



A STORY OF
LOVE
AND **WAR**

SCRIPT ANALYSIS BY GARY SWANSON



SCRIPT SERVICES

The Actors Studio

The Writers/Directors Unit was our Seal Team 6 or Special Forces as sacrosanct and filled with mystery as The Free Masons when they built Washington D.C. These were the architects, the designers who laid out the actor's playing field rarely recognized in New York City restaurants, unless it was the now defunct "Elaine's" on the Upper East Side; the greatest watering hole for writers since Gertrude Stein and Alas B. Toklas in Paris hosted the Expats of the 1920's.

The Monday nights' Writer/Directors Unit was the silent power center of the Actors Studio. It was on those nights that directors of theater, film and television from around the world, the women and men of American letters walked down West 43rd Street to the old church; Sidney Lumet, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Patricia Bosworth, Arthur Penn, Edward Albee, William Goldman, Paddy Chayefsky, Lillian Hellman, Beth Henley, to name just a few, were rarely hounded for autographs.

During the Writers/Directors Unit sessions the actors were not allowed in the theater unless we were acting in that night's reading, mounted by a writer or a directed scene from a play, critiqued for that directors' work. I would often sneak

into these Monday night sessions after they started and observed like one who was discovering the meaning of life; a peeping Tom on world-class leaders.

The evenings began with the reading of a play, film or musical in any iteration of its development. The actors and a director or writer rehearsed one or two afternoons then read the material that Monday for the unit. They sat in the old theater chairs with cardboard cups of coffee; unfiltered cigarettes smoke curled about. They all wore casual clothes ... and then they went at each other with cheerful abandon.

Mailer Vs. 'Gadge'

On one occasion I snuck in and stood behind the risers, watching from the shadows. Norman Mailer was that night's moderator. Then, I felt a presence move next to me. It was not just a person; it was a shocking sense of some kind of being. I looked to my left and there he was in a fire engine red shirt, khaki pants and Sperry topsiders. He was not a tall man, but he had the presence of a human giant transcending the physical to a living icon. I had spoken to him on a few occasions, but I never assumed Elia Kazan would remember who I was.

He looked out at the stage with stern look and said, "Gary, what the hell are you doing here?"

"I snuck in", I whispered, awaiting his wrath and dismissal.

"Good man. That's how you do it", he graveled to me well beyond the decibel of a whisper.

He had a commanding voice that sounded like he had rusty nails for vocal chords. *I was in.* The King just allowed me inside the inner sanctum from that point forward. He was in his late 60's, but still moved with the ease of a lynx as he hauled himself up into the bleachers and climbed over the railing. He was a restless soul and as Norman Mailer moderated Kazan soon climbed back over the railing and jumped down. Again, Kazan stood next to me.

“I can't sit in those God damn lounge chairs”.

He must have been talking to me, I thought, so I said, “Yea, ah.. chair.. ah.. no good..”

He kept his sight locked on center stage as Norman began to break down the play and its values. Norman had few single syllables in his vocabulary, but the music of his speech combined with the integrated intelligence always elevated the thinking of those around him. Norman then set his chair between the two actors on the stage and said, “This has the elements and the beginning of a real discovery of the little prostitutions of the soul. It's a real play. Let's start with comments”.

Kazan did not wait. He didn't raise his hand for permission to speak, but instead took center stage and with the command of a general in battle, threw down the gauntlet and billowed,

“We don't have a play here. We have the beginning of a novel”.

“Gadge, I think you're wrong ... this is the foundation of a good play with prismatic dimensions”, Norman shot back.

And so it went.

As a side note, Kazan tried writing novels. They were not great, but he was the greatest director in American history. Mailer was one of our great American writers, but failed at screen or stage plays. Both were at the top of their Americana bone fides, but - in the backward positions - defending their weaker selves.

My eyes widened and jaw dropped as Kazan and Mailer fought furiously over the clear definitions of a novel versus a play; a real donnybrook ten rounder with two American titans of mythological lore. But, get this; two of the greatest minds in the world **could not clarify a definition or delineation of a novel versus a stage play.**

They were fond of each other, but no one would have placed money on that bet. If it had to come to blows, Mailer was a trained pugilist prone to fist fights, while Kazan was 5'7" on a good day. I wouldn't put it past "Gadge" to have landed the winning blow because he was never afraid of cheating to get his way. William Goldman, who was there that night, had written in *Adventures in the Screen Trade*, "Nobody knows anything". That astounding night validated that concept. It was right there on display.

I saw Norman and Norris (Norman's wife) at an art opening the following night after his session. I told Norman he had liberated me because he didn't know the difference between the two forms. I told him that if he and Gadge did not know what a play was than I was entitled to my own opinion.

Norman's eyebrows thrust forward and his entire face compounded into a tight smile that forced his blue eyes into sky blue slits. It was delightful to see. He laughed and said in his Ivy League accent that he was never able to write a viable play or screenplay and - he knew it.

I got to know Bill Goldman through director Peter Masterson. I had done several films with Pete and I produced and starred in "Whiskey School" that Pete directed. His wife, Tony Award winner Carlin Glynn and I did several plays and films together. Bill confirmed the concept that writers "discover" more than

“create”. Horton Foote, Lyle Kessler, John Ford Noonan and Leonard Melfi all confirmed the concept that “nobody knows anything”. Tennessee Williams was known to change and re-write entire scenes at an actor’s request; an idiosyncrasy that caused Kazan to shoo the American bard out of the theater on more than one occasion.

“The great writers seem to trust and let creation well up from the deep subconscious.”

As an actor/writer/director, except for “Tenn” (as his friends called him) I’ve worked with all the above writers, spent time with them and always asked them where the “well” of creativity was, the divine inspiration, that magic place of creation. There are those who map out the product beforehand, but the above mentioned writers always **let the play tell them, informing the writer what it wants to do**, and the great writers seem to trust and let creation well up from the deep subconscious. Arthur Miller told me that playwriting for him was “auditory”. Lyle Kessler was adamant that the writer should let his or her own process play out in pure discovery. They all seemed to acknowledge that at the heart of the creative moment was trust in the mystery of creation itself; Michelangelo told us “David” was in the marble and he carved it out, Bob Dylan said he was not responsible for his songs and poems. They “came through him”.

In the writers/directors unit, The Actors Studio writers, at times killed each other with ease when making comments after the reading ended and the comments began. This is not to say that great scenes or plays were not equally lauded, but it’s important to know that political correctness or care of one’s “feelings” never entered into the discussion. Great writers seemed to enjoy a good slugfest. These harsh insights, cold hard criticism of their colleagues precious writing or directing, by those who spent their lives reading and writing, always drifted into the plus

side. The feedback was used to the advantage of those members who were able to take those hits without flinching, then go home and bring that beat-up script back off the type writer or computer and then pushing it back onto the stage. It was in those sessions that they cobbled classic films and plays archived today as the coin of the realm of American Drama. "A Street Car Named Desire" and "The Best Little Whore House in Texas" were breastfed in that old theater.

The Script

Screen writing is like building a house in a snowstorm. A screenplay is just a blue print without the largess of novel narrative to control the mind, the production or the outcome. A novel goes into the brain of the person lying by the pool and it does all the work for the sunbather. As they read, the turn of a woman's head from the man, who loves her in the novel, can have the same explosion to the moviegoer as a body exploding on a sidewalk along Wall Street after that long plummet from a high window. The intrinsic dramatic values of the two forms are not the same.

Hemingway, Falkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald had a hard time making the novel into successful screen hits. Those novels that do work are often compromised and altered by objective "script doctors" who are hired to fix the dramatic problems. I once watched the great Jimmy Brown play tennis. In my mind I could see his relaxed body speeding and dodging past the defensemen dropping at his feet on the field. But on the tennis court he stood flatfooted and looked clumsy. That did not take away from the fact that he would swat the ball with such force it was more like a bullet from a handgun. He also won the match without doing much. Tennis was not his game. And so it is with writers. They rarely move away from the form they are working in because ultimately they know that "nobody knows anything". A strange exception of a writer who jumps from one form to the other is William Goldman who wrote "Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid".

Shortened Script Summary

A major NYC production company asked me to read a script and write a response. The following is a sample of my assessment and shortened notes of the script. The film is currently shooting in North Africa. The film could well be a hit. According to the producers, because the novel was a “best seller” there will likely be buzz about an Oscar. Despite the hype, I did have some criticisms. I was told that a major scene was changed during the shoot due to my suggestions.

For obvious reasons, I am changing names and places in order to preserve the actual script from any advanced spoilers and to protect the writers and their confidentiality. As an actor/teacher/writer with four (4) decades of work, I’ve read hundreds of scripts in all forms. I’m now also an active member of the Actors Studio Writers/Directors Unit. Writers, like actors, need an outside, objective opinion and insights that the writer may lose with subjectivity. That is why the Actors Studio has had such a cache of success.

Overall Assessment

“Blocker, the writer, picks us up and drops us gently from rock to rock across the lake. And we go willingly. It is a beautiful script, but that may be its problem. This script is poetic, engaging us with the descriptive characters, situations and emotional regulations. That is good. But a film script is a blueprint for a team of people to use as map. It is not a novella.

The structure of this screenplay leaves the ending like a great racecar... coasting to the finish line with a whimper, not a bang. The writer sticks too close to the novel and fails to realize that films are pictures of conflict strung together, not elegant internal visions moving around inside the human. Films are character studies woven into structured plots that support that investigation. Some are pure plot but many films focus on interesting people doing what other people think is interesting, without any classical Greek structure. The latter are pabulum for the hoi polloi. Watch almost any Vince Vaughn film.

Hitchcock, Coppola, Pollack, Scorsese and Kazan never let the audience rest. Comfort is not what the paid ticket buyers expected or wanted within a two-hour period. They never want to know the future. Surprise is the great joy of birthday presents with bows, paper and ... the unknown. The most important element of all drama is conflict. But it takes courage to create conflict that must come from the element of surprise jammed into solid structure. 'Rocky' is about brains being pummeled into pulp leading to understanding. 'Psycho' has a motel owner who kept his 'dead' mother alive to capture and kill others. We did not discover until the end of that film when, a fly lands on Anthony Perkins' hand that he is one of those who lived and *act human* but – may not be. "Heeererrsss Johnny!!!"

This film is moving into production and this may be moot, but I will sight films still currently in our present day conversations that were character/plot driven and comparable. Each took the situations to the apex of agony and then brought us home. This concerned me with *A Story of Love and War* script. I'm an actor who looks for the problems. My work feeds off the worst problems. For this script, I always knew what was ahead. In fact, I was informed ahead evaporating surprise and releasing me from the conflict.

In the following films, the writers and directors never let me (us), the viewer experience a moments peace. That's what we pay for.

"Sabotage Agent, aka Tartu", "A Face in the Crowd", "China Town", "Three Days of the Condor", "Psycho", "A Few Good Men", "Citizen Kane", "Rocky", "The Departed", "True Detective I", and "Godfather I and II." These never allowed the audience to get ahead of the movie. All the characters were compelling, charismatic and the conflict of their behavior was like breaking eggs, one at a time, into a bowl. With each turn we did not know what was next or, the ending. Each dealt with life and (or) death without flinching.

Sample Notes

These are the notes that were given to the film company before they will have a worldwide release. Due to upcoming movie release, major changes were made. For example, names, places, scenes and conflicts have been disguised to protect the purity of the film.

Notes:

The mission up to page 22, scene 3 is general. Blocker, the writer, should clarify what he wants them to do. O'Malley is short but fast. If they are given a specific job by Blocker this could provide platform for conflict that might make a red herring possible at the start. O'Malley and Bland could fist fight which throws doubt into their military relationship and gives room for doubt about what is to come.

Pg. 17, Scene 4

What's the payoff of Bland's salt and tobacco? If he is religious and lives his life from scripture, as referenced, then why is it not used later on when he's in the bar and attacks the lady in the bar? Maybe he's sexually repressed and uses the bible to dictate his behavior. If you set up a motif early on, it must have a payoff later or the audience will always be searching for an answer when there is none. Audiences are always looking to close the loop. Brando in the back of the limo with Al says "All along ... It was Banzini". That question of culpability was set up numerous times in order to create further questions.

Pg. 34, Scene 2

O'Malley has a kill and Bland clutches causing the death of John Doe. Opportunity for conflict with Bland and O'Malley is lost. There is no defined conflict. Bland rarely crosses the line into being dangerous to those around him. He's always muted. O'Malley's vulnerabilities are not well defined. We lose compassion for his problems. Again, it works in a novel but not on film.

Pg. 51.

Johnson say's "He was lost on your watch" this releases both men from the possibility of murder. This is a prime example of lost or diluted conflict. Lost languishes. Conflict hits. This is not a novel.

Pg. 52.

Bar scene - O'Malley reveals too much. We should be wondering if there is culpability after it is revealed that O'Malley may be lost. Let the audience feel that one or both could be the cause. When he let us off the hook this is the first problem with the structure. If we believed they were in cahoots as murderers, it would intensify the ending when we find out that neither of them did it. We should think they both killed him then, slowly reveal the truth, holding that information right to the end of the script.

Pg. 55, Scene 6.

What would hold tension more? If he was on the plane and in the airport with the audience thinking he might have murdered O'Malley or that O'Malley was lost or AWOL. Murder works better in films.

Pg. 58.

Johnson should react to something that intensifies his PTSD. A door slams and he dives for cover. Some feelings of guilt should arise possibly when asked about what happened in the war.

Structure

Title: A Story of Love and War

Setting: Iraq War and Military Compound

Characters: John Doe, John Smith, Sergeant Bland, John Doe's Mother, Johnson

In this film, a death takes place in a war built on lies, but the stakes were not about that death. An illegal war was only the backdrop. It was about guilt, shame and escape; great topics for a novel. Despite the set-up of the introductory pages of the script, John Doe's death was not at all what was at stake. His fellow soldier and friend Joe Smith's guilt was about not following the request of his friend's mother and a reflexive response to the horrors of war ending: ***it was more about feelings than the results of actions that could kill.***

Characters Smith and Bland (his sergeant) did not put a living, eyeless, earless young hero out of his misery. They kept John Doe's corpse from the view of his fellow warriors and his loved ones. It was a beautiful gesture. Never did any of these characters appear to be responsible for conspiracy or murder. If that were the red herring, I would have been aptly surprised when I got 15 pages away from the last page to find out that that was not, in fact, the way it went down. Think back to "The End" of any of the above films as you stopped chomping popcorn and your eyes and mouth were left open in wonder. This film ending became flaccid."

In closing, having written these criticisms, the film still may stand on its own. It's on the brink of something great. If I had \$5 million disposable income, I would still place my bet on this film. But the acrimony of my Actors Studio battle ground experiences and the willingness to not just be pleased when multi-millions of hard earned dollars are heading towards a film's principal photography, I feel no guilt as Mr. Grinch in the casino.

I can hear Norman and "Gadge" yelling at each other.

"Is it a novella – or is it a screenplay?"

I'm not sure.