

Some like it Frank Daniel

By Beth Serlin

I'm here to talk about a methodology created by the renowned Frank Daniel. He is much more renowned than I am and for good reason. There are many aspects about his work and I could be talking for days, even weeks, so I will only touch on a few of the most important. The true beauty about Frank's contribution is that he distilled the core of his thinking into one amazingly simple phrase. This phrase has become a mantra for any writer who has worked with Frank or has worked with a teacher using his methodology. But, before I get into it I'd like to point out, for those of you who don't know, that Frank is European and developed his thinking in Europe, only to bring it over to the United States when he immigrated. After starting out at FAMU in Prague, Frank put his fingerprint on the American education system by creating writing programs at Columbia University in New York, The American Film Institute in Los Angeles, the Sundance Institute Filmmaker's Lab and finally the Graduate Screenwriting Program at the University of Southern California. When my colleagues and I teach in Europe on such training programs as North By Northwest, some students are initially resistant to being indoctrinated by a bunch of Americans. In truth we are only bringing a European's thinking back to Europe. And in my opinion, which I find quite appropriate for this conference, the method is actually neither European nor American - it is simply dramatic. By being simply dramatic it can cross borders of culture, language and experience. North By Northwest has writers coming from nine different countries and the methodology works for all of them. No matter what the story. No matter what the genre. No matter what country the writer comes from. And so I would say that Frank and the teachers who pursue his lead, myself included, are citizens of cinema rather than of a particular geographical area.

Okay, this all sounds well and good but the question remains: what is that amazingly simple mantra and how does it work? Frank's approach is all about connection. The ability to communicate clearly and connect. Not only between the writer and the story he or she wants to tell, but also between the writer and the audience he or she wishes to entertain. It is a total

approach to the film experience from the writer's perspective. And so I will begin in the most appropriate way, by telling you one of Frank's stories.

There is a series of Czech jokes about two friends called Mr. Cohn and Mr. Robichek. This one starts with Cohn visiting his wife Sarah in the hospital. She is very ill and he brings her a cup of coffee. He hands it to her lovingly and Sarah breaks down.

"Cohn, I must tell you something."

"Sarah, please, relax. You should rest," Cohn responds.

Sarah tries to relax. She sips her coffee but it does no good.

"Cohn, I must confess to you. I've done something terribly wrong."

"No need, Sarah. Whatever it is. I want us to have some peaceful moments together."

"But Cohn, I was unfaithful to you."

"Sarah," he says dismissing it.

"But Cohn, I slept with your best friend. I slept with Robichek."

Cohn looks at her in all sympathy, "Sarah, why do you think I put that poison in your coffee?"

It's funny. A bit of black humor. It connects to the audience. Now imagine the story told chronologically. The effect would be totally different. Using the raw material of this story you could create a drama, a romance, a detective story, or a thriller. It is told in a certain way for a certain effect and that effect is what the writer wants the audience to feel. This is the inherent difference between 'telling a story' which one could call the narrative story structure, and 'a story well told' which one could call the dramatic story structure. Frank's approach to understanding and developing screenplays is all about 'a story well told' (i.e. dramatic story structure) because this includes not only the story and its characters, it includes the audience.

Some of you right now might be wondering, "Why is the audience so important to a writer? Isn't that the distributor's concern? Isn't that the marketing department's expertise? All the writer needs to do is figure out the story and get it down on paper." In the initial mission statement of this conference it was highlighted that there seems to be a gap between the stories proposed by European filmmakers and the taste of the European film audience. I don't know the exact statistics but for the moment let's accept this as fact. My proposition is

that if the writer accepts his or her responsibility to the audience during the development of a story, then this gap will be closed. Exactly what is the writer's responsibility to the audience? It is the only absolute rule in filmmaking: do not bore them. We are in the boredom prevention business. A writer has two major tasks and their job is not complete until both tasks are achieved: 1) to tell a story and 2) to give the audience an experience. So a writer must consider the audience as an inherent part of their storytelling and only then will their stories have a better chance of connecting. Frank's methodology embraces the audience, respects the audience, and ultimately helps to close the gap between a story and its audience.

So now you are interested but what is that amazing magical phrase already? It is simply this: "Somebody want something badly and is having difficulty getting it." That's it. That's character, that's conflict, that's structure, and most importantly that's tension. "Somebody wants something badly and is having difficulty getting it." (Una persona quiere mucho obtener algo y se encuentra muchos obstáculos/muchas dificultades.) This is the definition of what we call 'The Dramatic Predicament' and it is this dramatic predicament which is the core of any screenplay. Let's break it down. "Somebody", that's your main character. Every story needs one and it better be somebody interesting and empathetic. If it's not, the audience won't care. This somebody "wants something badly". By badly I mean passionately. Desperately. If they don't want this something badly enough, why should you sit in the theater watching them for two hours? This does not mean they have to want to save the world. They could want to buy milk. They could want to stay in bed all day. They can want anything but they must want this thing more than anything else. They want something badly and "are having difficulty getting it." This is conflict, created by a series of obstacles put in the character's path toward achieving whatever they so desperately want. These obstacles can be external and internal, physical, environmental, social, emotional, and psychological. What's important is that they exist and that they cause tremendous difficulty for our main character. Not little difficulty, tremendous difficulty. So we have character and conflict on display in this one simple phrase.

What are some practical applications? Let's start with one of Frank's favorite films alluded to in the title of this talk, 'Some Like it Hot'. Somebody: namely Joe played by Tony Curtis and

his buddy Jerry played by Jack Lemmon, want something badly: namely to escape the mobsters. They have difficulty getting it for many reasons. They are broke and unemployed. They escape by masquerading as women which causes them all sorts of other, very difficult problems. These very difficult problems escalate in a causal nature, one spinning out of the other, each one being harder to overcome than the last. Another example, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Somebody: namely McMurphy played by Jack Nicholson, wants something badly: namely to get out of prison by finishing his time in a psych ward. He has difficulties for many reasons, the biggest one being named Nurse Ratched. The battle between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched escalates through a series of events, one spinning out of the other, each one more and more difficult for McMurphy to overcome. This is very basic character and conflict. I could speak at length about how Frank specifically develops character and conflict but these are general concepts you are all familiar with, so I will move on to one of the most powerful tools a writer can wield. This tool is called tension.

"Somebody wants something badly and is having difficulty getting it." Where is the audience in this amazing mantra? How does this phrase help a writer connect their story to their viewer? Look at the phrase as a question and you have the answer. "Will somebody get what they want so badly?" This question defines the audience's engagement with the story. This is why they are watching. They want to know what will happen. They anticipate the outcome and are emotionally invested in it. But the outcome is unknown. It is an uncertainty. Will somebody get what they so badly want or won't they? This teeter-totter effect is another way to describe tension. Tension is the audience interaction with a story. It's what keeps them on the edge of their seat instead of going outside to smoke or using the bathroom. It's a vacillation between what the audience hopes will happen and what they fear will happen. They hope the main character gets what he or she wants and they fear that the main character will fail. Tension creates a mental, emotional strain for the viewer. It is a pleasurable anxiety resulting from watching an uncertain situation. And it is a writer's most powerful tool to reach an audience. By constantly moving an audience between hope and fear, a writer fully engages the viewer. Ultimately the gap between story and audience is closed.

Okay, so a screenplay needs tension to work as a film. How is tension created? This goes back to the Cohn and Robichek story and the difference between narrative story structure and dramatic story structure. Dramatic story structure is all about the audience and therefore all about tension. It is not simply 'telling a story', it is 'a story well told'. There are two general concepts that Frank formulated to this end and they both work in conjunction with each other. The first is called 'the tension question'. Simply put, this is a question always led by the word "Will". Will something happen or not? The beauty of this concept is that a tension question can and should exist on every level of a screenplay, the level of the scene, the sequence, the act and the story as a whole. By constantly creating tension questions in the audience's mind, the writer is constantly involving them in the story and in the future of the story. What will happen? It makes them stay in their seat to witness the outcome. The tension question is also a structural device, ensuring that on every level of the screenplay there is conflict. Will a character get what they want in a scene? In a sequence? In an act? In an overall story? For example, in *Some Like it Hot* a scene tension is: "Will Joe get out of trouble with his agent's secretary? A sequence tension is: Will Joe and Jerry find a job? The main act tension is: Will the guys survive the mobsters by posing as girls? The question is answered yes or no, the tension is relived, and a new tension question take it's place. There are always many tension questions operating at the same time and it the writer's job to weave and layer them together.

The second element is creating tension is the management of information. A writer is in complete control of who knows what when. Does the audience know the same information as the characters? Is the audience ahead of the main character or behind? Is the audience and the main character ahead of secondary characters or behind? Is the audience ahead of all the characters or completely in the dark? Each of these scenarios creates a different type of tension. There is straight dramatic tension. There is suspense. There is dramatic irony. There is mystery. Each of these types of tension create a specific effect on the audience and are all of these effects are built by either revealing or concealing information. These two elements combined, the management of information and working with the concept of tension questions, empowers a writer to impact the viewer in very specific ways. The viewer is in a

constant state either hope or fear. Ultimately these tools allow a writer to connect, so that there is no gap between their story and their audience.

"Somebody wants something badly and is having difficulty getting it" is a mantra of many for good reason. Although simple at first glance, it actually informs every aspect of a screenwriter's work and ensures that the story is well told in a dramatic fashion. There are many other nuances and uses of this phrase to help develop character, structure, dramatic form, and theme. This phrase not only allows a writer to develop a story, it allows them to analyze a finished film and see how it works. This phrase can also help them maintain clarity during a pitch. On another day it helps them defend storytelling choices to a producer. How? By empowering the writer with the ability to communicate that their choices were made for specific audience reaction. This is the dynamic simplicity of Frank's invention. His ideas and concepts about screenwriting are not formulaic or paint-by-numbers. They take into consideration the entire filmmaking experience, from the first glimmer of a writer's inspiration to the feeling a viewer has when they leave the theater. This is why I believe his methodology works across cultures. Today I concentrated on the concept of tension. For me it is the crucial core ingredient that speaks directly to the topic we are here to discuss, the connection between story and audience. My goal, a goal I'm sure I share with many of you, is to help our students achieve this in their work. In my experience as both a writer and a teacher, I have found no better methodology than Frank Daniel's to close the gap.