

USC SCHOOL OF CINEMA-TELEVISION

CTWR 418a: Senior Thesis

The Independent Feature Screenplay

Fall 2012 – (Four Units)

Thursday 4-6:50, SCA 361

Professor Don Bohlinger

Class Overview:

CTWR 418a, “Senior Thesis”, taken together with 418b, is designed to see you through the development of your thesis project: a professional and polished feature screenplay.

As you have enrolled in the *Independent Feature Section of Thesis* we will focus on character driven stories with limited budgets that challenge the viewer in several ways: the subject matter, the sense of place, the characters and their relationships and/or the way the story is told. A brief look at the history of independent cinema demonstrates that it has always been a good way for young screenwriters to start a film career. Beginning with groundbreaking genre films like Francis Ford Copolla’s *Dementia 13*, Jonathan Demme’s *Caged Heat*, George Lucas’ *THX 1138* or Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead*, the independent market then began to expand and tackle gritty, personal stories such as Martin Scorsese’s *Who’s That Knocking At My Door?*, Spike Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It*, Barry Levinson’s *Diner* and Susan Seidleman’s *Smithereens*. (Note: Although many of these writers went on to be directors or writer/directors, they wrote the screenplays for the films mentioned above.)

Other writers and writer/directors used the freedom of independent market to challenge the ways of telling a film story: Terrence Malick’s *Badlands*, David Lynch’s *Eraserhead*, Jim Jarmusch’s *Stranger Than Paradise*, or Darren Aronofsky’s *Pi* are just a few examples.

Then in the late eighties, Steven Soderbergh’s, *Sex, Lies and Videotape* and Gus Van Sant’s *Drugstore Cowboy* helped launch a new wave of Independent filmmakers. People like Nicole Holofcener (*Walking and Talking*), Jim Taylor and Alexander Payne (*Citizen Ruth*), Wes Anderson (*Rushmore*), Alison Ander (*Gas, Food, Lodging*), Richard Linklater (*Dazed and Confused*), Debra Granik (*Winter’s Bone*), Paul Thomas Anderson (*Boogie Nights*), Michael Arndt (*Little Miss Sunshine*), Diablo Cody (*Juno*), Kenneth Lonergan (*You Can Count On Me*) found a way to get their quirky characters, exquisitely observed locations, and challenging stories produced, distributed and admired by audiences around the world. The Sundance Institute, founded by Robert Redford in 1981, which had long been a place where independent filmmakers could go to develop their scripts soon created the now world-renowned Sundance Film Festival followed by its own television station. Other stations devoted to screening independent films followed, as did the Independent Spirit Awards.

And I haven’t even touched on Mumblecore that has given us films such as Lena Dunham’s *Tiny Furniture*, Lyn Shelton’s *Humpday* or Aaron Katz’s *Cold Weather*. (*I should also mention International Independent films such as *Trainspotting*, *The Following*, or *Celebration* that helped launch the careers of people like Danny Boyle/John Hodge, Christopher Nolan and Thomas Vinterberg.)

So, you are in very good company.

As we go through the course we will look at what films such as these have in common: attention to budget, focus on a specific audience, taking chances with story and character in order to attract a financier and/or an audience, and writing fascinating characters that attract great actors. The list of actors who got their start in these movies and are now Hollywood stars is too long to go into.

If you love to write movies, but also, if you want to be involved in the making of your movies, this is your genre and this is the class for you. You will also need to think like a producer as well as a writer: where will you go with your script? What company, what festival, what competition or workshop can you get your script into? What young director or actor will want to be attached to your script?

But what are you going to write? I would counsel against genre at this point, but if someone is passionate about a genre story (and has a fresh and exciting take on a genre) I can be convinced. Generally, I would prefer you tackle something personal, something specific and something that pushes the boundaries of character or story. I will expect you to bring two or three ideas to class the first day.

We will begin with the 'ideation' process, the time when a writer explores all the possibilities of his or her story (or stories.) During this time, character will be stressed. We will be writing biographies: creating histories for your characters, defining their motivations, hopes and fears. Questions such as: why will the audience be interested in this person? What is the reason exactly and when does that bonding moment with the audience happen? What is the need of your character (why is *this* story happening to your character?) And what is their want? *How is your story different?* You will be challenged to make your stories fresh and original by using your own experience. Once the general questions have been answered we will write a three to five page **synopsis** of the story describing the overall theme and direction of the piece.

The second stage will be writing the step outline or treatment. Here we will ask you difficult questions in order to understand clearly the story you want to tell. We will review and add to what you know about structure. We will discuss the manner in which you tell the story. How is the character introduced? What is his/her defining scene? When is the tension clear? And what is the central question of the story? Then, what are the obstacles that frustrate your character in their journey? How do they find the courage to continue? Who is on their side and who is against them? What is their lowest point and what is their most brilliant moment in the story? Finally, how does your story resolve itself and what does that resolution have to say about your view of the world? *Are you telling your story in the most original way possible? Are there chances you can take that you aren't taking?* In this part of the class we will work sequence by sequence, presenting groups of scenes to the class. We will attempt to 'see' the movie in its entirety. This is our chance to make the story work: to play with the order of scenes, of revelation and recognition, of heightening the tension and making the resolution

believable. At the end of this section of the class you will have written a 20-25-page **step outline or treatment** in which every scene in the movie is described.

Finally, you will write the first draft. First drafts should be written quickly and in a burst of enthusiasm and emotion. Use your outline to guide you, but let the story take you over. Let your characters speak and act. The real challenge in this step is to **finish the draft**. Once you have the first draft, you then have something you can make professional. But that is the work of 418b. As we begin our scripts will be reviewing the lessons of 106a-b: how to tell a story visually, how to make your scenes rich with character, action and drama, how to make the dialogue surprising, clear and effective.

Your final portfolio of 418a will be: ten pages of character biographies, a 3-5 page synopsis of your story, a 20-25 page treatment or step outline, and the first draft (90-130 pages) of your script.

The class is a seminar and you will be expected to read and give feedback to the material of your classmates. The collaborative process is central to writing for film and television and is an integral part of the 418a-b experience.

Course Goals:

1. Writers are encouraged to keep their stories unique and personal. To use their own lives and experiences. To strive to find their voice. To discover the stories they want to tell not the stories they think Hollywood wants them to tell.
2. Writers are encouraged to study and understand the Independent Film Market. What can you add to the current cinema? How can you push boundaries, excite, or even outrage an audience?
3. Learn the techniques of creating character by writing biographies.
4. Learn to write a synopsis for your feature idea. You will discover how to pitch your story by writing this synopsis, emphasizing why an audience (and you must define your audience) would pay to see this film. Who is your audience? What is it exactly about your story that will interest them? What is the theme?
5. Learn to write a treatment or step outline for a feature script. Story structure will be emphasized in this portion of the class. Students should take note however that structure is not meant to handcuff the writer – it is not a series of set-in-stone rules to follow. On the contrary it is a series of patterns developed by screenwriters over time. How did the masters solve the problems we are facing? We will create a ‘writers toolbox’ of techniques to help us tell our stories, to communicate to the audience the exact feeling we want to communicate.
6. Learn to write the first draft of a screenplay. You will review and learn to write exciting dialogue and reveal character through the scene work you will be doing in writing the first act of your screenplays.
7. Learn the techniques of analyzing a feature story by reacting to the work of our classmates. This is meant to mirror the professional collaborative process.

Assignments:

Week 1:

- Discuss class expectations, deadlines, syllabus.

- The Independent Film World will be discussed. A screening list (we will screen outside of class) will be decided on.
- Story Ideas will be discussed. Main character? Audience? Genre?
- Students will be asked (in the first weeks) to pitch two possible stories for their thesis projects. Why this movie? Why now?
- Homework: create second idea.

Week 2:

- Discuss Second Story Idea.
- Homework: continue to develop both ideas and begin main character biographies.

Week 3:

- Discuss chosen idea and begin character biography work.
- Homework: decide on a story and write a short (one page) mission statement -- why this movie must be made and why it will launch your career as a screenwriter. Where will you go with it? How exactly are you challenging current cinema? What exactly will separate your script from the pile?
- Homework: character biography work.

Week 4:

- Discuss mission statements.
- Discuss character work.
- Screen some defining scene examples of special Independent film characters (for example Paul Dano's teenage son who has taken a vow of silence in *Little Miss Sunshine*.)
- Homework: character work. Begin work on secondary/ subplot characters.

Week 5:

- Discuss story and character work.
- Develop and deepen character work.
- Home work: final synopsis and biography work is due.

October 1st – biographies and synopsis are due.

Week 6:

- Discuss final synopsis and final character biographies.
- Make a plan for the step outline.
- Handout: sample step outline.
- Screen a classic independent film first sequence, review character introductions, character routine, point of attack.
- Homework: pitch character introduction, outline main character routine
- Homework: first sequence step outline is due.

Week 7:

- Discuss outlines and character introductions.
- Homework: write second sequence, leading to end of act one.
- Write a first person description: **What is your main character's want?**

Week 8:

- Discuss first act outlines, character wants.
- Homework: describe the tension of act two: hope vs. fear?

- Homework: describe obstacles to character's goal: internal or external?
- Homework: write first sequence of second act outline.

Week 9:

- Discuss first sequence of second act outlines.
- Discuss obstacles and character's goals. Does the audience identify?
- Homework: write second sequence of act two.
- Describe the midpoint of your film. What is the big scene? Does your character get close to achieving their goal?
- Homework: write third and fourth sequences of act two.
- Describe the end of the second act. Is there a low point for your character? Is there a point of high tension? Describe it.

Week 10:

- Discuss the final sequences of act two.
- Homework: write outline for act three.

November 1st: treatment or step outline is due.

Week 11:

- Discuss final outline.
- Homework: write a 3 to 5 page first person account of the main character's journey in the story. Get his or her voice right. Have them describe what they go through and what it means to them.

Week 12:

- Read and discuss first person accounts.
- Remember the best stories are all about character!
- Homework: write the first 30 pages of your script. Email to the class.
- Homework: read and comment on classmates' first 30 pages.

Week 13:

- Discuss first 30 pages.
- Homework: write the next 30 pages of your script. Email to class.
- Homework: read and comment on classmates' first 30 pages.

Week 14:

- Discuss the next 30 pages.
- Homework: write the next 30 pages of your script. Email to class.
- Homework: read and comment on classmates' next 30 pages.

Week 15:

- Complete the first draft of your script
- Homework: make any revision requested by instructor.

December 14th – first draft of script is due.

Evaluation Criteria:

CTWR 418a grades will be based on careful consideration in the following areas of the students' work:

1. The ability to keep up with the writing required in the course's schedule.
2. Demonstrated understanding of the fundamental principles of a good story: character, tension, and movement.
3. Demonstrated understanding of the fundamental principles of a good script: character, visualization, scene, dialogue.
4. The ability to develop a feature synopsis, treatment and first act of the script.
5. Class participation. The willingness to help classmates in their struggles with story, character, and structure. (The class is a seminar – participation is essential.)
6. Attendance. Absences are not allowed. More than one absence will result in a lower grade. Tardiness will not be tolerated.

Grading Weights:

CTWR 418a grades are based on:

Character Work	20%
Synopsis	15%
Treatment or Step	20%
First Draft of Script	35%
Class Participation	10%

Letter Grades:

91-100.... A	78-80....B-	65-67.....D+
88-90.....A-	75-77....C+	61-64.....D
85-87.....B+	71-74....C	58-60.....D-
81-84.....B	68-70....C	0-59.....F

Classroom Decorum

The professor expects all students to respect and support the ideas and writing of their fellow students. Writing is a fragile process and while we should ask questions, analyze and even challenge, we want to remain supportive, always keeping in mind that the screenplay is fragile work in progress. A working writer needs to develop *the art of collaboration* while working with their peers. As a working writer you will need to be able to work constructively with directors, producers and studio executives.

Laptop and Texting Policy

Students may use their laptops at the discretion of the professor. Laptops may be used for note taking, but not for surfing the web unless it is part of a class project. Texting is not allowed during class time. Texting is distracting and disruptive. There is nothing that needs to be communicated to anyone except your classmates during class time.

Save your texting and surfing until class break.

Class & Instruction Information:

Class section: 19198D

Professor Bohlinger's phone number and email: 213 740-7516, dfb@usc.edu

Office hours: Tuesday 4-6, Thursday 5-7, or by appointment, SCA 335

*Note: Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure this letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.- 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The telephone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.