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Sex, Vows and Jellybeans Screenplay Thesis
and Accompanying Exegesis

Year of Lodgement: 2011

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Alan David Brash

Acknowledgements

Intellectual Property

The intellectual property residing in the screenplay *Sex, Vows and Jellybeans* (also known as: *The Jellybean Jar Sex Contest*) remains with the author, Alan David Brash.

Abstract

Sex, Vows and Jellybeans is an irreverent, bawdy, male-skewed comedy feature screenplay. It is reminiscent in tone to films such as *There's Something About Mary*, *The Forty Year Old Virgin* and *The Hangover*. It features two brothers – one single, one married – who engage in a contest to see who can have more sex. The accompanying exegesis takes an auto-ethnographical approach to this project and contextualises the work in relation to various sceenplay structure theories, including genre-specific models. In particular, I used the exegesis to examine the extent to which various screenplay structure models' primary value is descriptive, and the extent to which they are useful as tools in actually writing a screenplay. I also considered whether comedy or romantic comedy film stories have a genre-specific structure, distinct from the more generic models of screenplay structure popularised in the last twenty-thirty years.

My conclusion was that the more complex models were more "all encompassing" in their scope, but were prohibitively complicated to be used easily in the creative process. Simpler models – such as those espoused by Blake Snyder, Syd Field, and Chris Soth – didn't always feel relevant to every story scenario. But when one "cherry picked" from several models, one could develop a useful "road map" for the creative process that is structuring a two hour screenplay. Finally the more metaphorical models – such as Christopher Vogler's *The Hero's Journey* – proved too oblique for a story such as mine. Further, its proponents seemed so intent on conveying the idea that the model is almost infinitely flexible that it didn't provide a useful guide to me in shaping my story.

In summary: Almost all of these models were excellent at labelling or describing elements of completed films. They were often less useful in assisiting a writer create a useable shape for their particular story. Genre-specific models tended to follow a similar pattern to non-genre specific models, often using different terminology to describe similar plot points.

Exegesis by Alan Brash

My exegesis will take an auto-ethnographical approach to my thesis, a feature film comedy screenplay, as well as contextualising the work in relation to various screenplay structure theories, including genre-specific models. I will explore the value of various screenplay structure models in the creation of a screenplay, and explore whether they are primarily beneficial as tools for analysing completed films. Finally, I will examine the question of whether comedic film stories have a genre-specific structure, distinct from the more generic structure models popularised in the last twenty-thirty years.

Introduction

Having a background in "after-dinner" speaking, stand-up comedy, and writing and editing television sketch comedy, it was perhaps surprising that neither of my first two feature screenplays were comedies. I decided to address this in 2010 in the AUT Master of Creative Writing programme. My objective was to write the first draft of an irreverent, bawdy comedy screenplay that could ultimately have commercial potential either in the New Zealand or Hollywood feature film marketplace. I felt the themes and issues of the story would be sufficiently universal that the story could work in either context. The screenplay, *Sex, Vows and Jellybeans* is a story about relationships between the sexes. By focusing on three brothers – one married, one single, and one on the cusp of a committed relationship – I attempted to explore the three stages of a man's life vis-à-vis his relationship with a woman/spouse in a light-hearted, adult manner.

As a part-time lecturer in undergraduate screenwriting (at Unitec's Department of Performing and Screen Arts), I had no shortage of material to draw from when it came to considering the best way to structure the screenplay. I decided to use this exegesis to examine the story structure models of: Robert McKee, John Truby, Blake Snyder, Christopher Vogler, Michael Hauge, and the developers of the story model, *Dramatica*. I also drew extensively on a

less known source who has developed his own story structure model – Chris Soth, (Soth, 2005). By Soth's own admission[1] his work was derived from the sequence approach which he learnt at USC Film School, and which is also taught by fellow USC graduate, Paul Joseph Gulino.[2] I will also reference the comedy genre-specific teachings of Billy Mernit and Steve Kaplan.

Inspiration

The inspiration for *Sex, Vows and Jellybeans* came from several sources. My sister and I, both married with young children, observed how few mainstream comedies or romantic comedies (rom-coms) dealt with married couples. Indeed the classic rom-com structure dictates that, at its most basic, the story will follow a "boy meets girl, boy loses girls, boy wins girl back again" model. So this script was, in part, a desire to address the issue of: What happens after "happily-ever-after?" How do relationships stay fresh and exciting when children, career, and financial pressures frequently conspire against romance, intimacy, and spontaneity?

I also noted that married characters were rarely the protagonist in wide release comedy feature films. Where the main characters were in a committed relationship, the central conflict was generally about something else. In *Meet the Parents* (Roach, 2001) the conflict revolved around a man trying to impress his potential future parents-in-law. In *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Columbus, 1993) the married couple separated within ten minutes of the start of the film and the conflict revolved around access to the Robin Williams' character's children. Even when the issue of romance and intimacy in a relationship was one aspect of a film's theme – such as in *Flirting With Disaster* (Russell, 1996) – it was often of secondary importance compared to the plot mechanism driving the story. (Ben Stiller's character finding his birth parents.) I felt this was a rich thematic vein to mine, and also that a large segment of the movie-going audience wasn't being well served.

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[1] Mentioned in his DVD seminar series 'Chris Soth's Million Dollar Screenwriting: The Mini-Movie Method', 2005, Cub Scribe Productions, Inc.
[2] As described by Peter Sciretta on filmslash.com
http://www.slashfilm.com/article.php/2005110608111132

I was heartened when, in 2010, during the writing of this script, *Date Night* (Levy, 2010) was released to solid box office returns[3] and generally positive reviews.[4] While this script fell into the action/comedy sub-genre, it clearly tackled the subject of a married couple (with children) trying to find fun and freshness in their marriage – a similar theme to that which I was exploring in *Sex, Vows and Jellybeans*. I was struck by the fact that my wife and I thoroughly enjoyed the film – seeing it with another couple who had children – but also that my seventeen year old half-brother took a date to the same film. My seventy year old father also saw it and enjoyed it.

While the star appeal of two of America's top comedy talents – Steve Carrell and Tina Fey – undoubtedly helped the film's success, presumably those stars were attracted to the strength of the script, which seemed to have wide audience appeal.

Early Development of the Idea

Screenwriting is a collaborative process, and I was influenced by an American screenwriting tutor, Barney Lichtenstein, who teaches a UCLA Extension course online. I had several fruitful discussions with him in the early development of this concept. One plot point to come out of those deliberations was that the brothers' sex contest should have the potential to leak into the public arena. The idea being that something very private (sex with your partner) becoming public (footage ending up on the internet) raised the stakes, and made resolution of the problem all the more urgent. By increasing the pressure on the protagonist, it gave me the ability to increase the tension and the conflict, and hence, the drama and comedy.

I also wanted to make life difficult for Andy by having his wife, Beth, throw him out of the family home when she discovered the sex contest. For that to feel

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[3] Box office mojo reports the film made US$98 million at the North American box office and a further US$50 million international from the theatrical release, with a modest 33% drop in US box office between the first and second weekends of its release.
http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=main&id=datenight.htm

[4] Metacritic, which offers the mean ratings of several US movie reviewers of a given film, found more positive reviews than mixed or negative ones for *Date Night*. Positive reviews outnumbered negative reviews by a factor of ten to one. http://www.metacritic.com/movie/date-night

credible, I needed to have something occur that felt serious enough to warrant such drastic action.

However, finding a way for this to occur proved difficult without sacrificing too much sympathy for the protagonist. For several drafts the mechanism by which the sex became public was linked to a verification device the two brothers used to keep track of how much sex each was having. The idea was that they would record the act – only the audio, rather than the video as well – using laptop webcams. The footage would be sent to the other's computer for verification. The plot had it that an I.T. technician – for self-serving reasons that later became apparent – did not honestly follow instructions, and the footage, containing both audio and video, ended up "in the wrong hands."

What I discovered, however, was that whenever someone read this part of the script, especially female readers, they baulked at the idea of a loving husband secretly recording love-making with his wife. Even with the caveat that it was only supposed to be audio, the betrayal felt so extreme that it became impossible to redeem Andy after that. No matter how many times I fine-tuned that part of the plot (including making Andy drunk at the time of agreeing to the plan), it did not seem to solve the problem that existed in many readers' eyes.

I eventually agreed that this created an insurmountable sympathy problem with the story's hero – who was already in danger of being unsympathetic given that the central thrust of his narrative arc (the contest itself) was essentially a dishonest endeavour.

By removing this aspect of the plot, I created two new plot problems that had to be addressed: First, if the contest involved the very private act of sex, and the stakes regarding who wins the contest were high enough (even if only in relation to each brother's emotional needs), then logically there needed to be some credible method of verifying the count. Second, if I wanted to hold on to the idea that evidence of the contest was in danger of becoming public, I needed to find some way for the act to be recorded other than because Andy set it up that way.

In the end the solution I found was as follows:

- Andy's single brother, Max, could still record his sex acts. This gave Andy his verification, and a reader ought not to care as much about Max as he

is not the hero, and is set up as a womanising cad, so we would expect "bad behaviour" from him.

- A more whimsical – and hopefully comedic – solution to the requirement that Andy's sexual couplings be verifiable was the idea that Beth had a very character-specific activity that she engaged in after sex. In this case I settled on baking. I liked the idea that there was some quirk that was in keeping with the playful tone of the script, but that wasn't so far-fetched as to strain credulity for the reader. While this does require a certain "leap" by the reader, I felt it would work within the tone and genre of the piece. (Hopefully in a comedy one is more willing to suspend disbelief than one might be in a "straight" drama.)

- In order for the footage to potentially become public, I had Andy persuade Beth to have sex in her office after hours, only for the act to be recorded on security cameras. I changed a secondary character so that he became a work rival of Beth's, and it is he who gets hold of the footage.

- This worked to raise the stakes: when Beth is alerted to the possibility the sex act might become public she's mortified. That, coupled with her sense of betrayal in regards to the contest (which she stumbles upon independently of finding out about the act being recorded), served as the motivation for throwing Andy out of the family home.

The other major story issue that I wrestled with for several months was: Who is my hero? Some readers – including my supervisor, Nick Ward – felt the single brother, Max, was the more obvious choice. Nick argued Max had a clearer character arc. In the story's subplot, womanising Max finds true love and must decide whether to pursue that – even if it means he loses the sex contest with his brother. He also acts as an ally to Andy when it becomes clear that Andy's marriage is on the line due to the contest (which Max pressured Andy into in the first place). Nick's argument was that Max undergoes the biggest change. He felt that Max would be well motivated to solve the problem if his actions unwittingly led to damage to his relationship with his brother (if Andy's marriage failed due to Max's actions). Nick liked the irony of a character who had disavowed love having to fight for love in order to save someone he cared

about. Nick also argued that Max felt like the more engaging character, compared to Andy who seemed more "ordinary", not as "larger than life."

While I concede these arguments have strength, after much soul-searching and experimentation, I decided to stay with Andy as the protagonist. Certainly it is possible to have a screenplay with more than one protagonist – or where the protagonist is not entirely clear. However, these are the exceptions rather than the rule. Nick felt that with *Sex, Vows and Jellybeans* being only my third feature screenplay, writing something other than a single protagonist story would be unwise. It is also true that many multi-protagonist films are more "indie" or "art house" in nature – not what I was attempting with this script. Examples that come to mind include: *No Country for Old Men* (Coen & Coen, 2007), *Syriana* (Gaghan, 2005), *Crash* (Haggis, 2004), and *Lone Star* (Sayles, 1996).

My arguments in favour of Andy as the protagonist were:

- Andy's story is less often told; Max could end up feeling overly familiar to a reader.

- In comedy, there is nothing wrong with having a hero who some might see as a "loser" – witness the titular character in *The Forty Year Old Virgin* (Apatow, 2005). In fact – unlike in drama, where the hero is generally expected to be heroic – in comedy the opposite is said to apply. Comedy writing theorist, Steve Kaplan maintains a comic hero is: "An ordinary guy struggling against insurmountable odds without many of the required skills and tools with which to win yet never giving up hope." (Kaplan, 2010) This description certainly suggests a highly imperfect/inadequate protagonist.

- Andy has the most at stake. While Max stands to lose by proxy if Andy's marriage fails, Andy's loss is the most personal and profound. He is the father of Beth's children, who would be collateral damage in any divorce.

- Andy has an obvious uphill battle; his quest is more challenging. He's the underdog when it comes to a sex contest.

- As a married man with children I felt I could be more truthful and insightful in my portrayal of Andy and Beth's relationship. While *Sex, Vows and Jellybeans* is far from autobiographical, I, like many married individuals, wrestle with the sorts of issues that Andy wrestles with.

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- Andy was easier for a reader to identify with. While he's far from perfect, he is more selfless than Max.

- Much of the inspiration for the script was to tell a story of a couple who were married; rather than a traditional "boy meets girl" story.

In saying that, Nick's prompting did make me take a hard look at both Andy's character and his journey to ensure that both were as satisfying as they could be. I did not want a scenario where a secondary character was more interesting than the hero. Nor did I want a passive hero who was reduced to mere observer. I explored at length the idea of making Max the protagonist – and even considered the youngest brother, Johnny – before settling back on my original idea of Andy.

Screenplay Structure Tools

William Goldman famously said that "screenplays are structure" (Goldman, 1985, p. 195). It was one of only two quotes in his landmark book, *Adventures in the Screen Trade* that he wrote in capitals. (The other being the oft-quoted "Nobody knows anything." [Goldman, 1985, p. 39]) As mentioned above, I have studied, and taught, numerous screenplay models over the years. I have tried to be open to new authors and their respective theories when they came along. This led me to contemplate which one, if any, I should employ to write *Sex, Vows and Jellybeans*. In the end I utilised aspects from several theories to help structure the story.

One I stayed with for a while before abandoning was *Dramatica Pro*. (Huntley and Philipps, 1999) This story theory and story engine software programme was co-developed by one of the creators of the *Movie Magic Screenwriter* software programme.[5] While I ended up abandoning the template as a tool to write the script, I did conclude that with more time to study their highly complex approach to story, creative outcomes could be achieved. Moreover, one the creators, Chris Huntley, did an excellent analysis of how Dramatica Pro differed from the story paradigms and structure models of some

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[5] http://www.screenplay.com/t-WBI_History.aspx

of the leading script theorists. This analysis was particularly useful because it included Robert McKee, Chris Vogler, Michael Hauge, and John Truby. (Huntley, 2007)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Huntley contended that all these authors had severe shortcomings with their models. In doing so, he make the case as to why he felt his system was superior. However, despite this inevitable bias, I felt he did make some valid points along the way.

One of the key issues he explored was whether these popular structural models were derived primarily from an audience's perspective. In other words: A system developed by watching films (or reading scripts) and looking for common patterns might be a useful tool to explore how an audience interprets or responds to a story. But are they useful tools in *constructing* those stories? In this respect Dramatica Pro's ambitions at least appear to surpass the others. Dramatica also has a more all-encompassing outlook which incorporates concepts such as:

- The protagonist and the main character being different characters. (i.e: the former drives the story/plot towards a goal; the latter is the character the audience is asked to relate to).
- A character *may* change, or s/he may remain steadfast. Several of the popular models, Truby, McKee, and Vogler in particular, emphasise the necessity for the character to grow and change through-out the story and, indeed, this is a very common occurrence. However it isn't universal, and many well-regarded films have shown this, such as *The Remains of the Day* (Ivory, 1993)

Others have noted similar shortcomings with various script structure templates: Comedy theorist, Steve Kaplan, (who deals more with scene-level comedy techniques rather than script structure models) commented at an Auckland workshop that he had recently toured with Michael Hauge. He asked him what he did when a film did not conform to Hauge's structural template. According to Kaplan, Hauge light-heartedly admitted he simply avoided those films in his lectures and books. (Kaplan, 2010) In other words, story theorists

ignore successful films that don't fit "their mould," or they argue the film would have been better/more successful *had* they hewed more closely to their model.

Huntley also "lines up" six script structure templates to see how they compare to his model. This serves as a useful overview of how they compare to each other. He admits he was "surprised by how structurally similar they are to each other." (Huntley, 2007, p. 3)

My own analysis of various story models reached a similar conclusion: Huntley argued there are essentially two schools of thought. One he calls the "post-Aristotelian story paradigm"; the other "The Hero's Journey story paradigm." The former models build on the work of Aristotle, and the author of *The Art of Dramatic Writing!*, Lajos Egri, and, while throwing in some discussion of character, primarily focus on a character pursuing a goal. It's very much focussed on "cause and effect", and centred on the notion of rising action or increasing conflict/complications leading to a final confrontation and the success (or failure) of reaching the story's goal. In this camp he puts Seger (by and large), Hauge, McKee and Field. (Huntley, 2007, p. 3)

The latter models are based on Joseph Campbell's work, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, more recently popularised by Christopher Vogler. (Vogler, 1992) Huntley puts not only Vogler in this camp, but also John Truby. (Huntley, 2007, p. 3)

One of the problems I have with the Hero's Journey model is that it comes from mythology. As such, it has numerous terms that relate to myth. If one were writing *Lord of the Rings*, (Jackson, 2001) *The Matrix* (Wachowski, 1999) or *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) I could understand these terms being useful. However, when telling a drama, comedy or action story set in some version of the "real world" these terms become increasingly distanced from describing what's actually going on in a scene. So one might be left wondering whether a scene where the hero and his lover have sex in a basement is an Approach to the Inmost Cave or a Supreme Ordeal? Or perhaps it's Crossing the Threshold. (Vogler, 1992, p. 16) Vogler goes even further by urging writers to choose their own metaphor:

> The pattern of the Hero's Journey is but one metaphor for what goes on in a story or a human life. I have used hunting, college classes, and human sexual response as metaphors to help explain the pattern I see in story...

you might find it useful to compare a story to a baseball game... You might decide the process of sailing a boat, baking bread, rafting a river, driving a car, or carving a statue makes a more meaningful comparison to telling a story. Sometimes a combination of metaphors is needed to illuminate different facets of the human journey. (Vogler, 1992, p. 266)

Far from making this more liberating I simply find it more confusing. If my metaphor is "repairing the car" then I must first come up with several steps ("This is the moment our hero changes the oil") and then work out how they translate into the specifics of the story I'm crafting. ("When he kisses the girl for the first time, that's the Hero Changing the Oil.") It becomes ludicrously convoluted.

I would, however, make an additional distinction between story models, over and above the two outlined by Huntley. In many ways I feel Dramatica is most like Truby's model which – while borrowing aspect of a Hero's Journey paradigm, seems mostly to follow the idea that stories are about solving problems. This is what he bases his seven steps of story-telling on – which he then expands into 22 steps. (Truby, 2007) Huntley states that: "the Dramatica theory posits that stories are models of human psychology, specifically metaphors for the mechanisms of a mind attempting to resolve an inequity." (Huntley, 2007, p. 4)

Compare that with Truby's description of story: "The seven steps are the nucleus, the DNA of your story and the foundation of your success as a storyteller... They are the steps that any human being must work through to solve a life problem." (Truby, 2007, p. 40)

In the end, I found the "Post-Aristotelian" model, combined with elements of the "resolving an inequity/solving a problem" model, the most useful. I attempted to describe the major plot sequences according to Chris Soth's eight "Mini Movies" (Soth, 2005). Then I would cross-reference others' screenplay models where I felt they were relevant. For example, Blake Snyder's "Fun and Games" and "theme stated" (Snyder, 2005, p. 70); John Truby's "desire, weakness/need", "moral argument", and "plan." (Truby, 2007, p. 270)

This was a story I had ruminated on for two to three years. As such, I believe I had done a lot of subconscious work on the likely shape of the story before sitting down to write it. I broadly knew what I wanted to say and where my hero

would end up at the end. I also knew the inciting incident that kicked-off the story (the suggestion of a sex contest), and I knew the contest itself would occupy at least the first half of Act 2. (I decided quite early on that Andy would pull out of the contest somewhere around the Act 2 Midpoint – a point half way through Act 2.) (Snyder, 2005, p. 82)

My first two screenplays were extremely intricately plotted thrillers. For each, I wrote numerous drafts. I had also worked for many years in television drama, where finding the shape of the stories for each episode was paramount. Finally, *Sex, Vows and Jellybeans* was always designed to be a fairly straight-forward story. Structurally, this wasn't going to try to emulate *Memento* (Nolan, 2000) or *Pulp Fiction*. (Tarantino, 1994) Nor was it going to be an ensemble drama like *Crash* (Haggis) or *Syriana*. (Gaghan) All of this meant I didn't feel the need to employ desperately complex structural tools. Rather I would utilise simple tools, and augment them with techniques of comedy writing specialists, such as Steve Kaplan, to elevate the script at the scene level.

Chris Soth's *Mini Movie Method*

Soth is a writer I came across on-line. A produced, Los Angeles-based screenwriter, he is currently working primarily as a mentor and teacher, having studied at USC and sold his graduating script for high six figures. (In fact he uses the title Million Dollar Screenwriting given he's made over one million dollars on this one produced script.) [6]
Soth essentially takes the traditional three act structure and divides it up further, taking each of the four sections of the script that most theorists identify (Acts 1, 2 and 3, with Act 2 broken into 2 parts) and dividing them each in two again. Following is a breakdown of Soth's eight mini-movies and his description of what typically occurs in each step:

- **MINI-MOVIE ONE**:
Our hero's status quo, his ordinary life, ends with an inciting incident or "call to adventure".
- **MINI-MOVIE TWO**:

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[6] http://www.milliondollarscreenwriting.com/

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Our hero's denial of the call, and his gradually being "locked into" the conflict brought on by this call.

• **MINI-MOVIE THREE**:
Our hero's first attempts to solve his problem, the first things that anyone with this problem would try, appealing to outside authority to help him. Ends when all these avenues are shut to our hero.

• **MINI-MOVIE FOUR**:
Our hero spawns a more grandiose, more extreme plan. He prepares for it, gathers what materials and allies he may need then puts the plan into action -- only to have it go horribly wrong, usually due to certain vital information the hero lacked about the forces of antagonism allied against him.

• **MINI-MOVIE FIVE**:
Having created his plan to solve his problem WITHOUT changing, our hero is confronted by his need to change, eyes opened to his own weaknesses, driven by the antagonist to change or die. He retreats to lick his wounds.

• **MINI-MOVIE SIX**: Our hero spawns a new plan, but now he's ready to change. He puts this plan into action...and is very nearly destroyed by it. And then...a revelation.

• **MINI-MOVIE SEVEN**: The revelation allows our hero to see victory, and he rejoins the battle with a new fervor, finally turning the tables on his antagonist and arrives at apparent victory. And then the tables turn one more time!

• **MINI-MOVIE EIGHT**: The hero puts down the antagonist's last attempt to defeat him, wraps up his story and any sub-plots, and moves into the new world he and his story have created. (Soth, 2005, pp. 163-165)

I found these steps useful for a few reasons. Firstly, each step averages 10-15 pages, so, as Soth himself notes, they're an achievable portion of script to tackle in a single writing session. (Soth, 2005, p. 185) He discusses the idea that drama is a contest between the hopes and fears that an audience feels as they watch events unfold, and that this is what gives a good story tension. He maintains that each Mini Movie ends with one tension being resolved and a new one starting. (Soth, p. 30)

The other reason I found this a useful tool to work with was that Soth gives the writer permission to "ignore it." Soth himself admits that within each of the steps there are numerous story possibilities. (Soth, p. 126) This allowed me to insert another paradigm's step if it felt more appropriate.

I believe all script structure templates are limited by one of the following two issues:

1. The theorist wants to make their model be "all things to all people." In doing so they apply a straight jacket to writers by encouraging them to follow a rigid formula. These theorists frequently find themselves unable to explain the structure of successful films that are not structured as they believe they "ought" to be.
2. The theorist promotes a template so vague and malleable that it is of little use in providing a road map for screenwriters.

Huntley points out this dichotomy when analysing Vogler's work, and I also picked up on it: "Vogler bends over backwards to illustrate exceptions to the Hero definition. So many that they seem to void any sense of "rules" to go by." (Huntley, 2007, p. 3)

In a companion book, *Myth and the Movies*, (Voytilla, 1999) the author gives illustrations of the Hero's Journey in various successful films across numerous genres. One such illustration is *Halloween* (Carpenter, 1978). In that film he suggests no fewer than twelve "Calls to Adventure" (Voytilla, p. 91) – a plot point usually identical to a film's Inciting Incident. (Vogler, 1992, p. 117) But if one were to insert that sort of story shape into a three act model, one would assume they were looking at a structural shambles.

In his book Vogler states that the needs of the story dictate its structure, structure will be influenced by the audience, and the time and place in which the story is being told. (Vogler, p. 266) He adds: "…don't follow these guidelines too rigidly." Use it like a map; write your story and then use it as a guide or reference for when you get lost. (Vogler, p. 267)

So if any of the steps can be omitted, rearranged, or repeated ad infinitum, what use is it as a template?

By contrast, Blake Snyder is positively didactic when he says in relation to the plot point he calls 'Break into Two' – a similar beat to the First Act Turning Point: "It happens on page 25. I have been in many arguments. Why not page 28? What's wrong with 30? Don't. Please." Even going so far as to add: "Page 25 is the place where I always go to first in a screenplay someone has handed me… to see 'what happens on 25.'" (Snyder, 2005, p. 78)

Yet in his follow-up book, *Save the Cat Goes to the Movies* (Snyder, 2007) he cites numerous examples of successful movies to prove *other* points that by no means conform to the rigid rules he espoused in his previous book.

Soth, too, argues that some steps can be combined or omitted. And that some of the things he says might happen in various mini movies may not always happen there – or indeed, may not occur at all, depending on the type of story being told. (Soth, p. 126)

Even proponents of a modified three act structure appear to want to hedge their bets. McKee states that scripts can have have more or less than 3 acts: he suggests *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Newell, 1994) has five, and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, (Spielberg, 1981) has seven. (McKee, 1998, p. 220)

As mentioned, I felt able to work within Soth's template, partly because I didn't hold to it too rigidly, and because I used others' models when it suited my story. Nevertheless, I felt it gave me a framework which served as a starting point for finding my story's structure. My plot roughly conformed to the following shape:

- **MINI-MOVIE ONE**:

Introduce Andy and identify his problem (dull sex life within marriage). Inciting Incident occurs when Johnny reveals he's thinking of getting married and Max challenges Andy to a sex competition.

- **MINI-MOVIE TWO**:

Andy resists this Call to Adventure (Vogler, p. 117) – what Snyder refers to as The Debate, (Snyder, p. 77) but he eventually takes up the challenge.

- **MINI-MOVIE THREE**:

Moving into Act 2 and the contest is underway. The area Snyder calls "Fun and Games". (Snyder, p. 80) Andy takes the most obvious approach to this challenge but it doesn't work for him.

- **MINI-MOVIE FOUR**:

Andy comes up with a new plan; eventually he starts having some success, but then the contest is discovered and Beth kicks him out of the house.

- **MINI-MOVIE FIVE**:

Andy licks his wounds, especially as Dave threatens to release the sex tape if he doesn't back off Beth. He contemplates an affair with an old flame.

• **MINI-MOVIE SIX**:

Andy is reinvigorated to re-enter the fight. He attempts to win Beth back and destroy the tape. This ends with Andy at a real low point.

• **MINI-MOVIE SEVEN**:

Andy finally joins forces with Beth and together they take on Dave. By doing this they're reminded of what they have together.

• **MINI-MOVIE EIGHT**:

The resolution; we see how things have changed for the better for Andy, Beth, and Andy's brothers.

Genre Specific Story Tools

Billy Mernit in his book *Writing the Romantic Comedy* (Mernit, 2000) attempts to find a structure that fits precisely for romantic comedies (or rom-coms). He refers to a rom-com subgenre he describes as "Married", and mentions films such as *The War of the Roses.* (DeVito, 1989) He indicates the premise of these stories are "slightly atypical in that girl's already got boy at the top; *staying* together is the issue that generally drives the plot." (Mernit, p. 20)

Yet it's not clear how his seven plot beats necessarily work for these types of films (which incorporate *Sex Vows and Jellybeans*). His plot beats are:

1. The Chemical Equation: Setup
2. Cute Meet: Catalyst
3. A Sexy Complication: Turning Point
4. The Hook: Midpoint
5. Swivel: Second Turning Point
6. The Dark Moment: Crisis Climax
7. Joyful Defeat: Resolution

(Mernit, pp. 109-117)

By comparison, consider Blake Snyder's Beat Sheet, where he describes:

- Set-up (also incorporating Opening Image and Theme Stated)
- Catalyst (followed by Debate)
- Break into Two (followed by B Story and Fun and Games)
- Midpoint
- Bad Guys Close In
- All is Lost
- Dark Night of the Soul
- Break into Three
- Finale (followed by Final Image)

(Snyder, 2005, p. 70)

Apart from the fact that Mernit's plot points are designed to reflect a relationship-based story, and Snyder's more closely hews to a typical protagonist/antagonist model, they are remarkably similar. Snyder's has more detail, and he splits out some steps that Mernit clusters together. For example: "All is Lost," "Dark Night of the Soul" and "Break into Three" – all of which appear around the end of the Act 2 – are bundled together as "The Dark Moment: Crisis Climax" by Mernit.

This is typical of structure theorists: They each have a particular way of labelling various steps or plot points. Some include more than others; some separate out steps that others "bundle" together. But the overall shape is remarkably similar.

Hence my strategy of following a modified three act structure (courtesy of Mr. Soth), and then reinforcing that by "cherry picking" elements from other theorists where they seemed to fit.

For example, Snyder's term "Fun and Games" seemed appropriate to describe Andy's efforts to get his wife to have sex with him without admitting he was taking part in a contest. And Truby's views on opposites in rom-coms were useful when he stated that they typically involve: The love interest/partner, a family member, and another suitor (Truby, John Truby's Comedy Writing Course, 2009) A perfect fit for my story.

I turned to Truby's views on comedy to consider how useful it is to maximise opposite character traits in a story, such as male versus female, and different ways of viewing the world. (The married Andy versus the single Max.) He also describes characters as either leaning towards Animal (Max), Machine (Beth) or Child (Andy). (Truby, 2009) Another useful consideration.

I was also influenced by Dramatica's character model which talks about "Contagonists." (Huntley and Philipps, 1999) This is a term I hadn't previously come across. Yet I found it useful to distinguish Max and Beth's respective roles in the story. Beth was the antagonist: the one making it hard for Andy to get what he wants. Yet Max is the one who takes Andy "off-course." Dramatica defines a Contagonist as an archetypal character who represents the qualities of "Temptation and Hinder." They contrast this with a character they call

"Guardian" who represents the quality of Conscience. (Huntley and Philipps) For me this was an excellent way to contrast Andy's two brothers, Max and Johnny. Plus it gave me a distinct way of considering Andy's two main Opponents – Beth and Max.

Finally, Vogler's description of Character Archetypes as being like masks worn at different times by different characters was also a metaphor I found useful. As such, the Hero archetype mask (generally, the same character as the protagonist) can be worn by a Mentor (such as when Obi-One Kenobi sacrifices himself to assist Luke et al escape the Death Star in *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) or a Hero can put on the mask of a Trickster, such as when Indiana Jones shoots the scimitar-wielding Arab in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. (Spielberg, 1981) The idea that different characters can perform different story functions at different times in the script is self-evident, but also a fact that is good to be reminded of.

Conclusion

No single model is going to perfectly suit every story. While a model such as Dramatica may go a long way to finding a "suitable" shape for a story, it presumes you know a lot about your story from the outset, and seems to diminish the "discovery" aspect that writing, especially a first draft, often brings with it. It also has a very "academic" tone which can be off-putting when engaged in a creative process such as writing a screenplay.

A genre-specific form *may* be useful if the story you're writing fits well within that genre. If it doesn't adhere to the usual genre conventions – for example, if the lovers start the story *together* – then it mightn't be all that useful. And in some cases (as in Mernit versus Snyder illustration above), the distinction can be primarily semantic. This also felt like the case in relation to John Truby. As well as his 22 Steps, he's made much (through seminars, software programmes and articles) of discussing the importance of various genre models. And yet, looking at his Comedy genre structure steps, instead of the more generic terms "First Revelation" and "Opponent's Plan," he's simply replaced them with terms such as "Nightmare 1," "Nightmare 2," and so on, culminating in "Worst Nightmare." Where he's previously labelled the end of the

film a "New Equilibrium," in his comedy genre model he refers to it as the "New Community." (Truby, Truby's Blockbuster software 5.10c, 2008)

Having said that, the opposite also holds true: when terms stray too far from useable, relatable labels for plot steps, they become meaningless. In other words, it's easier to understand what "Fun and Games" might mean in a comedy than "Approach to the Inmost Cave." Though conversely, Snyder's description of the second half of Act 2 representing "Bad Guys Close In" (Snyder, 2005, p. 85) may have little to do with many relationship-driven stories.

Unless one is planning on really experimenting with structure, one could do worse than use three act structure as a starting point – perhaps dividing the plot into eight more manageable "chunks," each with its own tension to resolve. And bear in mind the oft-told metaphor to describe a story's beginning, middle and end: Chase your hero up a tree; throw stones at her; then get her down.

That's broadly what I've attempted to do in *Sex Vows and Jellybeans*.

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