



Learning from the Masters

AN INTERVIEW WITH SCREENWRITER JIM UHLS

QUIZ & SUGGESTED EXERCISES

(RECOMMENDED FOR HIGH SCHOOL & COLLEGE STUDENTS)

“The commonality [in my work] is that the characters have something wrong with them that is interesting and provocative.”

Jim Uhls

EXCERPT FROM JIM UHLS'S INTERVIEW:

MIKE DE LUCA: *Do you find that [as a screenwriter], you get better over time?*

JIM UHLS: There's two things that happen over time: a good one and a bad one. The good one is that you hopefully merge your intuitive and analytical sides together better, and you get that mojo working. The bad thing is falling into using the same solutions, tricks, character patterns and story patterns. So it's good every once in a while to really try something experimental and try to surprise yourself....

DE LUCA: *Have you ever experienced writer's block [mid-script]?*

UHLS: That happens a lot. Or else before I start something, which is really kind of worse, because there's nothing that you're blocked from, that you need to get back to. You're blocked and you're not starting something. In either case I try to do experiments, like doing "interviews" with the characters. Or if I pretty much know the idea but I feel blocked about how to shape it, I start thinking about key scenes that would be in this project. I write those scenes first, out of order. I call it "the scent of blood." You didn't start on "fade in," but now you're *in* the script. It can grow out from inside, instead of page one.

DE LUCA: *So jumping to the meat of something can jump-start your process?*

UHLS: Absolutely.

DE LUCA: *Would your prescription for writers that get stuck to do that, as well as to keep writing and not dwell on the block too much?*

UHLS: I find a lot of blocks happen sequentially, while you're going in linear fashion. You just can't figure out what the connective tissue or the transition is at this part of the story. I say, skip it! Go to the part where you really have some feeling, and write that. That's a good way of staying in it.

QUIZ:

As you watch the interview, see if you can answer the following questions.

1. What other kinds of writing did Jim Uhls do before writing screenplays?
2. How does he decide whether an idea is best suited to a particular medium?
3. What is “safehouse?”
4. How does he feel about working from an outline?
5. According to Uhls, is doing an adaptation as much work as writing an original script?
6. How did he avoid “pitching” for the job of adapting “Fight Club?”
7. What famous screenplays does Uhls cite as his favorites?
8. What techniques does he suggest for dealing with writer’s block?
9. Does he view discipline and deadlines as an important part of his process?
10. How does he deal with studio notes?
11. Uhls says he has a recurring nightmare about screenwriting. What is it?
12. What does he say is the most frustrating thing about being a screenwriter?
13. What does he mean by “don’t sweat the small stuff?”
14. What keeps him stimulated and inspired when he’s between projects?
15. What is “Flicker?”

Bonus question:

16. What was legendary director Sam Peckinpah’s drink of choice?

SUGGESTED EXERCISES:

1. Jim Uhls says he knew he could write screenplays when he discovered he could use both the intuitive and analytical parts of his brain. What does he mean by this? Why would both be necessary to write good screenplays? Do you think you are more naturally intuitive or analytical?
2. Uhls says he “interviews” his characters to draw out their personalities and overcome story blocks. Can you imagine using this technique? What questions would you ask your characters to understand them better and develop their individual voices?
3. Uhls says he thinks Hollywood studios are now more reluctant to back big-budget edgy, “adult” projects than they were when “Fight Club” was made. Do you agree? Can you think of any recent films comparable to “Fight Club?” List a few recent mainstream releases and describe their target audience.
4. In this interview, a piece of raw meat inspires a tale of violence, pet abuse and sibling jealousy. Now it’s your turn. Using the same point of departure—a raw steak—come up with a simple story of your own. Would you say your story is a comedy or a drama? What changes would you need to make to tell it as the opposite?

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