



Learning from the Masters

AN INTERVIEW WITH SCREENWRITERS ALEX KURTZMAN AND ROBERTO ORCI

QUIZ & SUGGESTED EXERCISES

(RECOMMENDED FOR HIGH SCHOOL & COLLEGE STUDENTS)

“One thing that has proven to be true for us over and over again is not to be married to our words, necessarily, but to be married to the spirit of your words. Because there’s a thousand way you can express an idea.”

Alex Kurtzman

EXCERPTS FROM ALEX KURTZMAN & ROBERTO ORCI'S INTERVIEW:

JAY FERNANDEZ: *How does the [collaborative] process work for you guys? Is one of you stronger in structure, as opposed to dialogue, or pacing? How does that work?*

ALEX KURTZMAN: I think when we were a little younger it was easier to make the distinction. It's become much harder for us now. It's also very dependent on what material we're doing. Sometimes one of us will have a stronger instinct towards what the movie wants to be, and it really does trade off. I think we're probably equally matched right now.

FERNANDEZ: *Can you give an example of how, early on, you picked up things from each other?*

ORCI: I think earlier Alex was—and maybe still is—a little more facile and fast with action, and with the actual prose. I have an easier time with dialogue. I think that was a little more clear back in the day. Now it's become a little more blurry.

FERNANDEZ: *Do you think you've learned things from each other?*

ORCI: Oh, yeah. For sure. And when we have a rare emergency, when we [have to work separately on different scripts], I always have Alex on my shoulder, making sure that he's approving of it, even if he's not in the room.

KURTZMAN: That's the thing. We've been writing together for 15 years, so even when we're alone, Bob's totally with me all the time. Every line, I sort of have an instinct towards, "Is he gonna think that's good or bad?" Or how he'd want to direct it.

FERNANDEZ: *So you have each other's critical voice in your head?*

ORCI: Yes

KURTZMAN: Totally.

QUIZ:

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

1. How do Alex Kurtzman and Roberto Orci approach outlining before writing?
2. How has their process changed since they started writing together?
3. Where did they meet?
4. What does Kurtzman say he learned from working as a P.A. on “Heat?”
5. As staff writers on “Alias,” what did they discover about writing based on character?
6. What do they say a writer can do to hook a director, or an actor?
7. What do they suggest is the best way to humanize a villain?
8. Do they feel that Orci’s ethnic background has influenced their work?
9. Do they show their rough drafts to other people for feedback?
10. Where do Kurtzman and Orci look for inspiration in solving problems with specific scenes?
11. How do they prepare for a pitch?
12. Has their experience writing for television influenced the way they handle studio notes?
13. What are their criteria for taking a rewriting job?
14. Where do they look for inspiration when devising action sequences?
15. What do they say is the best advice they’ve gotten about writing?

Bonus question:

16. What was the pair’s first professional writing job?

SUGGESTED EXERCISES:

1. Alex Kurtzman and Roberto Orci describe their writing process as intensely collaborative, with the two of them working together on every line. Try this yourself by teaming up with another writer to script a dramatic two-person scene. What is the experience like? Is the scene very different from something you might have written alone?
2. The two writers say that an action sequences should perform the same function as a song does in a musical. What do they mean? What do you think an action sequence can accomplish that a dialogue scene can’t?
3. Using Kurtzman and Orci’s ideas as a guide, how might you make an audience more sympathetic to a screen villain? Can you come up with a few specific examples of relatable motivations for wrongdoing? What cinematic misdeeds might they lead a screen villain to commit?
4. A pill bottle inspires Kurtzman and Orci to generate both an overall film concept and a specific title sequence. What can you come up with, using the same object as a jumping-off point?

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