



Learning from the Masters

AN INTERVIEW WITH SCREENWRITER SHELDON TURNER

QUIZ & SUGGESTED EXERCISES

(RECOMMENDED FOR HIGH SCHOOL & COLLEGE STUDENTS)

“People tell you, write about what you know. If I wrote about what I knew, it would be the most boring scripts in history.”

Sheldon Turner

EXCERPTS FROM SHELDON TURNER'S INTERVIEW:

MIKE DE LUCA: Was there one thing that made you think, I can do this?

SHELDON TURNER: I never took a course. What I did was, I read every screenplay I could get my hands on. I tell people, go and find the crappy screenplays. Cause they are abundant, man.... That's what my inspiration was, to a degree. There was one script in particular that I read [early on] that sold to Sony for \$3 million, and it was an utter piece of shit. I put [two pages] up on the wall as a source of inspiration. Anger is a great energy, and I fully accept that's part of what fueled me at that point.

DE LUCA: Can anything prepare you for a life as a screenwriter?

TURNER: Temperament is really important. I think being able to sit by yourself in rooms for long periods of time...alone, in the dark, going through those things. For me [preparing to write means] just reading everything. I still read five newspapers a day, I try to read a book a week, I read a script a day. But at the end of the day, I believe it's like the 90 mph fastball, You either have it or you don't. That's why I don't get invited to talk at those screenwriting conferences. They're teaching everyone to do the same thing. You've got to be able to differentiate yourself. If you're being taught the same skills as 300 other people in a room, then what's the point? Find your own answers.

DE LUCA: Do you outline before you write?

TURNER: I do. I think it's important [but] I think it's overvalued in Hollywood. The reason execs place such a premium on it is "cover your ass." What they're basically saying is, give me a document that I can say, if Sheldon Turner decides to veer off and do his own thing, here, look, you said you were going to do this..." I think ultimately writers that write really good outlines write really bad scripts. Because you never know, things happen on the page, and you've got to be open to it instinctively.

QUIZ:

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

1. What does Sheldon Turner say motivates him to work so hard?
2. What does he like to work on more than one project at a time?
3. How does he deal with getting stuck?
4. How many scripts did Turner write before he sold one?
5. What does he think of sitcom writers?
6. Does he outline before writing?
7. Why does he say screenwriters can't afford to be anti-social or shy?
8. What did he learn in a cinema restroom when "The Longest Yard" was released?
9. Why does he contact writers whose scripts he is hired to rewrite?
10. Does Turner ever abandon a script in progress? Why?
11. What does he say a first script should demonstrate to readers?
12. Why shouldn't one "underline" key moments in a script?
13. Why does he prefer pitching to writing on spec?
14. What does he think of books and seminars about story structure?
15. What's the advantage of working with a big star or heavyweight producer?

Bonus question:

16. What time does Turner say he gets up every day?

SUGGESTED EXERCISES:

1. Sheldon Turner suggests that for a screenwriter, temperament is as important as talent. What is he referring to? What kind of personality traits might best serve someone working in the studio system? What traits might be a handicap?
2. Turner talks about two kinds of writers: instinctive and mechanical writers. What does he mean? Which type are you, most naturally? Do you think a screenwriter needs to be one, or the other, or both?
3. De Luca and Turner discuss the challenges of rewriting other writers and being rewritten oneself. To get some perspective on the process, try writing a three-page dramatic scene between two characters who are in conflict. Afterwards, trade your scene with another writer. Rewrite your partner's scene, setting it in a different location and changing both the gender and personality of one of the characters. What was the process like? What do you think of what your partner has done with your scene?
4. A broken pair of spectacles inspires Turner to invent a crafty courtroom gambit. Using the same object, can you generate a story of your own? Where does your own inspiration come from?

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