# **USC School of Cinematic Arts**

## **INTERMEDIATE SCREENWRITING**

CTWR 529 SECTION 19254D Fall Semester 2012 Wednesdays, 7:00-10:00pm SCB 304

#### Tim Curnen, Instructor email: *tim529@mindspring.com* Tel: (310) 470-1402 Office hours by appointment

**COURSE OBJECTIVES**: This course aims to sharpen your storytelling and screenwriting skills through practical writing experience in the short-film form, leading to an extensive introduction to shaping a feature film story. In a supportive workshop environment, we will examine the basics of the craft, encourage productive writing habits, and test the unexplored territory of your imagination. Starting with a few simple ideas, each student will mold characters and spin stories from those characters, with an emphasis on learning techniques for character development, visualization, and structuring and reshaping the story until it best embodies the writer's vision.

**COURSE GOALS:** Students will complete three projects over the course of the semester: Two complete, revised short-film screenplays, following the submission guidelines of CTPR 546 for possible production in that class; and an original feature film story in revised synopsis form, ready for development into a screenplay. The idea is to look forward to the realistic possibility of having the short screenplays produced, and to create a feature film story that has the potential to become a first-rate screenplay.

**ASSIGNMENTS**: Assignments are due at the classes specified in the syllabus. All assignments must bear your name, the title of the project, and be accurately dated. In most cases (indicated in the syllabus) the assignments are to be emailed to the entire class by 6pm the Monday before class. Students are expected to have read everyone's assignment before class and to have prepared comments on them.

#### GRADES:

Class participation: 10% Your revised short film screenplays: 60% (30% each) Your completed and revised feature film story and synopsis: 30%

#### **RECOMMENDED READING:**

You are urged to READ SCREENPLAYS (in standard screenplay format) of films that you know well and especially admire. It's the best way to truly experience how the visuals and dialogue of an influential film first played out on the page. You will learn a lot.

#### <u>Also:</u>

- <u>THE TYRANNY OF STORY: Audience Expectations and the Short</u> <u>Screenplay</u> by Ric Beairsto
- <u>STORY SENSE</u> by Paul Lucey
- ADVENTURES IN THE SCREEN TRADE by William Goldman
- <u>THE TOOLS OF SCREENWRITING</u> by Howard and Mabley

#### HOUSE RULES:

#### Students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class.

Unexcused absences or repeated lateness will lower your final grade. Two unexcused absences will lower your final grade by half a letter. A third unexcused absence will lower your final grade by a full letter. More than three absences will be basis for failure for the course. Two late arrivals equates to one full absence.

In order for an absence to be excused, the student must have approval from the instructor prior to the absence and provide documentation at the next attended class session.

Late Assignments will be recorded as such and will negatively impact your final grade, each late day increasing the penalty.

**Missed Assignment or Incompletes:** The only acceptable excuses for missing an assignment or taking an incomplete in the course are personal illness or a family emergency. Students must inform the instructor *before* the assignment due date and present verifiable evidence in order for a make-up to be scheduled. Students who need to take incompletes must also present documentation of the problem to the instructor before the final assignment is due.

Assignments must be properly formatted and PROOFREAD. You will be held to professional standards – typos, abused homonyms ("there, their, they're", etc.), grammatical and spelling errors may cause your draft to be returned unread.

All work must be original and originate in this class – no revisions of work started in other classes or adaptations of others' work will be accepted without the prior permission of the instructor.

**E-mail formats:** Assignments to be delivered by email should be in **pdf format**. The **filenames** should consist of the *"student's last name\_ assignment name\_date.pdf"* (Example: *Smith\_CharacterSketch\_9-22-12.pdf*) Laptop, Cell Phone, iPad Policy: Cell phones, Blackberrys, and similar devices must be turned off during class. Laptops, iPads and similar devices may be used only with the express permission of the instructor.

# <u>SYLLABUS</u>

## <u>WEEK 1</u> (8/29/12)

• Introductions and Getting Started

**Written assignment due Week 2**: Prepare THREE STORY IDEAS FOR YOUR 1<sup>ST</sup> SHORT-FILM PROJECT. Keep them simple for now, consisting of little more than a few sentences each. Each idea should address: 1) The central character or characters, 2) What the character(s) will encounter in the body of the story – i.e. the subject or central "conflict" of the story, 3) an indication of how the story will resolve. Do not wait until the last minute to explore these ideas – one of them will be the foundation of your next screenplay and you'll want to have confidence in it. Be prepared to pitch the ideas in class.

Also, now is a good time to begin thinking of IDEAS FOR YOUR FEATURE FILM STORY, which you'll be working on later in the semester. Allow time for these ideas to develop and mature. Explore these ideas carefully, and review them each week to see how you can enrich them.

# <u>WEEK 2</u> (9/5/12)

- The nature of the short fiction film
- Focus: Character Development
- Pitch and workshop your short film story ideas

### Turn in: Short-film story ideas.

Written assignment due Week 3: Choose the SHORT FILM IDEA that you most want to develop in this class and WRITE A BRIEF BACKSTORY for both its protagonist and its antagonist. THEN WRITE A ONE-PAGE CHARACTER SKETCH of each of these characters, writing IN THE FIRST PERSON. That is, let each character speak in his/her own voice, revealing as much as possible about some aspect of that character's life. Try to capture each character's unique speaking rhythms and point-of-view. See if you can let each character reveal something to us that the character doesn't yet know or understand about himself/herself. Hint: What the character *thinks* about things won't be as important as how he or she *feels* about things. <u>Email a copy to all members of the</u> class by Monday night at 6pm, and be prepared to present it to the class.

# <u>WEEK 3</u> (9/12/12)

- Focus: Story structure (The Short Film)
- Workshop your character sketches

**Turn in:** Character backstories and first-person character sketches. **Written Assignment due Week 4**: Write a ONE PAGE SYNOPSIS of your story and from that synopsis, write a BEAT-BY-BEAT STEP OUTLINE. For the <u>synopsis</u>: Keep it simple at this point. Tell the story as it will unfold on the screen: Include the setting, the major characters, the main story beats, and the resolution. Make us want to see this movie! For the step outline: Write in the present tense only, and limit your description to what we will actually see and hear on the screen, in the order we'll see and hear it. Email a copy to all members of the class by Monday night at 6pm, and be prepared to present it to the class.

## <u>WEEK 4</u> (9/19/12)

- Focus: Writing the scene
- Workshop your short film synopsis

**Turn In**: Your short-film synopsis and beat sheet. **Written Assignment due Week 5**: Write the FIRST DRAFT of your short film screenplay. <u>Email a copy to all members of the class by Monday night at 6pm,</u> and be prepared to present it to the class.

### <u>WEEK 5</u> (9/26/12)

- Focus: Visualizing the moment Writing Scene Description
- Workshop your short-film first draft

### Turn in: Your short-film first draft.

Written Assignment due Week 6: Come up with a SHORT FILM IDEA that you want to develop as your 2<sup>nd</sup> SHORT SCREENPLAY (stretch a little – choose something completely different from your first short film), and WRITE A BRIEF BACKSTORY for both its protagonist and its antagonist. THEN WRITE A ONE-PAGE CHARACTER MONOLOGUE for each of these characters, writing IN THE FIRST PERSON: That is, let each character speak in his/her own voice, revealing as much as possible about some aspect of that character's life. Try to capture each character's unique speaking rhythms and point-of-view. Email a copy to all members of the class by Monday night at 6pm, and be prepared to present it to the class.

## <u>WEEK 6</u> (10/3/12)

- Focus: Writing Dialogue
- Pitch and workshop your short film ideas and character monologues

**Turn in**: Your 2<sup>nd</sup> short-film idea, character monologues, and backstories **Written assignment due Week 7**: WRITE A ONE PAGE SYNOPSIS OF YOUR STORY, AND FROM THAT SYNOPSIS, WRITE A BEAT-BY-BEAT STEP OUTLINE. For the synopsis: Keep it simple at this point. Tell the story as it will unfold on the screen: Include the setting, the major characters, the main story beats, and the resolution. Make us want to see this movie! For the step outline: Remember to write in the present tense only, and limit your description to what we will actually see and hear on the screen, in the order we'll see and hear it. Email a copy to all members of the class by Monday night at 6pm, and be prepared to present it to the class.

## <u>WEEK 7</u> (10/10/12)

- Focus: Writing Visually
- Workshop your 2<sup>nd</sup> short-film synopsis

<u>**Turn in</u></u>: Your 2<sup>nd</sup> short-film synopsis and beat sheet. <u>Written Assignment due Week 8</u>: Write the FIRST DRAFT of your 2<sup>nd</sup> short-film screenplay. <u>Email a copy to all members of the class by Monday night at 6pm, and be prepared to present it to the class</u>.</u>** 

### <u>WEEK 8</u> (10/17/12)

- Focus: Revising your work
- Workshop your 2<sup>nd</sup> short-film first draft

**Turn In**: The 2<sup>nd</sup> short-film first draft.

**Written** Assignment due Week 9: REVISE AND POLISH both your 1<sup>st</sup> and your 2<sup>nd</sup> short film screenplays. Email copies to all members of the class by Monday night at 6pm, and be prepared to present one of them to the class.

<u>NOTE</u>: The deadline for submission of screenplays for possible production in CTPR 546 is Sunday, October 21<sup>st</sup>. Consult the 546 Submission Guidelines (available on the SCA Community website, in the Writing Division office, and in SPO) for detailed instructions on how to submit.

## <u>WEEK 9</u> (10/24/12)

- Focus: Writing the feature film
- Workshop your revised short film drafts

**Turn in**: Your revised drafts of both your 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> short-film screenplays. **Written Assignment due Week 10**: Prepare THREE STORY IDEAS FOR YOUR FEATURE FILM PROJECT, consisting of a few sentences each. As before, each idea should address: 1) The central character or characters, 2) What the character(s) will encounter in the body of the story – i.e. the subject or central "conflict" of the story, 3) an indication of how the story will resolve. *Include with each idea, in a paragraph or two, why the idea is important to you and deserves to be made into a feature*. Email a copy to all members of the class by Monday night at 6pm, and be prepared to pitch these ideas in class.

### WEEK 10 (10/31/12 – Halloween!)

#### • Pitch and workshop your feature story ideas

**Turn in:** Your feature story ideas, with explanations.

Written Assignment due Week 11: Choose the story idea you plan to develop, and WRITE A BRIEF BACKSTORY of its protagonist and antagonist. Then create a ONE-PAGE MONOLOGUE for each of these characters, writing IN THE FIRST PERSON: Let each character speak in his/her own voice, revealing as much as possible about some aspect of that character's life. As with your shortfilm characters, try to capture each of these characters' unique rhythms and pointof-view. Notice how adding specific, identifiable characters to a simple story idea brings that story to life and lets us see its potential. <u>Email a copy to all members</u> of the class by Monday night at 6pm, and be prepared to present it to the class.

### <u>WEEK 11</u> (11/7/12)

- Focus: Reviewing your characters
- Workshop your character monologues

**Turn in:** Your character monologues and backstories.

Written Assignment due Week 12: WRITE A ONE PAGE SYNOPSIS OF YOUR FEATURE STORY. Keep it simple at this point. Make us want to see this movie! Email a copy to all members of the class by Monday night at 6pm, and be prepared to present it to the class.

# <u>WEEK 12</u> (11/14/12)

- Focus: Opening scene, first ten pages
- Workshop your one-page feature synopses

#### **Turn In:** Your feature synopsis.

Written Assignment due Week 14: Revise and expand your feature story idea into a synopsis of not more than five pages, breaking it down into acts. Tell the story as it will unfold on the screen: Include the setting, the major characters, the main story beats, and the resolution. <u>Email a copy to all members of the class</u> by Monday night (11/26/12) at 6pm, and be prepared to present it to the class.

## WEEK 13 (11/21/12) – No class (Thanksgiving Week)

### <u>WEEK 14</u> (11/28/12)

- Focus: Shaping your feature; Working with scenes and sequences
- Workshop your 1-5 page feature synopsis

Turn In: Your 1-5 page feature synopsis.

Written Assignment due week 15: Revise your feature synopsis, telling the story simply but fully in no more than five pages. Email a copy to all members of the class by Monday night at 6pm, and be prepared to present it to the class.

### <u>WEEK 15</u> (12/5/12)

• Workshop your revised synopses and wrap up.

**Turn In:** Your completed and revised Feature Synopsis.

Syllabus and assignments are subject to change at the instructor's discretion.

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#### **Statement for Students with Disabilities**

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 the letter is delivered to me (or to TA) 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 phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

#### **Statement on Academic Integrity**

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. *Scampus,* the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A: <a href="http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/">http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/</a>. Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at: <a href="http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/">http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/</a>.

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