



Learning from the Masters

AN INTERVIEW WITH SCREENWRITER JOHN HAMBURG

QUIZ & SUGGESTED EXERCISES

(RECOMMENDED FOR HIGH SCHOOL & COLLEGE STUDENTS)

“The characters in the scripts I write think that they’re in a drama. They don’t know that it’s kind of funny what’s happening, they take their lives really seriously. I always use that as a guidepost.”

John Hamburg

EXCERPTS FROM JOHN HAMBURG'S INTERVIEW:

MIKE DE LUCA: *Is your work space in New York, or is it mostly [in L.A.] now?*

JOHN HAMBURG: It's in New York... My office was in a suite of therapists. I'd be writing and you'd hear screaming, from a couple in couples therapy. It's funny, when you're in New York, you go, "No one in L.A. would believe what's going on." Because L.A. writers are all in their beautiful—they've built a deck out back, or they're at the studio. Here, I'm literally walking out to get a sandwich and there's four people waiting to go into therapy. It was just an office space, really bare bones.

DE LUCA: *Did you get any inspiration from being around all that neurosis?*

HAMBURG: Yeah. I'm sure. That's why I like living in New York most of the time. There's a lot of neurosis floating around there.

DE LUCA: *Do you draw much on your experiences or what happens in real life for your scripts?*

HAMBURG: Yeah, that's a lot of it. A lot of it is my life, or...it's not necessarily my life, like things that literally happened to me in my life, but it's fears I have or awkward situations, that I can then heighten it and put it into a movie. Or just living in the world and walking down the street, seeing the way two people interact. I'm that cliché of, at a restaurant, always listening in on what other people are talking about.

DE LUCA: *Do you ever record dialogue, or jot notes down when you hear something?*

HAMBURG: I jot notes down. The best are taxi drivers. I have pages upon pages of what cab drivers have said to me, that I want always to put in scripts... I sat in a cab the other day and a guy was like, "Let me ask you a question. I eat tuna sandwiches every day. What do you think about that?" Why would he ask me? I was like, "There's a lot of mercury in tuna, so you might want to mix it up. Have a little turkey." He was like, "Okay. Thank you."

QUIZ:

As you watch the interview, see if you can answer the following questions.

1. When did John Hamburg make his first films?
2. What is “Tick?”
3. Why did Hamburg leave NYU film school?
4. Does he recommend working as a production assistant (PA)?
5. What kind of outlining does he do before writing?
6. What does he see as his main contribution to “Meet the Parents?”
7. What does he consider when offered a job rewriting a script?
8. What’s Hamburg’s attitude towards writing set pieces?
9. What does he say is the challenge of adapting a sketch into a feature, as with “Zoolander?”
10. What’s his feeling about test screenings?
11. Does he consider a film’s budget when writing?
12. Why does Hamburg say there’s no such thing as a dialogue polish?
13. How has his writing discipline changed?
14. How does he prepare for a pitch?
15. What advice does he have for novice screenwriters?

Bonus question:

16. Who was originally attached to star in “Meet the Parents?”

SUGGESTED EXERCISES:

1. John Hamburg says that his own fears, personal experiences and memories of awkward situations, when heightened, find their way into his screenplays. Can you imagine any of your own fears, neuroses or memories of uncomfortable moments being useful to you as a writer? What are they? How might you heighten or transform them to make them even funnier or more dramatic in a script?
2. Hamburg says he gets inspiration in everyday life by watching people and overhearing conversations. Try this yourself by going to a public place where you can watch and listen to people. Spend a couple of hours taking notes of what you hear and observe, and then share some of your observations with your classmates. Did you record anything you could imagine using in your writing?
3. Hamburg says he develops his ideas and pitches by telling them as stories to his friends and noting their reactions. Try this technique by teaming up with another student. Tell each other the story of a project you are developing, or pitch the story of a film you know well but your partner has never seen. Can you tell what amuses, intrigues or bores the other person? Could this method be useful to you in fine-tuning ideas and pitches?
4. A meat tenderizer inspires Hamburg to visualize an awkward but charming dating mishap and a trip to the emergency room. Using the same object, can you come up with your own story?

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