

“Tower Heist” from the script writer’s point of view

Screenwriting Corner

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Genres: Comedy/Drama/Action/Adventure

By Ronnie Tharp-Garber

Designing Principle

Ben Stiller and Eddie Murphy lead an all-star cast in Tower Heist, a comedy caper about working stiffs who seek revenge on the Wall Street swindler who stiffed them.

Premise

After the workers at a luxury Central Park condominium discover the penthouse billionaire has stolen their retirement, they plot the ultimate revenge: a heist to reclaim what he took from them.

This is a comedy with the sub-genre of heist-comedy. The drama elements are the known Opponent, with a moral dilemma that blows in the Battle scene, with the Opponent defeated: finally a Wall St. multi-million dollar player who thinks he’s above the law is brought down by some very creative “working stiffs.”

The elements of action come into play with the Hero, Ben Stiller, greatly incensed when the trusted employee/doorman of a high rise tower building is bilked out of his life savings by the Opponent and then tries to commit suicide. To stay in this genre where comedy is the overall force, the doorman could not be killed – Ending up in a hospital, yes. And the Hero goes for a visit and vows to make things right. As a comic action Hero, “a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do!”

The Character Web of hotel workers and bosses and funny residents of this super-expensive, posh residence that resembles Trump Tower is neatly played out. All of the secondary characters play against their natures, which contributes to that “comic gap” that is the mainstay of comedy: The desk clerk Russian young woman is studying for the bar and will end up being the shark lawyer for the Hero; the Jamaican maid is a brain with safe-cracking; the lonely, broke, divorced and bankrupt Wall St. occupant becomes part of the heist team instead of going asunder; the primo thief, Eddie Murphy, is bailed out of jail and wears a stolen business suit with attache case and becomes the heist trainer for these other “pansy-ass” would be thieves, who have never stolen anything in their lives.

All of the secondary characters support the Main Desire Line of the Hero, who wants to retrieve the money that the Opponent stole from the employees’ pension plan. Each character approaches the Desire according to his/her particular “quirk” and value system.

What keeps the Narrative Drive going is the continued “immoral” acts that the Hero commits to reach his goal/Desire of getting the money back for the employees. The Hero smashes a prized race car to smithereens; he engineers a safe-break-in; trains with a jailed criminal. The comic gap with his straight man character is that in the beginning of the story, he is a perfectionist- well-respected and politically correct with the wealthy residents of the Tower at all times. He plays along with the Opponent boss and maintains his calm under pressure. But then he goes berserk and is willing to jump completely out of character to go after the goal/Desire.

In a tightly crafted script such as this one, the story beats are all orchestrated: There’s the Inciting Incident at the 12-minute mark: The news that the pension fund has been raped by the unscrupulous boss. The end of Act 1 is at the

30 minute mark when the Hero receives new information to propel him into a definitive Plan of action to solve a huge dilemma that not only he is faced with, but all of his employees, or “working stiffs” as the Opponent likes to call them.

Act 2 is filled with preparation and training for the big heist moment. A sub-plot love interest for the Hero is woven in with the F.B.I. agent also desirous of putting the Opponent away, as she is totally disgusted with the rich raping the poor and being above the law. At the 60-minute mark, also called the Mid-Point Break, there is a distinct change of story world where the characters are in a very precarious time, just steps away from being discovered by the F.B.I., the Main Opponent, and the police. On page 75, a unique reveal occurs, and on page 85, another unique reveal occurs to jolt the audience forward with the Narrative Drive of the story. On page 90, the low point is very definitive, but because this is comedy, it is not a devastating low point.

There is a creative twist at the end, which comes after the Battle scene. The final sequences are compressed, as in comedy genre, these sequences are generally shorter than in other genres. The average comedy is about 96 minutes long, and this film is 99 minutes, including 5 minutes of credits. There is no Self-Revelation or New Equilibrium sequence, as the audience mainly cares about the Battle scene and wants to see the Opponent get his due.

For an entertaining, rollicking and good-humored 99 minutes, this film delivers. The cast is superb, the script is tight, and the comedy-heist genre is transcended, whereby the audience knows it will be a happy ending, but they will be surprised with the twist – It’s not a *deus ex machina* type of twist, but rather a set-up in good script writing, so that the audience feels a “poetic justice” type of emotion for a clever turn on predictability.

The Domino Effect of Desire

In screenplay writing, Desire is what will help form the Spine of your story. From the getgo, in Act 1, this Desire is what drives your Hero in his Ordinary World. The Desire of your Hero is then seized upon by the Inciting Incident of your story, which is the “match that lights the fire” of the Desire. The Inciting Incident is an external event, which will ultimately catapult your Hero with a slightly changed external Desire into the world where most of the story will take place: in Act 2 and Act 3.

In “American Sniper,” it might look something like this: Although it is established early on that the Hero is a sharp shooter, the Hero’s Desire in his Ordinary World is to win rodeos. The World Trade Center is attacked by terrorists and 3,000 people are murdered

in one day. The world stands still, in shock. The Hero is not one to stand still- Islamic terrorists are behind the murders- So the Hero, no longer desirous of winning rodeos, joins the Navy S.E.A.L.S. with a changed Desire: He's going to Iraq to fight the evils of Islamic terrorism. Once in Iraq, his Desire becomes: Fight off the Islamic terrorists while protecting the backs of his fellow soldiers. His Desire to "protect" is intensified by his particular skill set: He is a spot on, fearless sniper. The Desire of the Hero of "American Sniper" stays with him until the end of the story, and the audience is at the edge of their seats during all three acts.

In crafting your story, your character needs to know what he wants. Once he establishes what he wants, he now has his Desire, which is his "end goal." Unlike the Desire embedded in an emotional yearning, the Desire your Hero wants is an external Desire. Knowing what the

external Desire of your story is will result in your audience rooting for the Hero. The Desire will be the force that creates the Spine of your story; it creates focus; it gives clarity to your story.

Examples of a Hero's external Desire: To win the gold medal in the Olympics; to get the girl; to reach the top of Mt. Everest; to get a divorce; to win custody to see his children; to find the person who murdered his wife; to discover a cure for cancer; to protect a witness from a murderer; to slay 10 dragons who are keeping his family hostage; to consummate an illicit affair; to take over a family mafia business; to get to the truth behind child abuse by pedophiles.

However, just like "real life," it is a tough challenge to figure out one's Desire. So the Hero's Desire in the beginning of the story might be: To drink and play the rodeo circuit: "American Sniper"; to get into trouble with the ex-wife which will preclude getting child

custody rights: “Mrs. Doubtfire”; to stay as far away from a Mafia family as possible: “The Godfather”; to bury the truth about pedophiles destroying children’s lives because it goes against tradition: “Spotlight”; to ignore the love of his life for a more shallow goal of making money: “Jerry Maguire.”

Therefore, the Hero’s Desire is not clear in the beginning of your story. The Desire that your Hero has in the first few pages of the story will get “ramped up” after the Inciting Incident, which comes about 10, 11, or 12 pages into the story. The Desire doesn’t completely change, but rather, it takes a “bend in the road.” By the end of Act 1, or about 30 pages into the story, the Hero will have the beginnings of a Plan and also a more clearly defined Desire.

[How Do I Start to Write?](#)

1) Decide on your genre. Think about genres that really speak to you, that move you deeply.

Is this an historical epic? Are your characters real or fictional? Is this a drama? A political thriller? An action/adventure? Is this a mix of romance and comedy? Drama and historical epic? Science fiction mixed with Drama and Mythology?

2) Where did your story originate? Are you the sole author? Is it a derivative work based on other material, such as a book, magazine article, short story? Is the derivative work public record? If not, you have to acquire rights of the living person to write the story.

Maybe this was an event that occurred that you now want to write about. Maybe you “read about this person” and always wanted to write a story, incorporating this person’s story, but fictionalizing it.

Maybe you lived in the arena you want to write about—Journalism, tennis, ballet, medicine, education, the oil industry, the legal profession, politics, art, music. This is good. But if you did not live in the arena you want to write about, you need to start doing research about the arena. As you get deeper and deeper into the research, you will be amazed how inspired you will become. New ideas and perspectives will reveal themselves. You will become knowledgeable and feel that you have the depth to write a story that is believable and “grabs” your audience!

3) Story values within your story idea – Come up with a main character who has those values.

What draws you to that story? What does the story reveal about the human condition? Your main character has psychological needs and moral needs – What are they? What happened to him/her that caused this character to have these needs? What flaws does this character have as a result of his/her psychological/moral make-up? All of this moral structure value system for your story will give it spine and a theme, and the moral structure value system of your main character will play out in the climax. So it’s important to devote some time to this in the very beginning!

The “Running Start”

Working within the 3-Act Structure of a screenplay, the writer has to be aware of many structural plot points that work cohesively to craft a great story. The Main Character/Hero/Protagonist will start off in most genres with “A Running Start,” as opposed to a “Community Start” (characters dancing at a wedding, etc.), or a “Slow Start” (a narrator whom we are mystified as to his identity).

Therefore, with the “Running Start,” the Hero will usually be introduced in the first few pages of Act 1. But wait!! Exceptions:

An example would be the Crime Genre, in which the crime is enacted in the first few pages of Act 1. Also, in the Crime Genre, the crime could be the Inciting Incident. This is the incident that acts as a catalyst for the Hero to engage in the action of the story. The Inciting Incident in Crime Genre and other genres will usually occur on page 10, 11, or 12, or 10, 11, or 12 minutes into the story. To sum up, the Hero will start off with “A Running Start” oftentimes after the crime, and the crime will occur in the first few pages of the story or on p. 10, 11, or 12 of the story.

In “Lincoln Lawyer,” a Redemption Story, Micky Haller is introduced to the crime after he has come face to face with the Main Opponent of the story. At this point in time, there is no REVEAL to the Hero or to the audience that Micky Haller is looking into the eyes of a psychopath. The face to face moment occurs at the “Inciting Incident,” on page 12. And then the Hero will have a meeting with the Main Opponent and his mother and their family lawyer, and the crime the Main Opponent is accused of is related in Flashback. The Hero is off to a “Running Start” to find the murderer.

In “Witness,” the crime is committed as part of the “Inciting Incident

moment,” on p. 13, and this crime is witnessed by a little Amish boy in the bathroom of a train station. The Hero, Detective John Book, is introduced after the crime has been committed, right after the Inciting Incident. John Book is now off to a “Running Start” that will take him into Amish country to hide the boy until Book can confront the murderer, a dirty cop.

However, in “The Fugitive,” the crime is in motion on the opening page of the story. The Hero is taken into custody because he is in his home, covered with blood, with scratches on his neck when the police arrive after his dying wife has called 9-1-1. The Hero, Dr. Richard Kimble, is in the interrogation room of the police department and the crime is slowly revealed with Cross-Cut Flashback technique. The Hero is then off to a “Running Start” from the moment he is sentenced in court to lethal injection for the murder of his wife, which he did not commit.

The “Running Start” is a preferred way to open a story because the Hero is going for his Goal/Desire from the getgo. This ramps up the Narrative Drive of the story and it’s what keeps viewers on the edge of their seats.

How the Premise Becomes a Hook!

Wouldn't it be great if you could go back in time and hear how some of your

favorite movies or novels were pitched?

Benchley: "...so a Great White Shark is eating people at a beach resort, and this water-phobic sheriff has to figure out a way to kill it before the 4th of July week-end when tourism is at its peak..."

Cameron: " We know the ship sank, but did we know that a young man in steerage class was aboard to sacrifice his life to save the love of his life?"

The actual "pitching" is really saying what your premise is by first stating your main character; next comes the inciting incident that catapults your main character into action and conflict; and last is the outcome of the story, or what it is that the main character needs to do to solve his problem.

The premise of your story becomes "high concept" when you employ a "conflagration of opposites" methodology. This means that an immediately unlikely situation occurs in the story. For example: What if a man decides to dress up as a nanny in

order to get to see his children after a divorce decree prevents him from having custody? What if there were a lawyer who suddenly could not tell a lie? Because lying is how lawyers make their living...

This “conflagration of opposites” can also be called a hook, which is the idea that sells the story. It isn't the story itself, because the hook doesn't *tell* you what happens next – instead, it *sets up the question* “what happens next?” You can transcend what has been done before by added an epic element. i.e. Man's struggle against nature; the human race will be destroyed; a societal breakdown of the family structure will occur.

Once you have your high-concept premise, it should be no longer than 28 words. This would be like sending a text message that needs to include only the 3 main elements: main character; inciting incident; end game of the story. You can use this 28-words as your elevator speech; your pitch; your focus when you are writing your story. If you find

yourself getting off-course, refer back to the high-concept premise to remind yourself exactly what your story is about.

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What is my Premise?

Blog Post 4-30-15 Premise examples

We are at the VERY BEGINNING of the writing process for a great story idea you have been toying with for years. Do you buy screenwriting software and plug in your characters and start typing away? Answer: NO. THIS IS THE DEATH KNEEL FOR A STORY. AFTER A FEW PAGES, YOU WILL BE LOST.

TAKE YOUR TIME AND...Start with the Premise. A premise in screenplay writing is also called a Log Line. If you stand in a parking lot and yell across to a friend and tell the friend what the story is about, you should require only one or two sentences. In Premise talk, you should be able to tell what your story is about in approximately 25 words or less.

A Premise is a combination of character and plot. It is NOT theme, not a character's weakness, not every detail in the story, not a sequence of events. It should include the following:

1. The inciting incident
2. The main character
3. The outcome (highly summarized) of the story

A Premise gives you the "High Concept" of the

story. The “high concept” is the premise with a flip. The Premise should also enable the reader to tell what the genre is in those concise 25 words. The Premise should NEVER be the same as a movie you have seen. The Premise should never be an idea that you cannot develop into a story that has all the structure beats.

Here are examples of some famous Premises:

JAWS – Great white shark eats tourists off a small East Coast island community; a conflict-avoiding, water-phobic sheriff has to go out and kill it. (24 words)

The Inciting Incident in **JAWS** is when someone is eaten alive by the Great White. The main character is the sheriff. The outcome of the story is that the Great White is killed.

MRS. DOUBTFIRE – a Divorced Dad who misses his kids disguises himself as a British nanny and is hired by his ex- so he can see his kids more. (26 words)

The Inciting Incident in **MRS. DOUBTFIRE** is when the divorced dad is told by a judge that his wife has sole custody of his kids. The main character is the divorced dad. The outcome of the story is that the divorced dad will be able to see his kids.

THE FIRM – A young lawyer joins a law firm, only to be told by FBI he’ll be indicted soon since it

is Mafia-owned; no one quits. (25 words)

The Inciting Incident in THE FIRM is when the young lawyer joins a law firm. The main character is the young lawyer. The outcome of the story is that the young lawyer will find a way out of the Mafia-owned firm without getting killed.

Please open the pdf attachment in our Blog: Premise Examples. This is a page from a typical cable t.v. listing of films for the week. Note that several films are about 50 years old. The Premise Line concept was not as prevalent with the older films. In the 1980's, the Premise Line concept started to be a requirement by the Hollywood studios.

Practice writing down the 3 main components of each Premise Line. Be aware of the "High Concept" and the genre for each film. The more you do this exercise, the better equipped you will be to start writing your own Premise Lines.