

Every year, the Mill Valley Film Festival offers a series of educational seminars for aspiring Bay Area filmmakers. The 1989 festival included a seminar on Film Comedy, which was moderated by screenwriter and script consultant Tom Schlesinger. Schlesinger appeared on KALX-FM (U.C. Berkeley) to discuss the art of writing comedy.

**Q:** Most actors will tell you that comedy is much more difficult than drama. Do writers feel the same way: that it's harder to write comedy than drama?

**A:** Well, I think one of the pratfalls is that sometimes comedy writers feel like they don't need to have a serious dramatic structure when they work.... For me, structure is really a main part of writing successful comedy films. So I always like to start out with a serious dramatic structure, and then the comedy of the film is really predicated on the sense of humor of the writer himself. So what you do is you create a dramatic structure and then you infuse your own sense of humor through the characters.

**Q:** Yeah, I think it's tough when you don't have that dramatic structure. There are very few films that can just exist on pure comedy—an *Airplane*, they come along only once every blue moon.

**A:** Yeah, in those episodic-type films it's really hard to sustain tension throughout the course of the story.

**Q:** A lot of them fizzle at the end. What do you like about writing comedy as compared to the other genres: drama, horror, adventure?

**A:** Well, basically I find that my life is a lot saner when I'm writing comedy than when I'm writing serious dramas. And I can still explore human behavior when I'm writing comedy films, but I tend to approach life in a much lighter way when I'm writing comedies. And it also is developing into my forte right now.... When you find out what your strength is, then you build on your strength and really focus in on that.

**Q:** What's the secret to winning over the audience? Is there any one crucial ingredient?

**A:** Nobody really knows the answer to that question, although certainly people have been talking about it for many years. What I have found is that as a writer, when you have a visceral connection to the story and to your characters, that that is something the audience will experience when they watch the film. So it has a lot to do with writing from your heart and writing from your own passions, rather than trying to fulfill some formula that somebody says will bring commercial success.

**Q:** Can you give me an example of a near-

perfect comedy?

**A:** Well, it's so subjective to talk about a near-perfect comedy, but some of the comedies that I have really loved and that I study, which is really one way to develop your skills, are *Annie Hall*, *Harold and Maude*, and *M\*A\*S\*H*. These are the kind of films that you can watch over and over again and still find enjoyment from.... They become models for your own writing. It really helps to kind of find writers and directors that have made comedies that you really respect and then you really study those.

**Q:** What did you think of *When Harry Met Sally...*? Did you think that it was derivative of Woody Allen, as several critics argued?

**A:** I've actually held off on seeing that film. I saw *Parenthood*, which I finally had a lot of difficulties with.... They were raising some very serious dramatic issues about dysfunctional families, and I found that some of the humor was kind of like sit-com laugh track humor, that they would build to the tension in a scene and then escape with some kind of self-conscious line. And I think that's another pratfall that comedy writers can fall into.

**Q:** I was going to ask you what the fatal mistakes are of comedy writing. Do you think that's one: catering to sit-com humor? I often criticize movies for being too much like a TV sit-com.

**A:** Yeah, like Neil Simon's recent films, you know, we make a comment, writers will make a comment, that when you're watching the movie, you can hear Neil typing in the background, because the lines are so cheeky and self-conscious. I mean some of his earlier films were okay, but I think that's one thing: trying to be funny. The most success that I've had in writing comedy is when I'm more spontaneous and open.

**Q:** When you write a scene, you have a particular image in mind. Are writers often disappointed by what they finally see on the screen?

**A:** Nearly always, unless you're involved in the production, which is why I'm getting more involved as a producer in the projects that I'm doing right now. Unless you do get involved in the production and understand the technology involved in executing the screenplay, then you really don't have a right to belly-ache about it.

**Q:** So I guess to maintain creative control, you really have to become writer, director, producer, sort of a Woody Allen, an auteur.

**A:** Yeah, and really understand that filmmaking is a collaborative process. We hear about the auteurs, and we hear about the great directors and comedy stars and all that. It's really a collabora-

tion so you choose your family wisely when you're making a film.

© 1989 - Randy Parker

<http://www.emusements.com/randy/RRI/>