

“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.

Jason Bourne: Script Learning Curve

Jason Bourne is a known entity – It is a highly successful franchise: The Bourne Identity, The Bourne Ultimatum, The Bourne Supremacy, The Bourne Legacy, and now – Just plain Jason Bourne because that’s all we need. The name says it all.

The genre that audiences love – Action/Thriller fully delivers, with a shaky-cam that can sometimes drive an audience to dizziness. Every single scene starts late and arrives early. In other words: The party is already in full swing when the guest arrives; a door slams and the guest is in his getaway car. The camera cross-cuts to the various story lines with record-breaking speed and then, we get a rap-up or mop-up in the last sequence of the story.

The story is compelling: A loner with a mysterious past. He’s been dealing with amnesia, but through all the Bourne movies, he’s slowly gotten his memory back. The plot has revolved around the fact that this Hero is looking for his past so he can understand his present and then hopefully, move on to a future. This is the compelling notion about crafting such a Main Character: Most of the people in the audience can certainly identify with his quest for self-understanding, as the journey most of us take through life involves connecting these three core elements: Past, Present, Future.

The problems with this script were not enough to make the film a failure, but there were problems, and if you can identify what they were, it will help to make you a better writer.

First of all, Nicki, the potential love interest and ally is knocked off at the end of Act 1. At approximately the 31

minute mark, she dies from several bullet wounds. Because the writer chose to kill off the potential love interest and Bourne's only ally at the end of Act 1, no time was invested in any type of relationship between the Hero and his love interest, who did have a vested affection for Bourne, as was established in prior films in this franchise. The audience doesn't feel emotionally involved by Bourne's loss in this film because there is simply no set up for it. If the writer was counting on every viewer having seen the prior films, that was an error. She could have been killed off on p. 75 which would set up the eventual show-down with the Main Opponent, the Tommy Lee Jones character.

Instead, the Vikander character appears as Bourne's new ally. She is a fake ally, as will be revealed in the Climax. But again, this is a "dropped in" contrivance of the writer. The audience is sucked in to thinking she's the new ally, and she is set-up nicely for this because the Opponent is aware that she is helping Bourne, but finds her conveniently useful to advance his own Plan – to take down Bourne. Suddenly, she turns and wants power and the whole thing about being Bourne's ally hits the dust. He is on to her though, as he is a "superman warrior who misses nothing," and we are given this little "twist" at the end of the Climax, into the New Equilibrium sequence of the story. All of this at the end was contrived and predictable and highly irritating because audiences are not as stupid as Hollywood thinks they are.

By the end of Act I, Bourne has figured out his identity and he has also gleaned remarkably new information about his father. This was powerful stuff and certainly could have sufficed to catapult him into Act 2 to avenge his father's murder. Instead, as already noted, Nicki, the love interest is the "new information" that pushes him out of his Ordinary World of fighting in bars and just existing in hiding into the C.I.A. world of high gadgetry, action, more murder, car chases, more opponents – All the stuff that audiences love in

this genre. The high-tech guru, with heady references to Snowden and identity theft, also on today's audience's minds, takes a bullet on p. 75 instead of Nicki, the love interest. Maybe the writer toyed with this idea. What was lacking here was what the high-tech guru had as a relationship to Bourne's character development – I couldn't find it. It made for a big disconnect. It was not a good feeling to see the guy felled by a bullet, but it was a plot contrivance and it was predictable. Yes, it was set-up when the high-tech guru had his meeting with the Opponent, the Tommy Lee Jones character. But again, unless the high-tech guru character either challenged, supported, or negated the Bourne character, he should have been rewritten in this script.

Then we had, per an interview with Matt Damon, approximately 170 cars demolished in this film. Kudos to Las Vegas for allowing all this craziness on the Strip. But 70 cars demolished would have been enough. The massive pile-ups were staged to the point of looking like an animation. And why not take the money from the savings of buying 100 cars and then smashing them up and give the money to some out of work Vegas people? All the casino employees who lost their jobs when the bubble burst in 2008 would have loved a lottery to win a car from Jason Bourne.

This brings me back to the compelling Weakness/Need of the Hero who is trying to connect his past with his present so he can move forward into his future. He's been used and abused by a corrupt system within the C.I.A., a common mantra these days. The audience identifies with this Hero. I'm not discounting the acting of Matt Damon, a very lovable, believable "All American" kinda guy. And the genre of Action/Thriller is a crowd-pleaser. But certain elements in this action-packed thriller could have made the character even more compelling and elevated the story line to a much higher level. Fancy camera work, cross-cutting, and superb high-tech gadgetry aside, it's the story that everyone remembers. It's

the inner struggle, that term called the “character arc,” that audiences remember. It was a bit thin in Jason Bourne.

Do You Have Writer's Block?

Or Do You Just Need to Take Another Shower?

The brain and the heart combine with our collective conscience in the shower of all places. It's happened so many times, and my screenwriting students have reported this phenomenon so many times that I now believe it to be the answer/solution to:

Writer's Block.

But Writer's Block is really not a Block. It is just a very nice smoke screen. It's protective armor from:

Marital issues; child-rearing problems; finance issues; the weather; house leaks; plumbing leaks; dirty dishes; the state of world affairs; mounting terrorist attacks; more finance issues; more child-rearing problems; more marital issues; issues of singledom; dating issues; divorce; death; taxes...You can fill in the paragraph and write about ten pages more.

Once Writer's Block sets in, it's time to take another shower. The water flows and clears the nasal passages and we are cleansed of all of our problems until, of course, we finish our shower and then the Block sets in again and again

and again.

So in addition to taking about ten showers per day, which will raise your water bill; not be good for a drought-ridden climate; make your skin extremely dry and sensitive, but very, very clean—I would suggest making a drink of your very favorite elixir, settling down in front of your computer, and watching the cursor click silently on the empty page.

Then, it's time to write down the following: I feel inspired right now. My past has caught up with my present, but I won't allow it to Block me from enjoying my future. Then, think of a character you'd like to write about: A woman on the bus; a child crying at a restaurant; a disabled passenger being helped off a bus by a soldier; a soldier returning home to his dog, family, cat, girlfriend, or childhood best friend.

Sit with your elixir for about 15 minutes and write a paragraph about this character. Think about the next shower you're going to take. Do not answer the phone or return an e-mail or speak to a soul for a solid 15 minutes. Close your 15-minute document and put it into your file that you've named: Writer Unblocked. Keep the file on your Desktop. Open the file tomorrow and repeat for one week.

Stay tuned...

Ronnie Tharp-Garber

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.

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!