

## A GREAT VILLAIN WITH A GREAT PLAN

### Screenwriter William C. Martell

By Eric Lilleor

William C. Martell has written sixteen produced films, including *Hard Evidence* which was "video pick of the week" in over two dozen newspapers. It also beat the Julia Roberts film *Something To Talk About* in video rentals when both debuted the same week (Video Store Magazine Top 30 (tpc) Chart).

A columnist for Script Magazine and contributor to Writers Digest Magazine, Martell is the author of *The Secrets of Action Screenwriting*. He was the only non-nominated screenwriter mentioned on "Siskel & Ebert's "If We Picked The Winners" Oscar show in 1997. The Washington Post calls him "The Robert Towne of made-for-cable movies."

#### How did you first get involved in film and screenwriting?

As a child I was often punished for telling lies. As an adult I found a way to get paid for it! Actually, I've always loved movies. I wrote stories in school, and found an advertisement in the back of TV Guide Magazine for a company that sold television scripts. I sent away for scripts to *Columbo*, *Rockford Files*, and some other shows.

These were actual scripts used on the show, and often had hand written notes in the margins. Being able to read a script made the idea of writing movies real to me... not just a fantasy. Around the same time, I started making little movies with my parent's 8mm home movie camera. I made one where my brother was being attacked by a cardboard alligator made from old boxes.

I come from a working-class family in a small town. My family's business was digging water wells for farm irrigation. If I wasn't writing screenplays, I was digging ditches for a living! In my view at the time, writing and making movies was my only chance to escape heavy labor.

I couldn't afford to go to film school, so I took a film appreciation class at my (free) community college. A local producer who made exploitation films for drive-in theaters spoke one night. I gave him a script and told him I'd do anything to get into the movie business.

A year later I was doing heavy labor on a film set. Not exactly what I had in mind when I made my offer, but I made a good impression and a year later the producer hired me to write a kung-fu script called *Ninja Busters*.

#### Do you think the Hollywood environment is constraining to writers as far as their perspective?

Writers are not treated well in Hollywood. We may come up with the story and invent all of the characters, but we give up all power the moment we sell the script.

When a producer hires a cinematographer, he would never think of telling him how to focus the camera or what lens to use... yet that same producer will change characters, plot points, and scenes without thinking twice. Often without thinking of the ways their changes effect the finished film. Many times, I've explained logically why a certain change will ruin the film, but as writer, I always lose. Directors and stars come first, even where the script is concerned. Usually the marketing people have more input than the writer! And people wonder why Hollywood films often don't make sense!

On *Steel Sharks*, I felt the director was removing all of the interesting aspects to the characters and making it a dull film. I talked to the producer about this, and I was allowed to explain each of my points logically. But directors are more important than writers are, so I lost that battle. Later

the producer told me he thought the film turned out very dull, and could not figure out why, since my original script was so exciting. I really wanted to say "I warned you!" but that would have ended my career.

I think if producers treated writers as Story Experts and actually listened to our opinions, Hollywood films might be better. I say let the writers be the last word during the script process, and let the directors and actors control their own portion of the film.

They buy the script because they like the story... then they change the story! It doesn't make any sense, but it's the way Hollywood works.

### **In Europe, eight out of ten movies are American. The local movies are hardly attended. Are American screenwriters better storytellers than their European peers?**

How about different? American movies are made strictly for profit, and are designed to entertain the audience. European movies are often funded by government art programs, and are designed to be cultural and artistic works. Even with European films that are designed to entertain, the focus is not on creating a product devoted entirely to entertainment. In an American film if a dramatic scene slows the pace, they'll remove it. The focus is entirely on pleasing the audience. Different disciplines.

Plot, structure, and pacing are important in American films, but characters and details are usually more important in leisurely paced European films.

But many European films are bought by Hollywood and remade with American actors. Hollywood is always remaking Francis Verber's films. Usually the remakes are inferior to the original, because Hollywood has removed the dull spots of character that made the film brilliant in the first place. Or they sand down the sharp edges to make it more palatable, when those edges were what made the film different and exciting. Besson's *Nikita* was remade as *Point Of No Return*, and the American version has none of the hard edge of the original... everything Hollywood thought might be offensive to the audience was removed.

But these limitations have made American writers more cognizant of the audience. Many European films are self-indulgent (as are many American art films) while Hollywood films are all about creating an exciting experience for the viewer. My job as a writer is to give the audience a treat, not a lecture. As Hitchcock said: "A film shouldn't be a slice of life; it should be a slice of cake!" American writers learn to please their audience (which makes money for the producers) or they aren't hired again. That means our stories are more linear, more exciting, more plot-oriented.

Artistically that may be a curse, but audiences seem to prefer these films.

By the way, I should mention that many of my favorite films are European thrillers. From the comic thrillers of DeBroca to the gangster work of Melville to the stylistic paranoia of Robert Enrico's *Le Secret*. Fellini's *Amarcord* is one of my favorite films because it reminds me of my life growing up in a small town... though I never had an uncle who climbed a tree and yelled, "I need a woman!" When Europeans make entertainment films, like Wim Wenders' *The American Friend*, they're successful even in America. When Wenders does a more "artistic" film like *Alice In The City* or *The Wrong Move*, they're less successful in America. It's not that American screenwriters are better storytellers, more that their priorities are different.

I like structure in stories. I'm basically a mystery writer, and that is the most structured of all genres. I don't find structure confining; I find it challenging.

### **Is writing an Action-Adventure script the same for international as well as for the U.S. markets?**

Yes! Action films “travel well.” Because they’re visually told stories, they can be understood no matter what the language. A car chase is a car chase in France, America, Spain, or Zimbabwe. A fight scene is the same. We can understand a man running for his life, or trying to protect his family from gangsters, or saving the world from nuclear terrorists. These are universal concerns and the way an American reacts to a man threatening his family is exactly the same as the way an Australian bushman reacts.

Comedies don’t travel well. What makes an American audience laugh may not be funny in Denmark or Greece or Portugal. What makes a Greek audience laugh so hard they cry may not seem funny to an audience in France or America.

Half of my films have been funded by foreign distributors, and the other half by American cable TV companies. *Crash Dive* was co-funded by a company that specializes in films for foreign audiences and HBO. The same script appealed to both halves of that deal. I’ve a new script that is being considered by a producer that specializes in selling foreign rights and the USA Network (TV) in the United States.

One or the other will buy it and make it. If it’s made for American television, it will still be exported to Europe and the rest of the world. If it’s made for the foreign market, it will still be sold to some American distributor.

If you tell an exciting story audiences all over the world will want to see it.

### **In your experience, what's the most important ingredient to a successful Action-Adventure script?**

The Villain’s Plan. The hero in an action movie is usually reactive; he has to stop the villain from blowing up the world, or robbing Fort Knox, or assassinating DeGaulle. What the hero wants from life isn’t nearly as important in the script as what the villain wants... yet many writers spend all of their time creating a credible hero and spend no time on the villain. Hitchcock said the better the villain the better movie. Let me add - The better the villain’s plan the better the movie.

The Villain’s Plan is the fuel for the plot. The Villain is going to do some dastardly deed, and the Hero must stop him. That means the hero is in a REACTIVE role, and the villain is in the ACTIVE role. When writing your action script, remember that the villain is your most important character.

Let’s use *Die Hard* as an example. The Hero’s desire and need is to reunite with his wife and children for Christmas. Is that an action movie? If you throw in a couple of fistfights and a car chase, is it an action movie? No.

But the VILLAIN’S PLAN in *Die Hard* is to rob the Nakatomi Corporation’s safe of millions of dollars on Christmas Eve.

That’s an action plot. There’s an exciting story even without John McClane. In fact, if you were to delete all of the Bruce Willis scenes, you’d have an action film about Robbers vs. FBI agents. Maybe Agent Johnson (“No, the other one!”) would have been the hero. If Robert Davi’s scenes were deleted, maybe Officer Powell would be the hero. But even without Reggie Vel Johnson, there would STILL be an action movie because the Villain would still have a plan.

You can have the most vile, unlovable, ugly hero in the world, but, as long as the Villain’s Plan is good, we will still identify with the hero and root for him to save the day. Why? Because the Villain’s Plan is the fuel for action, not the hero’s appeal. If you don’t believe me, check out Lee Marvin in *Point Blank* or Mel Gibson in the remake version *Payback*. In any other film, these guys would be villains!

If your script is about a villain robbing the First National Bank in Omaha, it's a small movie. If the villain's plan is to rob every bank in Omaha on the same day, that's a medium sized movie. If your villain's plan is to rob Fort Knox, that's *Goldfinger*.

So, give the villain a BIG plan! Don't just have the villain want to kill one person, have him want to wipe out an entire TOWN. The higher the stakes, the more we want our hero to STOP THE VILLAIN.

Remember, the villain is the active character, so his plan has to be ACTIVE. He must want to DO something. Rob a bank, blow up a plane, assassinate the President, take over Chicago, steal government secrets from a high security vault, make a million dollar drug deal, go back in time and kill the mother of his enemy, take over a corporation, or create an earthquake which turns Nevada into beachfront property.

If the villain just wants to be left alone, you've got a dull film on your hands. Why? Because THE HERO is the character who just wants to be left alone. Look at *Shane* or *The Gunfighter* or *Witness*. The hero is trying to get through life without shooting anyone, then the Villain sets his plan into motion, and the hero must do something to stop him.

That's the key to a great action script - a great villain with a great plan!

### What are some of the do's and don'ts you've discovered when writing action movies?

DO - Have a good villain's plan.

DO - Have a hero with a personal hurdle to overcome.

DON'T - Have an illogical plot, or use a plot twist that doesn't make sense.

DO - Keep the pacing quick.

DO - Have a great "high concept" idea - Story as star.

DON'T - Have a passive protagonist - he or she has to take charge and solve the problem.

DON'T - Have an idea as the villain - Poverty is the real villain in real life, but in REEL life it has to be a PERSON. The hero has to be able to vanquish the villain.

DON'T - Have a weak ending. That's the last scene the audience sees before leaving the theater.

DO - Use reversals to make your action scenes exciting to read.

DO - Use plot twists to keep your plot unpredictable.

DON'T - Write the first scene that comes to mind, dig for the BEST, MOST INTERESTING scene.

DO - Have strong act breaks that spin the story to the next level.

DO - Have strong structure. Structure is everything.

DON'T - Make it too easy on your hero because you want him to SUFFER! You want BAD THINGS to happen to him! If his problems are too easy, then solving them is meaningless. Make sure it's life or death.

DON'T - Use someone else's joke in your dialogue. You're supposed to come up with your own jokes!

DO - Have an opening scene that draws in the reader.

DON'T - Have an action scene for no reason - make sure each scene is part of the story.

DON'T - Mix sex and violence in the same scene! It's emotionally disturbing.

DO - Remember to tell your story VISUALLY. Movies are about people DOING things, not talking about them!

DON'T - Write boring action passages. You want the description to be as exciting as the film!

DO - Remember you're writing for an audience so entertain them!

### Is there a formula for writing dialogue for action movies so that the chemistry jumps off the page?

No formula. It's hard work! Make sure every line of dialogue: 1) Exposes character. 2) Moves the

story forward. 3) Is entertaining.

The last one is the most difficult. You've to go over every line, and try to find an amusing or unusual way to say what you want. That's the hard work part. Usually the first line that comes to mind is the most obvious and dull, so you've got to "mine" the line. Dig until you come up with a clever or witty way to say the same thing.

Movie dialogue should be all of those great lines we come up with the day after the argument. Every line should be a "I wish I'd thought of that!" line. Of course, some lines will work and others will be "just okay," but you've got to try to make them ALL gems, or you'll end up with some "just okay" lines and the rest not very good at all! Push yourself to do the best every step of the way!

Dialogue is like going out on a date. You never say exactly what you mean, but you hint at what you want. You dance around the question instead of coming right out and asking it. You would never ask a woman if she wanted to go back to your place and have sex, but you might ask her if she would like to go back to your place to listen to music... after you had gotten some clues from her that she would be interested in more than music.

Another tip for good dialogue is to give your character an interesting way of looking at things. In Scott B. Smith's *A Simple Plan*, Billy Bob Thornton's character sees the world the way a child does. When he notices crows sitting on a branch, he remarks "What a weird job - sitting around and waiting for something to die so that you can eat it." That's an unusual way to look at crows! This character has such an unusual way of seeing things that you can't wait to see him in another scene!

Buddy cop films depend on the contrast between characters. In Shane Black's *Lethal Weapon*, Riggs is a young suicidal loner who will take any risk to catch the bad guys. Murtaugh is an older family man who always proceeds with caution. If you made a list of every one of Riggs's character traits, they'd be the exact opposite of Murtaugh's. The contrast between the two characters creates the friction, which leads to comedy and suspense.

Make a list of character traits for each one of your characters and make sure they're in the opposite corner from the character they'll spend the most time with. This will lead to humorous banter (we hope!) when the opposite characters are thrown together.

Contrast is also the key to "fish out of water" stories like *Beverly Hills Cop* and *Witness*. Alex Foley in *Beverly Hills Cop* is a street-smart Detroit cop who has to solve a case in wealthy, polite Beverly Hills. Contrast = humor. He's constantly making fun of Beverly Hills society! Every "polite" situation he's thrust into sets him up for a joke or a witty line. When you're coming up with your script idea, you can have "built in" humor by looking for contrast between characters, between characters and environment or between characters and situations. All of these can lead to witty dialogue.

But it all takes work! Writing isn't easy!

### Who's your favorite on-screen villain and what make him stand out?

My favorite villain of all time is from a thriller - Alex Sebastian from Ben Hecht's *Notorious*. Sebastian is a hybrid of the two main types of villains: The suave, well educated, slightly paternal villain (Guy Of Gisborn in *Robin Hood*, Hans Gruber in Steven E. deSouza's *Die Hard*, Auric Goldfinger in *Goldfinger*, Philip Vandamm in Ernest Lehman's *North By Northwest*) and the "flipside" type of villain who is very similar to the hero (Belloq in Lawrence Kasdan's *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, Bob Rusk in *Frenzy*). Sebastian is suave, sophisticated, and superior, plus he's very insecure about his relationship with Alicia, just like Devlin (the hero).

Sebastian seems powerful, but Hecht strips back the veneer so we can see that fear and self-loathing motivate his evil. He's a fascinating character. He's so weak, he's strong. Sebastian is in over his head and fighting for his own survival... just like the hero!

I tried to do something similar in my *Hard Evidence* script (starring Gregory Harrison and Joan Severance). My villain seems completely in control, completely at ease... but underneath it all he's in a constant state of panic. His calm is a facade that helps him manipulate people so that he gets what he wants. After the premiere, a director friend came up to me and admitted he really felt sorry for the villain at the end. The guy had killed, stolen, and made the hero's life hell for 100 minutes... but you UNDERSTOOD why he did it.

A good villain would be the hero, if the story were told differently.

I always try to give my villains some extra little dimension that makes them human. In *Crash Dive*, my villain was a Bosnian freedom fighter, a man fighting for his people and their families... but he's on the side of the civil war the U.S. isn't supporting. He has a great speech in the film about living in the war zone where death and bloodshed have become a normal part of life. I hope the viewer understands his motivation, but finds his methods all wrong.

*Night Hunter* is about the last of the vampire hunters tracking and killing a group of vampires before the total eclipse allows them to breed. I felt this was a weird film, because the villain is the hero! The vampires just want to live their lives in peace, and the hero wants to kill them!

My new film *Black Thunder* has a split villain. There's a terrorist leader who is going to drop a germ warfare bomb on Paris while World Leaders are meeting. The terrorist is really a minor villain - he gets killed before the REAL villain who was the hero's mentor.

I did something interesting in *Black Thunder* by holding back some of the relationships. The Airforce pilot hero always carries a photo of himself and his mentor, a rugged test pilot. We know the hero and his co-pilot sidekick don't get along because of some past rivalry. After the sidekick is captured by the terrorists, they find a torn photo in his pocket showing the test pilot mentor with his arm around the sidekick. The hero and sidekick were rivals for the mentor's affection and approval, like two sons fighting for the love of a father. At this point, the audience understands the relationship between hero and sidekick... but there's more! At the END of the film, the LAST SHOT shows the original and whole photo with the hero, mentor, and sidekick, arms around each other. We realize that the hero's photo and the sidekick's photo were two halves of the SAME PHOTO. The hero and sidekick used to be best friends!

### Let's talk about your writing process. What are your steps?

A story is when a character is forced to solve an internal problem (character arc) in order to solve an external problem (plot). So I start either with a character or a plot, then find the plot or the character that fits... hopefully with a wild "high concept" idea attached. *Black Thunder* was about the ultimate

Stealth Fighter Plane - push a button and it's INVISIBLE.

Terrorists steal it. How do you find an invisible warplane... before it finds you?

Because it was our own plane used against us, BETRAYAL was my theme. I came up with characters that illustrated betrayal. Different facets of betrayal.

Then I came up with a list of scenes - many more than I needed. I picked the best of the scenes and used them in my outline. Pacing is critical in an action script, so I made sure that every ten pages included one action scene of some sort. By Act 3, it was ALL action scenes! One action

scene rolling right into the next!

Because *Black Thunder* was an assignment, I had a deadline... Three weeks to turn in the first draft! Once the script was outlined, I started writing. Six pages a day, six days a week, for three weeks. I finished the script on time, turned it in... and had another writing job! I spent the next 3 weeks writing *The Base* for another company!

By the time I turned in the first draft on *The Base*, they had notes for my second draft on *Black Thunder*! So I went right into the second draft on *Black Thunder*... and for a month alternated drafts between *The Base* and *Black Thunder*. I was exhausted by the time I'd finished both of them! That original first draft of *The Base* is on my homepage, if you're interested in reading it.

### What are you currently working on, and what are your plans for the future?

I just finished a science fiction action script called *Hard Return* that is like *Fantastic Voyage* in a computer - a computer virus takes over the government's central computer and they send a team of soldiers in to destroy it.

I've a thriller called *Blind Trust* about to go into production, and I'm about to sell another thriller called *Riptides*. Plus I might be adapting a comic book... but I don't have that job yet.

I've an action script called *Sky High* that may sell to the USA Network. It's a great script that Warner Bros. almost bought two years ago! If USA Network doesn't buy it, someone else will. It's very fast paced. Hijackers hook a bomb up to a plane's altimeter, so the plane can not descend below 20,000 feet without exploding. It's up to the passengers on the plane to fight the terrorists! Very exciting.

My plans for the future? Keep writing!

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