

WHY THEY WIN Notes from the Jury Box

by Kenny Kemp

Over the past five years, I have been a Stage One jury chair in the CINE Golden Eagle Awards competition. As you may know, there are two stages in the competition; only the strongest entries move on to the second stage, and then only the best of the best receive the prestigious "Golden Eagle."

As a judge, I have a rare opportunity, a chance to see the state-of-the-art of non-theatrical filmmaking in America. I wish every entrant could be a fly on the wall and hear the discussions that surround the judging of any given entry - they'd learn more about how to craft an effective and award-winning film in one hour than they would learn in years of actual filmmaking.

That can't be right. How can *watching* a film teach someone more about film than actually *making* one? Because, when you make a film, you only deal with the problems of your project, and creativity being what it is, is discreet and defensive, more intent upon its own growth and achievement than comparison with other projects.

When I attended film school, we had a popular class called "Bad Cinema" where we watched some notoriously badly-made films like "Plan 9 From Outer Space." The premise of the class was that we could learn more from a bad film than from a well-made one. Good films have a seamlessness, a sort of unity that defies parsing of the elements. Acting, writing, cinematography and scoring all work together to create a work of art. But the flaws in a bad film are so glaring that no such unity exists. In this case, the elements are competing and no matter how well lit the scene is, if the acting is poor or non-existent, no one notices the lighting.

And sadly, watching most of the entries in the Golden Eagles is a lot like my Bad Cinema class. You begin to see problems that occur again and again, and a judge, whether it's his first or thirty-first time, gets very impatient with a particular pothole, and he avoids it at all costs.

But what are these potholes? They are few, but they are deep and will ruin your suspension, tires, and rims, not to mention your chances of winning an award or achieving your goal of moving your audience.

Tell Me A Story

The first and most ubiquitous mistake is also the most fatal: lack of *story*. Since prehistoric times, people have sat around campfires and told stories, which always contain four crucial elements: a beginning, a middle, an end, and conflict. Every good story begins with the world in balance, and focuses on a certain individual (the *hero*) whose life is, shall we say, at *rest*. Then a complication arises to challenge this status and the hero must react, with varying degrees of success. The story usually escalates, like rising saw teeth: a complication occurs, the hero attempts to overcome it. Maybe he does and if so, another, larger complication takes its place. If he fails to overcome that one, it remains and grows in size anyway, making his inaction or inability to meet the challenge even more troubling. Finally, at the end, the hero succeeds in overcoming all obstacles. We call this the climax. The end shows us our new hero in a new world, with a new, higher status. Balance is once again returned to the universe and the audience is satisfied. The dragon is slain, the traveler completes his journey, and the lovers unite. All is well.

You know all this; you've seen too many films to have this escape your understanding. But do you recognize that this format applies in *every* storytelling situation, even corporate how-to videos? And it doesn't matter whether your project is a seven-part miniseries or a five-minute public service announcement. Even a joke has all the elements: set-up, development, and pay-off, all in the context of conflict, whether the conflict is glaring or subtle.

So why do so many film projects forget this important fact? Why are so many of them deathly boring and slow, without a trace of storytelling art? Because the filmmakers are intent upon their message, the purpose of the project. They have a client who insists that certain information be passed to the audience. So the film ends up playing like a PowerPoint presentation: all graphs and charts and bullet points and not a shred of interest or storytelling art. You know what I'm talking about. *You* would rather tell a story, set up a dramatic situation and do it in a parable, metaphor or simile. But how can you convince a client of this fact?

I wish there was a simple way. There is not. But the key to successful teaching (and, yes, folks, that is what we're doing here, however subtly) is to know your audience and give them the information in the best way possible. And since we've got wood smoke in our genes from sitting around a million campfires listening to stories since the beginning of time, every one of us knows a good story when we hear it. And, guess what? We remember it and we internalize the message.

The truth is you must trust the instincts of your audience. Trust their antennae to tune in to your story (read *message*) if you use these indispensable storytelling elements: structure (beginning, middle, end) and conflict. Oh, yes, and one other thing.

Power to the People

Have you ever seen a film with no human characters? And even if it's *Toy Story* or *A Bug's Life*, even these non-humans are imbued with human characteristics: goals, fears, courage, and drive. The ants in *Antz* are really humans and we, as the audience, are constantly comparing our lives to the ants on the screen, wondering what we'd do in that situation. This mental shape shifting is universal.

But you'd be amazed how often a filmmaker manages to extract every human element from his story. The frames of celluloid are filled with people, true, but not a single human being is present. How can this be?

Because news announcers, anchors, and talking heads are not human.

I do not wish to offend any former or future Dan Rathers out there, but these characters, while looking human, are not. They are androids staring into the prompter, reading copy, not letting their eyes shift from one line of text to the next. They are the flesh and blood equivalent of a grocery list: full of information while being completely empty of emotion. And it doesn't matter if the news reader is crying while he or she reads the copy; we still know on a genetic level that they are not the story. Indeed, we know that they are *getting in the way* of the story.

The solution is simple. Get rid of the grave voiceovers and the solemn talking heads. Do what every writer has engraved on his forehead: *show, don't tell*. Tell a story. With real people. Construct a situation that dramatizes your message. This takes greater skill than assembling a bulleted list but it is infinitely more effective and satisfying, both to the storyteller and the audience.

But you knew this. You also know that common belief is that dramatization is too expensive and accident-prone. There are more pitfalls, more potential problems, more hit-and-miss in using drama to teach a principle. But what is the greatest pitfall of all? Not reaching your audience. Whether you spend ten dollars or ten million, if you haven't succeeded in your stated purpose, then you've wasted money. Your project has a goal, to get the audience to laugh, cry, think, or fork over the money. And if you fail, it doesn't matter how cool your bulleted list was. You failed.

Here's an example: not long ago my jury judged a film celebrating a therapy technique that uses music to help individuals cope with autism and other mental illness. Talk about potential! In my bones I knew this would be a powerful story; that I would be moved and touched. But in the course of forty-five minutes, we did not see a single, live (or even a reenactment) example of a person actually engaged in the music therapy. We didn't watch as a grateful mother cried tears of joy as she saw her

normally disengaged child come alive under the influence of music. Instead, we got a steady dose (as if by hypodermic) of talking heads droning on about the wonders of music therapy. I wanted to see it happen; to watch the magic unfold. Instead we saw white-coated doctors sitting behind mahogany desks pontificating about the amazing results. We saw people walking down corridors, chatting with others, long shots of hospitals and buildings, people shaking hands, all with muted sound while the voice over stated over and over how beneficial the therapy was.

In short, the film was the chloroform that made the hypodermic injection of information at once both less painful and less effective. Today, weeks later, I cannot remember even the name of the organization that performs this amazing, helpful service to people with mental illness. All I remember is how disappointed I was in the storyteller.

Unless you've seen five or ten of these sorts of films in a row, you might be satisfied with the non-dramatic, talking head approach. After all, you see it everywhere. But does that make it effective?

But if you could see a Golden Eagle award-winner, you would see something different. Almost always, they've taken potentially dry subject matter and effectively infused the two crucial elements, storytelling and people, into a seamless whole that is both dramatic and informative.

One film I remember from three years ago still plays in my mind. It was about a group of Down's Syndrome youth who were being trained to live independently. The story (aha!) followed one particular young man as he sought employment at a grocery store. We followed him as he got ready for his first interview, struggling with his tie in the mirror, then finally getting his mother to help him. The look on her face, so full of pride and concern as he walked out the door by himself to go to his bus stop, touched me. As I fought back tears at the bravery of this mother and of her gallant son, I knew I was in the hands of a great storyteller. I was won over and became, from one moment to the next, open to whatever that storyteller wanted me to know. I was teachable. All resistance left me; all cynicism and doubt about the efficacy of this program evaporated as I watched this young man simply sitting on the bus, looking out the window, his lunch sack clutched in his pudgy hands, his eyes hopeful, a smile on his face for his fellow passengers, eagerly going out into the world to find his way. I've felt more fear for myself on my first day on the job and I don't have his handicap.

He marched into the grocery store and met the manager. We watched as he was interviewed and hired and given his own apron. He received his first assignment: under the watchful eye of a coworker, he retrieved shopping carts in the parking lot. And the look on his face when he managed to snag a runaway cart was priceless! When he successfully returned the line of carts to the corral, he was greeted with a hearty slap on the back from his associate, who put his arm around his shoulders and they walked back into the store, ready to tackle another important job.

And when he returned home and showed his first paycheck to his proud mom, I must admit I wiped a tear away, embarrassed lest my fellow CINE judges see me cry.

But I wasn't too embarrassed to give it a 95 and to recommend it for a Golden Eagle award.

The facets of good filmmaking are too numerous to cover here. All the production elements must be in place. Lighting, camera, sound, music, editing all must be journeyman quality. But the first and least-expensive element, the script, is all too often treated as an afterthought. Your client may feel that PowerPoint presentations given by a talking head work, but remind him that everyone watching that presentation in that boardroom, fighting yawns and boredom, has a vested interest in staying awake: his boss is probably present. In other words, the audience in that room is captive and has incentive to pay attention.

The people who will watch the video outside of that context have no such incentive, and they will either mentally or physically turn it off if it isn't interesting and full of humanity. The solution is simple: pretend you're sitting at the campfire and it's your turn to tell a story. Everyone is

looking at you expectantly, waiting for a good yam. You take a deep breath and say, "Once upon a time..."

Kenny Kemp won a "Golden Eagle" for his inspirational film Fedora, which has also won awards in over twenty film festivals worldwide, as well as being chosen by the American Library Association as a "Top Children's Video for 2000." His memoir Dad Was A Carpenter won the 1999 National Self-Published Book Award and is now reprinted by HarperCollins, which has just signed him to a three-book deal. He is president of Alta Films, Inc., a film development and production company in Salt Lake City, Utah. In addition, he is a contractor and an attorney specializing in entertainment law issues. He welcomes your response at kennyAlta-films.com and invites you to visit his company website: www.alta-films.com

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