



Learning from the Masters

AN INTERVIEW WITH SCREENWRITER NICK KAZAN

QUIZ & SUGGESTED EXERCISES

(RECOMMENDED FOR HIGH SCHOOL & COLLEGE STUDENTS)

“What I try to do – I don’t succeed, but it’s what motivates me – is to write something that’s unlike any film that you’ve seen before. Something conceptual, that hasn’t been done...is much more difficult to get made because a lot of people are scared of what’s new or anything different, but that’s what excites me as a writer.”

Nick Kazan

EXCERPTS FROM NICK KAZAN'S INTERVIEW:

MIKE DE LUCA: *How important is [the introduction of] any character you're writing?*

NICK KAZAN: What I like to do with a character is, if it's a minor character that gonna come in, like somebody's father is gonna come in, I like to not know who it's going to be. I like to have the door open and the father comes in, and he's gonna tell his daughter that her mother's dead. And the door opens, and there's a midget there. And it's the last thing you expect. And then you play the scene with the midget, and then you look at it, and you say, nah, that doesn't work. You say, that's too comic, or that's too peculiar. So, okay...go out, shut the door again, and have somebody else walk in. And it's a guy with long, stringy blond hair and bad teeth. ... I like to preserve those things as opportunities, because I think that the more spontaneous the script is, the more unexpected it is for you as a writer, the more alive it is for the reader.

DE LUCA: *Does structure play a big part in your outlining process? Do you know where the structural beats are gonna be, or do you hit those as you go?*

KAZAN: I do it entirely by feel. Sometimes I have a lot of trouble with structure as a result, but I just try to proceed. I know the movie has to intensify. I don't want to bore the audience. I'll do anything, the most absurd things to keep people's attention.

DE LUCA: *Did you feel constrained when you had to do things that were based on real-life events?*

KAZAN: No. It's exciting, because when you're doing an original screenplay and you're making the whole thing up, it can be very intricate and difficult. You're creating a whole world. When you have a script based on real events, as in "At Close Range" for instance, there were certain events that had to be in the movie.

DE LUCA: *That you knew were gonna be there, regardless?*

KAZAN: There were certain real lines of dialogue from the underlying stories in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. There were certain moments...you know those are going to be in the movie. So then you say, "Fantastic. I know those things are there." They exist kind of as the architecture of your building. You know that that wall is gonna be there, and even though you might like it further back, that's where it's gonna be. You play with it, you say, what's the most interesting way that I can put that wall there? What can I put around it? You know that you have these things. And then your imagination can be completely free within the constraints of those givens.

QUIZ:

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

1. What experience does Nick Kazan say made him a writer?
2. What film inspired him to write his first produced screenplay?
3. How long does he prepare before writing a script?
4. What does he mean by the “DNA of a script?”
5. What kind of research does Kazan do?
6. What device does he use to indicate what a character *would have said*, if he hadn’t been interrupted?
7. What does Kazan mean when he talks about his “catastrophic imagination?”
8. What kind of writing schedule does he keep?
9. Why does he think humor can help to extend and heighten tension?
10. How is writing like being schizophrenic?
11. What does Kazan say was the biggest challenge of adapting “Reversal of Fortune?”
12. Why does he choose to write on spec?
13. What was the inspiration for the film “Fallen?”
14. How does Kazan say fear affects Hollywood decision-making?
15. What advice does his agent give him regularly about responding to studio notes?

Bonus question:

16. What scene does Kazan regret was never shot for “At Close Range?”

SUGGESTED EXERCISES:

1. Nick Kazan describes being surprised by minor characters as they enter his screenplays. As an experiment, write a two-page scene in which a character opens a door to find a distant cousin holding a birthday cake. Don’t plan the character of the cousin, just let him or her appear to you as you write. Now write the scene again, envisioning the cousin differently. Now try it a third time with a different cousin. Are you surprised by the characters you create? Could you imagine working this way often?
2. Kazan says his ideal writing experience is one in which a simple image or phrase leads to the creation of script, without preconception or plan. To try this kind of automatic writing yourself, close your eyes for a moment, and focus on a single image or a single sentence of dialogue. Using that image or phrase, write a scene as quickly as you can between undefined characters “A,” “B” and (if necessary) “C.” What is the experience like for you? Does it seem useful?
3. Kazan suggests that sometimes the flaws in a script contribute something valuable to its essential character, and that correcting them may not always be an improvement. Do you agree? What flaws do you think might add something to a script? Can you think of a flawed film that you like or respect? Do you appreciate that film in spite of or because of its imperfections?
4. An exotic-looking cigarette lighter conjures up a surreal “waking dream” for Kazan. Using the same object, can you devise your own story?

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