



Learning from the Masters

AN INTERVIEW WITH SCREENWRITER JOSE RIVERA

QUIZ & SUGGESTED EXERCISES

(RECOMMENDED FOR HIGH SCHOOL & COLLEGE STUDENTS)

“When I decided to make the jump into screenwriting, within a month or two I was pitched four films. One was a film about El Salvadorian gangs in L.A. One was about girl gangs in East L.A. One was about deaf gangs – no joke – in New York. I forget the fourth one, but I think that was a gang one, too. So I said, ‘Do I look like a gang member?’”

Jose Rivera

EXCERPTS FROM JOSE RIVERA'S INTERVIEW:

MIKE DE LUCA: *Do you outline before you write a screenplay? Do you use cards, or do you wing it?*

JOSE RIVERA: I wing it in the theater, but in film, I don't. Just because the structure is so important. I don't do cards, but I have fairly detailed outlines that I work from.

DE LUCA: *Once the outline is completed, does it take you a long time to complete the screenplay?*

RIVERA: I'm both a fast and slow writer. Meaning, I won't write until I've done enormous amounts of research, until I've really thought about it for a long time, and then I write very quickly. For instance, in "The Motorcycle Diaries" experience, I researched that and lived in the mind of that story for about nine months, before I wrote anything. And then when I wrote it, I wrote it in three weeks. But those three weeks were backed up by nine months of constant thinking.

DE LUCA: *Did you have set [daily writing goals], or was it just organic to what it was going to be?*

RIVERA: I only had specific goals in that I'd say to myself, "I'm going to write for six hours today." That would be my goal. And whatever happens, happens, during those six hours.

DE LUCA: *Do you have any rules for yourself governing dialogue or story structure, in terms of what you think needs to be in a screenplay?*

RIVERA: For dialogue, I guess my only rule is precision. And density, to make every line have as many layers as possible. Because of my theater training, I went into screenwriting with a real chip on my shoulder, like, "Oh, screenwriting, it's so easy." And I intentionally wrote shitty dialogue in my screenplays because I didn't respect it. It wasn't until I invested the same amount of attention and detail in my screenwriting dialogue that I did for my theater that I really became a good screenwriter.

QUIZ:

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

1. What kinds of writing did Jose Rivera do before become a feature film screenwriter?
2. In what way did he have to learn to “think differently” to write for film?
3. What element of screenwriting does he find the most challenging?
4. How does he say his Puerto Rican heritage has influenced his writing?
5. How does Rivera describe his working relationship with “The Motorcycle Diaries” director Walter Salles?
6. How does he feel about rewriting other people’s work?
7. What does he try to accomplish with each scene that he writes?
8. Why did he hesitate to adapt “On The Road” after “The Motorcycle Diaries?”
9. What does he look for when deciding whether to take on a writing project?
10. What is Rivera’s attitude towards the job of being a writer?
11. Which aspects of screenwriting does he think can be taught, and which can not?
12. Why does he say writers need to be in touch with the culture and politics of their times?
13. In what way does he think films of the 1970s differ from those made today?
14. What useful advice about magical realism did Gabriel Garcia Marquez give Riviera?
15. How does Rivera measure his success with the projects he does?

Bonus question:

16. What was the “oatmeal experiment” in Rivera’s “The State Boys Rebellion” project?

SUGGESTED EXERCISES:

1. Jose Rivera says he was offered a series of very similar gang-related projects when he first became a feature film screenwriter. Imagine that you, too, were to be typecast as a writer based on your personal history or ethnic heritage. What kind of projects do you think you would be considered for? How might a writer avoid being “pigeonholed” in this way?
2. Rivera says that he looks for projects that *mean* something, beyond the promise of financial reward or career advancement. Looking at your own goals as a writer, what kind of films do you think you would find most personally fulfilling to create? Can you think of a few films that speak to you in a truly meaningful way? What is it about them specifically that appeals to you?
3. Rivera spends some time discussing the differences between writing for theater and for film. What are some of the differences he describes? As an exercise, think about how you would stage a one-act play about two people spending an evening together. What changes would you make to tell the same story on film? What guides the choices that you make?
4. A stuffed animal – a cat – inspires Rivera to tell a poignant moral tale with a magical realist twist. Using the same object, can you come up with a story of your own?

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