



Learning from the Masters

AN INTERVIEW WITH SCREENWRITER MARSHALL HERSKOVITZ

QUIZ & SUGGESTED EXERCISES

*(RECOMMENDED FOR HIGH SCHOOL & COLLEGE STUDENTS)*

*““If I have a criticism of many screenwriters, it’s that they are way too wedded to the words. When I say ‘the words,’ I mean the words the characters speak. [Speaking is] the last thing that people do. They have the thought, they have the fear, they have another thought, they want to run, and finally, they speak. There has to be a whole dynamic that goes on before a person speaks.”*

*Marshall Herskovitz*

## EXCERPTS FROM MARSHALL HERSKOVITZ'S INTERVIEW:

**JAY FERNANDEZ:** *Do you set goals for yourself [when writing]?*

**MARSHALL HERSKOVITZ:** They're a little bit amorphous. I kind of know when I've done it for the day. It's gotta be more than six or seven pages a day. In terms of the actual number of hours, it could be three hours done with great focus, but I can never do that. So it's normally five or six hours to get the three where I actually did the work. But I write fast when I'm actually writing.

**FERNANDEZ:** *Do you write at the same time of day every day?*

**HERSKOVITZ:** I try to work in the morning. Once it's the afternoon, I'm distracted by things. Once in a great while, I'll be so excited by something that I'll work at different times, or I'll work in the night, but that's extremely rare for me.

**FERNANDEZ:** *Are you pretty disciplined, generally?*

**HERSKOVITZ:** I am about everything but writing. It's hard to make myself write. Once I get into a rhythm, I can make myself do it every day. But there literally is just this moment of dread each morning, of "Can I do this? Can I make myself do this?" It's just a hard thing. Then once I'm in it, I can enjoy it and it's okay.

**FERNANDEZ:** *How do you get past the dread?*

**HERSKOVITZ:** Sheer will. That's all. You either have the will or you don't have the will. There's no way really to make it better. You can try to talk to yourself about what the voices are, why you're afraid, but finally you just have to make yourself do it.

## QUIZ:

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

1. What was Marshall Herskovitz's first writing job?
2. What lesson does he say he learned from his early TV writing?
3. What decision led him to write his first feature film script?
4. What kind of stories does Herskovitz say he's most attracted to?
5. How does he deal with the demands of structure and theme when he's writing?
6. When does he say he gets his best ideas?
7. Why does he find it difficult to read screenplays?
8. What does Herskovitz think is the best thing he has written?
9. What is his attitude towards research?
10. Does he have daily page-count goals when writing?
11. What is "human behaviorism?"
12. What is Herskovitz's attitude towards studio notes?
13. What was Tom Cruise's concern about his character in "The Last Samurai?"
14. What does Herskovitz find most frustrating about making movies?
15. What the best lesson he's received about writing?

## Bonus question:

16. Who are Nina Foch and Jan Kasar?

## SUGGESTED EXERCISES:

1. Marshall Herskovitz says he learned an important lesson early in his career when he recorded and transcribed his own natural way of speaking. What lesson did he learn? Try recording yourself for two minutes as you describe an event you are watching. Transcribe the recording. Does it read the way you expected? Why or why not?
2. Herskovitz describes his own "concentric circles theory of pitching." What is this theory, and what is its origin? Using a well-known film of your choice, write a "concentric circles pitch" yourself. Is it harder or easier than simply writing the whole story in detail?
3. Herskovitz describes two television movies, "Special Bulletin" and "Extreme Close-Up," in which he used unusual methods to tell stories. What are the narrative devices used in these two projects? Can you think of one or two more unusual ways to approach telling a story? What would these devices bring to the narrative?
4. Herskovitz says he writes stage direction and description in a way that implies how the scene would be shot. He uses the example of saying that a character's "eyes well up." What does this imply about the camera placement? Can you think of other examples of description that would suggest how the scene is meant to be shot, without stating it outright?

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