read screenplays or TV pilots where the protagonist just wanders around in a succession of slice-of-life tableaux and never really has a threat to his status quo that will require him to take risks. If at any point he could simply walk away and not incur any consequences, it's not a sufficient conflict and conflict is what separates great projects from blasé ones.

7. What are the mechanical differences (teaser, tag, length) between a screenplay and teleplay?

The biggest difference is the fact that teleplays are constructed to accommodate the insertion of commercials and are, thus, divided into "acts" that each end with some sort of cliffhanger to entice people to come back from the refrigerator. A half-hour program is comprised of two acts, an hour-long program will have four, and so forth. The purpose of the short teaser at the start of a TV series is to hook the viewers' attention and keep them from channel-surfing to see what else is on; the short tag at the very end is either to sum things up or plant the seeds for the next episode. With movies, the audience is already committed to being there because they paid for their tickets and have likely heard some hype on what the movie is about. Like any form of storytelling, a film's development is parsed out over three acts (without intermissions) but it's crucial that the first 10 minutes hit the ground running and reveal whose point of view will prevail, what the core conflict is, and the genre. The formatting of movies and teleplays is different insofar as teleplays more closely resemble the layout of theatrical scripts.

8. What is the page limit for a feature film screenplay?

Feature screenplays range from 95 pages to 120. The rule is that one typed page is equal to one minute of screen-time. This is assuming, of course, that the writer has followed the industry standard in placing all of the elements (master scenes, action lines, dialogue and transitions) in the right configurations and is using the correct font. Readers often turn to the last page first to see how long a project is; anything over 120 immediately arouses suspicion that the writer is either rambling or doing way too much directing on paper.

9. How can you tell if your story is right for the big or small screen?

By comparing and contrasting it to projects that have been successfully produced, as well as engaging the services of a script consultant who can identify your material's strengths, weaknesses and marketability. That said, however, even an excellent screenplay is subject to

timing and the capricious nature of human attention spans. Let's say, for example, you've written an eye-popping SciFi about tall blue aliens that inhabit an environmentally conscious planet. Alas, but a guy named Cameron already thought of it first...and there's nothing you can do about it except go off and start working on your next great idea.

10. What is the key element to writing solid dialogue? How do you know if you have excellent dialogue?

The key element to making dialogue sound realistic is that you have to eliminate all the empty chit-chat inherent in real conversations and just cut to the chase. If a line doesn't reveal character, advance the plot, and/or articulate feelings that can't be conveyed visually, delete it.

The most common problems I see in the scripts I receive are:

- **The Party Syndrome.** This is the phenomenon whereby the first time characters come into a room, they get introduced to everyone else who is already there. Unless it actually is a party or meeting where such introductions would be natural, there are more creative ways to convey their identities to an audience.
- **Multiple Monologues.** This is where a character uses every appearance as a chance to make a soapbox speech. Even worse are conversations where everyone talks to one another in chunky paragraphs rather than short, snappy lines.
- **Name Dropping.** In real-life chats with friends, family and coworkers, we don't keep repeating each other's first names and yet this is a frequent occurrence with screenwriters.
- **Back-story Banter.** This is where characters bring the audience up-to-date by explaining things that the respective parties already know. Example:

JANE
And how are your two
children named Wilma and
Buddy?

MARY
(wistfully)
Buddy is a handful, Jane.
And Wilma, who is our
older child, is the apple
of my second husband
Alfred's eye.

- **Excessive Parentheticals.** If dialogue is well crafted, it should be clear from the context of the scene how the lines should be delivered. Yet time and again writers try to be "helpful" to actors by telling them whether they should be angry, confused, defiant, tearful, flirtatious, etc. This also applies to instructing them when they should smile, nod, scowl, blink, or shrug. I once read a script where the writer spent 25 pages on a dinner table scene with detailed directions for picking up utensils, cutting meat, chewing thoughtfully, sipping wine, setting the glass down, etc.

- Phonetic Faux Pas. Even worse than the curse of parentheticals is when authors attempt to emulate foreign accents by writing them out as follows:

Pardo-nay-mwah but eez
zis za vay to zee
railrow stay-see-on vare
I can catch zee tren to
za fair.

It's not only tedious for a reader to sound all of this stuff out but it's also really annoying to actors. If you simply indicate that the line should be spoken with a French accent, they will know how to take it from there.

If you want to test whether you've written great dialogue, it's imperative that you recruit friends to read it out loud for you and pay close attention to how it sounds. Phrases that look perfectly fine in print could take on a totally different meaning when spoken out loud. Examples:

Running Bear will keep
you safe.

I've detected a life
form on Uranus.

Live readings will also help you identify if you've written lines that are impossible to deliver in one breath:

JANE
(curiously)
Say, is Alfred still working
as a senior piano tuner at
the shop on West 57th which I
read in the Times is going to
be torn down next month and
which will be replaced by a
home and garden store where
they offer discount prices
and where I am thinking of
buying a new chaise lounge in
green or orange for when my
Aunt Louise and Uncle Milt
visit from Detroit for my
brother Allen's graduation?

11. How do you write roles that actors will want to play?

Actors are drawn to roles for one or more of the following reasons:

- Extraordinary characters forced to function in ordinary environments;
- Ordinary characters confronted with extraordinary circumstances;
- Characters in stand-alone films that experience a significant range of growth or characters in a franchise series wherein they sustain the same level of development throughout;
- Roles that have the potential to attract an Academy Award;
- Roles that push them out of their normal comfort zone;
- Themes that spotlight social causes or political views they already support.

12. How do you write screenplays that will get you noticed by movie studios, directors, and producers?

By coming up with marketable plots that you feel passionate about and that will resonate with contemporary mindsets. Just like the publishing industry, the market is not driven by how well a project is written but whether there's an audience that will pay to see it.

13. How do you sell a screenplay?

By making a compelling pitch that it's a project which will be commercially viable and artistically gratifying.

14. How do you write a screenplay for a specific audience, i.e. children, teens, young adults, women 18-30, action adventure junkies, etc...?

To tailor your script for a specific demographic, you need to have a clear understanding of what it is that's important to them and why they go to the movies in the first place. Movies are an escapist art form that allow viewers to vicariously experience something that they'd either like to have happen to them (i.e., meeting one's soul mate) or to get an adrenalin rush from situations that they know/hope they'll never confront (i.e., being pursued by zombies). Children and teens gravitate to films that contain magical elements and/or feature characters their own age that are able to accomplish amazing things. In the 18-30 range, females seek out storylines about romance and career empowerment while males are drawn to plots involving espionage, crime, car chases and explosions. Older audiences have an affinity for historical themes, biographies and films about families with strong roles for mature actors.

Concluding questions

1. How did you become involved with NYC Midnight and South West Writers?

These competitions – along with my participation as a judge for Writer's Digest and the Hartley Merrill – were the result of invitations I received from the planning committees. They were familiar with my expertise through the columns, articles, interviews and books I write and were interested in how I'd evaluate the submissions.

2. What do you look for when you judge a screenwriting contest?

Aside from the obvious attractions of originality, a page-turning plot, compelling characters and excellent dialogue, I'm a stickler when it comes to making sure the participants have followed the contest requirements. At least 30 percent of the submissions, for instance, come from individuals who seem to think that rules don't apply to them. Not only is their formatting all over the map but if they've been asked to submit the first 15 pages, they'll use a 9 pt Arial Narrow font, set up half-inch margins, run the dialogue all the way from left to right, and print on both sides of the paper. Had they adhered to the guidelines, their submission would easily come out to 40+ pages. Even if it's a good story, I'm going to reject it. Whether it's ignorance or arrogance, the rule-breaking isn't going to fly if they start submitting their work to agents or production companies.

3. You have an extensive list of books. How does the writing process for a novel or non-fiction writing differ from screenwriting?

Screenwriting takes the least time because it's a medium that embraces brevity. Nonfiction takes the longest because of the amount of research and interviews that are involved. Fiction falls somewhere in-between but – next to writing plays - is the most fun because I allow my characters to take me where they want to go. While a lot of writers can't start anything without first drafting an extensive outline, my own style has always been to come up with an idea and just sit down and start writing it. I'm also fortunate to have a wonderful husband with whom I can brainstorm new plots and concepts for articles. Since we've both been on stage, we have great fun dividing up the roles and reading my scripts out loud over martinis at the dining room table. I'm pretty sure our neighbors wonder just how many people live with us if the windows are open and they hear all these different voices and funny accents.

4. What can writers do to improve their chances of seeing their screenplay produced?

Take the craft seriously, attend workshops, enter contests, and get professional feedback through companies like HollywoodLitSales (www.hollywoodlitsales.com) and Screenplay Readers (www.screenplayreaders.com). Increase your visibility by registering your script at reputable websites such as InkTip (www.inktip.com). Invest in screenwriting software programs such as Final Draft that will make your material look polished and consistent with industry standards.

5. What final advice can you give aspiring screenwriters?

The first time you try anything new – cooking waffles, getting married, making macramé plant hangers – you're going to make mistakes. Lots of them. From these mistakes, however, you're going to discover all the things you didn't know and – in the process of being inspired/humbled/frustrated by these discoveries – can approach your next attempt from a different perspective. So it is with any creative writing endeavor. Your first one is likely to be mind-numbingly awful but you're not going to realize this until years later when you have something to compare it to.

I tell people in my workshops, for example, that I have never sold my first novel. This surprises them because there's a large body of published work (including novels) attached to my name.

When I first started, however, I had no clue what I was doing, only that I wanted to write The Great American Novel, become rich and famous, live in a fog-shrouded lighthouse in Maine, and have a wardrobe full of cable-knit sweaters. I wrote my novel in the space of about six months and sent it to every publisher I could think of. Although every single one of them rejected it, some of them were kind enough to offer encouragement and advice. Being a 20-something and rationalizing that no one could possibly realize what a brilliant tome they had just passed on, I stuck it away in a box and went off and joined the theater instead. Years later – and well after I had already hit my stride writing plays, magazine articles and stories – I ran across it. As I flipped through the pages that I once believed would put me in the stellar ranks of my favorite authors, I realized what a total piece of drek it was. I was, thus, enormously thankful that no one had published it by accident because I'd have to fly around the country grabbing up every copy in print and burning them out of embarrassment that they had ever seen the light of day.

I share this story because every once in a while I get hostile emails from clients who are angry that I criticized their first script. “Dear Ms. Hamlett,” they write. “I hate you. When my screenplay wins an Academy Award and I am making my acceptance speech, I am going to tell the world that you thought my script was stupid and you’re going to feel really, really, really bad.” Really. Fortunately, I also get emails from clients who say, “Wow, I hadn’t realized until you pointed it out that my second act just kinda meanders around and that my ending is contrived. You’ve given me some great ideas for a revision and I can’t wait to send it to you again and see if I’m on the right track.”

At the end of the day, that’s what makes it all worthwhile.

For additional information on Christina Hamlett or to schedule a screenplay consultation, visit her website at www.authorhamlett.com.