# Screenwriting

## by Alan Swyer (November 2024)

**Greg Bauer winced on the** September morning he was to start teaching a screenwriting course when the front page of the LA Times lamented the slow but seemingly inevitable demise of cinema as an art form.

Though he found the doom and gloom to be overstated, Greg, both as a filmgoer and as a filmmaker, had serious doubts not so much about movies themselves, but about the future of the movie business. With rare exceptions– "Oppenheimer" foremost among them–his watching habits had come to focus almost exclusively on limited TV series, most of them foreign. When asked for recommendations, aside from "The Queen's Gambit," his choices were England's "Peaky Blinders" and "Giri/Haji," Germany's "Babylon Berlin," France's "Spiral" and "The Bureau," Scandinavia's "Borgen" and "The Bridge," plus two hard-to-find gems: Italy's "The Best Of Youth" and Ireland's "Love/Hate."

Professionally, after making his directing debut on a thriller, with another film poised to start filming in the months ahead, Greg was no longer caught up in what he called being "only the writer, merely the writer," then too often "no longer the writer" once a re-writer was hired, or worse, a project fell into "development hell."

Still Greg's hope was that his once-a-week class at the American Film Institute would provide an opportunity to share the love of cinema that first brought him to Hollywood. If he was lucky, maybe his students would even go on to breathe new life into the art form he still cherished.

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"I can't make you a screenwriter," Greg announced when he faced the nine graduate students assembled in a funky classroom. "But what I can do is help you learn to think, feel, and function like a professional." Greg let that sink in, then spoke again. "And here's the kicker. The class comes

with a lifetime warranty. Once you leave here, I will happily continue to read works-in-progress."

That elicited smiles, then Greg went on. The course, he explained, would be run as a workshop. Instead of writing being done in isolation, each student's script would be developed communally, so that everyone would have the experience of being hands-on on nine different projects.

Every student would be called on to pitch to the class, eliciting mandatory constructive criticism. No one would go forward until his/her classmates—and above all, Greg himself—seemed convinced of readiness. The next step would be a treatment, with once again approval required before going on to screenplay.

Thus the process would mirror a professional development deal. Once scripting was finally underway, the first half of each three-hour class would be devoted to discussing questions and problems, plus pages if appropriate. After a short break, the time remaining would be devoted to a conversation with a guest: a producer, director, actor, cinematographer, development exec, agent, or other industry pro brought in by Greg.

As preparation, Greg announced that he would assign films from the past, which would be watched, then pitched as if they didn't yet exist. But before doing so, he asked each student to name the two or three films that sparked the initial interest in becoming screenwriters.

Though Greg hoped there would be invocations of "Citizen Kane," or "Yojimbo," or at least "Casablanca," he wasn't completely surprised that with the exception of a young woman named Elena Salas, who pleased him by citing "The 400 Blows" and Buster Keaton's "The General," the most common choices were "Avatar," "Inception," the Indiana Jones cycle, and above all "E.T."

That provided Greg with the opportunity to demonstrate the breadth and diversity of cinema by assigning what amounted to a survey of great American films: “The Apartment,” “A Face In The Crowd,” “McCabe & Mrs. Miller,” “Petulia,” “Ninotchka,” “The Big Sleep,” “The Lady Eve,” “The Hustler,” plus a little known personal favorite called “Better Off Dead.”

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When the first pitch began clumsily the following Tuesday, Greg stopped the guy in a motorcycle jacket—Mike Ziobro—who had volunteered to kick things off. “How many times did you watch “The Big Sleep?” he asked.

“Only once,” Ziobro admitted guiltily.

“Is that enough?” When Ziobro answered by wincing, Greg continued. “To pitch a film—one I assigned, or even more one you’re creating—you’ve got to know it, own it, and feel like in every way it’s yours. You’ve got know the characters—their wants and needs—so it seems like them generating the story, not you as puppeteer. You’ve got to have a firm sense of the tone, and eventually the theme, so that it not merely comes to life, but is ready to be put on the page. Clear?”

One by one the members of the class nodded.

“So what’s the difference between plot and story?” Greg asked.

When all he received were shrugs or blank looks, Greg answered his own question. “Plot is imposed by the screenwriter. Story is generated by the characters’ wants and needs. Got it?”

As one, the class members nodded again.

“So,” Greg then said, “anyone else willing to try? Or do you need more time?”

Only Elena Salas raised her hand. Impressing her classmates—and Greg—she proceeded to pitch “A Face In The

Crowd” with just two interruptions by Greg, who had her substitute the first person—as in “I plan…” —rather than speaking of “it” or “the film.”

“Had you seen it before?” Greg asked once Elena finished.

“No.”

“How many times did you watch it?”

“Three.”

“So tell us what you consider to be the theme.”

Elena pondered for a moment. “I’d say it’s the cult of celebrity,” she began, “plus the power of TV where politics and entertainment merge.”

“And what did you think of the film?”

“Amazing. But scary!”

“Scary how?”

“Because of what’s happening in the country.”

Greg smiled approvingly, then addressed the rest of the class. “That films are from before your time—or mine—doesn’t make ’em museum pieces. They can be smart, prescient, and fun.” He faced a woman named Sue Torosian. “What did you think of ‘The Apartment?’”

“I loved it.”

Next he turned to Rashad Parker. “And ‘The Big Sleep?’”

“Best detective film ever.”

Then he pointed at Stewart Schwartz. “And ‘Better Off Dead?’”

“Can’t believe I never knew of it before!”

“Welcome,” stated Greg to the entire class,” “to the wonderful world of cinema. And we haven’t even mentioned the great stuff from France, Italy, or Japan.”

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Greg was pleased not merely by the pitches the next week, but even more to see eyes opening about the power and breadth of the films being discussed.

“More excited about the potential of cinema?” Greg asked the class after the last pitch. When the response was affirmative, he went on. “Better sense of what you’ll need for your own pitches?”

Again the sentiment was positive.

“So now comes the real question. Films like ‘The Hustler,’ ‘Petulia,’ and ‘The Lady Eve’ –were they inspirational? Or daunting?”

A woman named La Quita Perry answered. “Both!”

“Good,” said Greg with a chuckle. “This is the place to flex your muscles and give free reign to your imagination. Anybody want to kick things off next week by being our first victim?”

For a moment, no one stirred. Then Elena Salas held up her hand.

“One brave soul,” Greg said approvingly. “Anyone else?”

A student named Eric Zhang raised his hand.

“And another,” responded Greg. “In case we have time for a third, anyone else?”

No one budged until Stewart Schwartz begrudgingly raised his hand.

“Good,” said Greg. “Now some ground rules. First and foremost,

this is a safe place. What's discussed here, stays here. We don't want ideas or stories winding up elsewhere, even inadvertently—weeks or months later—if someone forgets the source. Also, if someone pitches a tale about addiction, the sex trade, or even murder for hire, we don't want rumors starting that so-and-so is a junkie, a hooker, or an assassin. Got it?"

Everyone nodded.

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Greg's excitement about his students pitching their own tales was impinged upon when the New York Times published a piece about rapidly declining production in Hollywood. Two days later came another blow when Pete Dresner, the producer on the largely autobiographical project slated to be Greg's next directing gig, called to say there might be delays.

"Money problems?" Greg asked.

"What else is new?" responded Dresner. "But I'm pretty sure it'll be cool."

"Only pretty sure?"

"Welcome to the movie biz," said Dresner with a sigh. "But I'm still confident."

"As in hope springs eternal?"

"Gotta believe," grumbled Dresner. "Every movie is a fucking miracle."

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"Excited? Scared? Nervous?" Greg asked his class members on Tuesday morning, trying his best to appear ebullient.

"All of the above," responded Eric Zhang.

“Questions before we start? Problems? Anything?”

“What happens if we screw up?” wondered George Occhipinti.

“Somehow life goes on,” said Greg. “You take the constructive criticism, then come back and knock us out with your re-pitch.” Then he faced Elena Salas. “Ready?”

Elena had just begun a rapid-fire pitch about a young woman from East LA when Greg held up a hand.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed. “Catch your breath, then take your time. It’s not a test on many words per minute, or how fast you race through. The story matters, so does how you pitch it. Do it the same way you pitched ‘A Face In The Crowd’.”

Elena steadied herself, then much more dramatically began telling about a college student whose plans to go on to med school are imperiled when her mother—a single mom running a Oaxacan restaurant in East LA—has a stroke. That leaves Chloe Hernandez torn between her dream of becoming a doctor, and the desire to be with her mother at a tough time.

“That was excellent,” said Greg once Elena finished. Then he turned to the others. “Now let’s dive in and help her. Comments? Questions?”

Lamar Jones asked Elena to describe the other characters, which she did. Joni Olson inquired as to whether the tone would be entirely serious, which allowed Elena to explain that she hoped to include funny Chicano family moments as well.

After each of the others got to speak, Greg praised them all for their critiques. “But what’s missing?” he then asked.

The students looked perplexed.

“Where’s the story set?” Greg asked.

“On a college campus,” said Stewart Schwartz.

“And?”

“East L.A.,” added La Quita Perry.

“So shouldn’t each of those places, in effect, become a character?” asked Greg. “In the best films, places themselves become characters. In ‘Annie Hall’ and ‘Serpico,’ whether you’ve seen them or not, New York is totally a character. In ‘Breathless,’ Paris.” Greg looked at Eric Zhang. “Since you saw ‘Petulia,’ how much is San Francisco a character?”

“Big time,” acknowledged Eric.

“A film set anywhere, as opposed to somewhere specific,” explained Greg, “likely comes off as being set nowhere. Got it?”

Everyone nodded.

“Now comes the key question,” Greg announced, facing Elena. “Where will Chloe be five or ten years later? Will she be treating rich patients in Beverly Hills?”

Elena took a moment to ponder. “I see her working at a women’s clinic in Boyle Heights.”

“Okay,” replied Greg. “See how that should inform your script?”

Elena smiled. “You bet.”

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After a break, Eric Zhang pitched an adventure yarn that, unlike Elena’s tale, seemed inspired not by life, but by other movies.

That led to a discussion that was growing harsh until Greg intervened.

“How much prepping did you do?” he asked Eric.

“I spent a tons of time outlining,” he answered.

“But what about the work that precedes the outlining? Did you spend time daydreaming about the story? Did you write bios of your characters? Did you think of what makes where it takes place distinctive? Did you consider your character’ hopes and dreams?”

Eric’s response was a guilty shrug.

“That’s your assignment for next week. Before anyone else pitches, I want you to tell us all of that. Clear?”

Seeing Eric wince, Greg spoke again. “Don’t think of it as punishment. It’s a learning experience that’ll help you not just with this, but hopefully with your career.”

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The next week proved to be a further demonstrations of the contrast between a pitch based on personal experiences and one drawn primarily from other movies.

Part of that, Greg realized, owed to the age of his students, whose life experiences were limited. But it also brought into focus the difference between creativity and craft. Creativity, if and when it existed, was innate, which meant it could be nurtured, but not taught. Craft, in contrast, could very definitely be taught.

The ideal, clearly, was a marriage of both creativity and craft. That’s why people like Billy Wilder, Budd Schulberg, Frederic Raphael, and Jorge Semprun were skilled both at conceiving original screenplays and at crafting adaptations.

Historically, Hollywood provided a place for artists as well as artisans, so hopefully there would still be opportunities for his students no matter which group they were part of.

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At the beginning of the next class, Sue Torosian complained that she was having trouble outlining the story she wanted to tell.

“What prep work have you done?” Greg asked.

“All the screenwriting manuals say start with an outline.”

“I’m not going to say the manuals are wrong,” responded Greg. “But the truth is they’re wrong.”

That drew a laugh from the class, after which Greg continued. “What’s kind of thinking is their premise based on? Reverse engineering from scripts already written. But did Billy Wilder, or Ben Hecht, or Herman Mankiewitz give a shit about having a reverse on every page with a zero? And how about flashbacks? If they’re taboo like the manuals say, what about ‘Citizen Kane,’ or ‘La Guerre Est Finie,’ or the opening of ‘Sunset Boulevard’?”

When no answer was forthcoming, Greg continued. “Here’s what I want you to do,” he told Sue. ‘Forget outlining and make believe it’s five or ten years after the end of your story. Then have your main character write a letter to another of the characters, looking back and describing what happened during that time. Forget structure, terminology, and just let it flow, with all the emotions that’s generating. Can you do that?”

“I’ll try.”

“Instead of waiting for the next class, email me the letter when it’s done. Got it?”

“Yes,” said Sue.

“And I hope the rest of you realize the same kind of letter can work for you,” said Greg.

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The rest of the pitches followed, with only Stewart Schwartz and La Quita Perry having to re-pitch.

Then came the treatments, which were emailed to everyone so that they, too, could be critiqued in class.

Finally, actual scripting was underway by every member of the class.

As promised, the first half of each subsequent session was devoted to questions, problems, and occasional lectures by Greg about exposition, dialogue, or some other subject. Then came the guest of the week.

The purpose, as Greg saw it, was first and foremost to demystify the business side of filmmaking. Instead of thinking conceptually about directors, producers, studio exec, and so forth, the students would get to talk, in a familiar setting, with real people. On top of that, it was a step toward networking, since they would get to know the guests personally.

Though the students were somewhat nervous in the presence of the first guest, with the second they were more open. By the third, there were much more at ease.

But when Greg arrived the following Tuesday morning, he found himself intercepted by the head of the Screenwriting Department, Len Schreiber.

“I hear you’ve been having guests,” said Schreiber.

“Anything wrong with that?”

“Only that you’re not sharing them.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Wouldn’t it be nice to have them address the entire student body?”

“Please tell me that you’re kidding,” answered Greg. When Schreiber shook his head, Greg went on. “What’s more appealing to a director, producer, or some other guest, to sit around a table with nine eager students, then have me buy them lunch? Or to face a large, anonymous group at lunchtime while they’re starving? Besides, this is my class, and I was told I could do whatever I wanted with it.”

“B-but—” mumbled Schreiber. “What about the other faculty members?”

“Don’t they have friends?” responded Greg, who walked away.

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“Anybody got a rough draft ready for us to read?” Greg asked at the last class before closure for the holidays.

La Quita Perry raised her hand, followed by Steward Schwartz and Elena Salas.

“Please email them to everybody so that we can discuss ’em when we’re back. Will the rest of you be done by then?”

Everyone nodded with the exception of Sue Torosian, who pouted.

“What’s wrong?” asked Greg.

“I could use a some inspiration,” she said.

“Remember,” replied Greg, “screenwriting is only half inspiration.”

“What’s the other half?” asked George Occhipinti.

“Perspiration.” answered Greg. “When you’re working professionally—”

“Don’t you mean *if* instead of *when*?” interjected Occhipinti.

“No *ifs* in my classroom,” answered Greg. “A due date means a due date. Clear?”

Sue and Occhipinti nodded.

“Other questions?” asked Greg.

“When does your new film start shooting?” wondered Mike Ziobro.

“We’re hoping to start pre-production by the end of January.”

“Can we come watch you shoot?” asked Joni Olson.

“You bet,” said Greg.

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When he drove onto campus on the first Tuesday after the holiday vacation, Greg was surprised to find Len Schreiber again waiting for him.

“Rumor has it you’ve got a film that’ll shoot,” said Schreiber.

“Anything wrong with that?”

“What about your class?”

“Either they’ll come to location, or I’ll buy everybody lunch on Saturday at Canter’s.”

Schreiber frowned. “Not how it works. We prefer to have classes on campus at their scheduled time.”

Greg stared at Schreiber in disbelief. “Are we talking about grad students, or third-graders?”

“You not a believer in rules?” asked Schreiber.

“Hold it,” said Greg. “What’s my title here?”

“Adjunct Professor.”

“So define Adjunct.”

“Where’s this going?” demanded Schreiber.

“Working professional who makes time in his schedule to give back.”

Schreiber sneered. “How come the rest of the faculty has no problem?”

“Are they working professionals?” replied Greg

Schreiber grimaced. “They’ve all worked in the business.”

“Point proven.”

“What the hell’s that mean?”

“Past tense,” stated Greg, realizing his days at AFI were numbered.

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Ironically, Greg’s guest for the second half of class that day was Pete Dresner, the producer on what was slated to be his next project.

After a lively classroom discussion of the do’s-and-don’ts of independent production, Dresner followed Greg to a Thai restaurant.

“So where do we stand?” Greg asked after they ordered.

“We’ll get financed eventually,” answered Dresner.

“Eventually as in a few weeks? Months? Years?”

Dresner shrugged. “I’m as antsy as you. What if –”

“Yeah?”

“While we’re waiting we do something on the cheap.”

“Such as?”

“You tell me,” said Dresner.

“What about a documentary?”

“About?”

Greg thought for a moment. “Boxing.”

“What about it?”

Greg pondered for a longer moment. “The Latinization of the sport,” he finally said. “In the ring and in the stands.”

Dresner smiled. “Give me names.”

“Oscar De La Hoya. Sugar Ray Leonard. Canelo Alvarez. Bob Arum. Should I go on?”

“Can you get to ’em?”

Greg nodded. “I know Larry Merchant, so he’ll open doors.”

“What kind of cost?”

“Know what the architect said when someone asked him to design a house by a lake?”

“Tell me.”

“How much you got?”

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Accustomed to the world of scripted films, where months can be spent budgeting, casting, crewing, and acquiring permits, Greg was thrilled that within a matter of weeks he was filming. The plan was to interview locals such as Larry Merchant, Oscar De La Hoya, and Sugar Ray Leonard on days that didn’t conflict

with his AFI workshop. Similarly, a trip to Vegas, where Greg could have the equivalent of one-stop shopping on the weekend of a championship fight, since so many luminaries show up, presented no problem.

The first hitch, which Greg viewed as little more than a hiccup, came when he decided to travel with his cameraman and sound man to Puerto Rico on a fight weekend, with a stopover in Miami for additional interviews before flying back. Because that would mean missing class on Tuesday, he arranged to buy his students lunch on Saturday in a private room at Canter's Deli, which everyone found to be a pleasant alternative to their dreary classroom.

Nevertheless, Len Schreiber was once more waiting for him the following Tuesday.

"Obviously, my words meant nothing," Schreiber muttered.

"What're you going to do, burn me at the stake?"

"Not funny."

"Neither is trying to get me to choose between silly rules and my career. Besides, class and pastrami went real well together."

Schreiber scowled. "How does that make other faculty members feel?"

"Hungry? Jealous?"

"Time will tell," Schreiber growled.

"Tell what?"

"Which class turns out the best scripts."

"Want to bet?"

"What's that mean?" demanded Schreiber.

“There are contests, right? National screenwriting contests?”

“What about ’em?”

“What’ll you say if one—or maybe even two—are won by group?”

“Fat fucking chance!” spewed Schreiber.

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Little did Greg know that Elena Salas’ screenplay would win the coveted Nicholls Award, with its $35,000 cash award. Or that Rashad Parker would win a Page Award in the category of Best Coming-Of-Age Screenplay.

Nor do he know that his boxing film would win the Imagen Award for best Latino-based Feature Length Documentary. Even better, as studios merged, movie theaters closed, and the business continued to contract, that would lead to projects about the criminal justice system, Eastern spirituality, music, and breakthroughs in the treatment of diabetes.

Though affiliation at the American Film Institute would soon end, in the years that followed Greg would to teach workshops first in Singapore, then in France. And, per his promise, he continued to read works-in-progress from the members of his class.

## Table of Contents

**Alan Swyer** is an award-winning filmmaker whose recent documentaries have dealt with Eastern spirituality in the Western world, the criminal justice system, diabetes, boxing, and singer Billy Vera. In the realm of music, among his productions is an album of Ray Charles love songs. His novel *The Beard* was recently published by Harvard Square Editions.

His newest production is called “When Houston Had The Blues.”

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