

## Toronto Screenwriting Conference Notes

21/4/2017 – 22/4/2017

### Chris Cantwell and Chris Rogers Masterclass – *Halt and Catch Fire*

- Googling only gets you so far, go to the primary sources (books, etc) for your research.
  - Find the people who actually did it/are doing it. Find the lost perspectives, including the ones that are no longer valid, to get into the p.o.v. of your era.
- The research can take you away from the actual meat of what makes the subject interesting. If you're making a movie about submarines don't Wikipedia U-Boats, talk to someone who is acutely claustrophobic.
- "Outside-in" writing, or writing to what you think the market wants, because that's not what people actually want.
  - Also, if avoid working on those shows because they will stunt you. Work with the right people.
- Notes aren't a to-do list. Be the steward of your material. Defend your work if you know better.
  - If you wrote it well, nobody knows your story better than you.
    - This means defending your p.o.v. from a place in the work, not from ego, or pride.
  - Because as a showrunner you have a duty to be open to hearing and trying other perspectives.
  - Look for people who say "I don't get it" or "I like it the way it is" because these people are not making notes out of fear, out of insecurity, out of "necessity." They will champion your work when it's right, and make it better when it's not.
- On writers in the room: "He who does not speak knows. He who speaks does not know."
  - The best idea wins, no matter the hierarchy of the room.
    - Similarly, you are not your ideas, and vice-versa. It's easier said than done, but it will make you a better writer, and a better person, if you can teach yourself that.
  - Create a space where everyone feels safe enough to bomb. You don't get the great ideas without a few bad ones. It's important to allow your writers to get there.
  - Build a consensus in the room through debate and writing process (what fits) because it works.
    - You have to let the story develop past the "breaking" period because it stagnates otherwise. You'd be surprised how often something exciting in the room is flat on the floor because you didn't go back through it.
      - The "Tech" in our show is a way to get characters doing something every week. It's the metaphor that lets us look at the people.
        - Tech is a means to character.
      - "If you set out to write a poem about two dogs fucking, and you write a poem about two dogs fucking, then you've written a poem about two dogs fucking."— Gerald Stern
    - Don't let your ideas drag. "Spend" story as quickly as possible, because the audience is smarter than you are. They will get there faster than you expect.
    - You haven't finished breaking if you aren't surprised. Surprise is the writer's only real tool.
    - Don't try to copy "Prestige Drama" but find what works in your show.
      - Always look to move and move fast with your story.

- We start the season by talking characters, where their heads are at, what cool things we want to see happen this year, etc, to find a jumping off point
  - We often move away or passed these ideas, but a starting point is essential.
  - The stories are then broken as they come, channelling the characters' headspace from episode to episode.
- A work/life balance is possible, but it is up to you as a showrunner to set these boundaries.
- Great work comes from always putting the human element first.
  - Procedure/World-building/set pieces/etc are all fun, but don't mistake the meny for the meal.
  - Character comes first, and every action, thought, or shot must come from them.
- In the edit suite, watch your show like a viewer.
  - Editing is the second writer's room. Try anything and bin it if it's a bad. You find a lot of gold this way.
- As a writer, you *have* to get enough out of just making your show. Because that's all you get. You can't stake your well-being on someone else's reaction. "Joy's soul lies in the doing."
  - Similarly, if you go seeking your insecurities, you will find them on the internet.
- Always begin with the belief that your story can contain anything.
- You can't write from an agenda.
- Give characters valid p.o.v.'s and arguments and let them fight it out.
- Try not to "burn" characters, i.e. make them do something that turns your audience off a character forever.
- For a reaction beyond approval in our own work, we can't aim for what fits. If we aren't pleasing ourselves, who are we pleasing?

#### **Gran Via Productions Roudtable** – *Breaking Bad, Better Call Saul, Halt and Catch Fire*

- Looking for filmmaker-driven projects, where great characters go on unexpected journeys.
- First-look deal with AMC.
  - AMC doesn't go from pilot to season.
  - Instead of shooting a pilot, AMC pays for a writer's room to produce 6+ scripts.
    - Cheaper than a pilot, and buys a better idea of what the show is.
    - Then decides which show to pick up, dependent on how many open "slots" they have.
  - Flexible on season orders, but looking for 10+ episode seasons
    - Easier to amortize the cost of a series over more episodes. Maximizes value.
- "Cutting through the noise is about your unique tone. Voice is important above all."
- Gran Via is more proactive as a producer than reactive, meaning I don't really read the projects that are sent to me, I go out to look for the projects that speak to me as a producer.
  - I pass on things that I know will sell because they aren't for me. Not worth the effort if your heart isn't in the project.
  - Reading submissions is more about finding voices to work with than picking next projects.
  - Probably received 1000 scripts in the last two years. Currently have 12 film and TV projects in development.
- We receive a lot of similar ideas and things that are "hot," but again looking for voice.
  - Looking for "five degrees off" stories like *The Good Wife*. Everyone knows the disgraced politician story, but nobody thought of writing it from the wife's experience.

- Take a cliché and write it from a new p.o.v. that is unique.
  - Also please no more “boom town” (i.e. Dakota fracking towns), “Mega Church Pastor,” “Friday Night Lights” with other sports, or Trump metaphor scripts. Please.
    - Typically you get pitched an idea a hundred times before someone gets it right (Mad Men, Breaking Bad, etc). Then people move on to the next idea.
- Producers and Studios don’t know what they’re looking for in terms of content, but they know it when they see it. Looking for the thing that punches them in the chest, that hits them in a way nothing else does.
- Packaging is paramount – the network is buying the team as much as the story.
  - Can hinder success though is studio doesn’t like your team.
  - Keanu Reeves tried to make *Passengers* for a decade, but no one wanted to because they didn’t want him starring in it.
- Can be important to have an “intellectual property” attached to your project, even if your story isn’t based on anything, to convince studios to take on your project.
  - Even if it’s an article from the Atlantic, or a comic book in the same genre, it helps frame your pitch in a way that’s easier to understand than just a straight original pitch.

### I AM: Discussion on the Female Gaze

- There’s an expectation that character’s always must know what’s going on, and know exactly what to do, but often that’s not the case.
  - Indemic problem with female characters is the lack of authenticity in the voice.
- In shows with a single female character, writers find more pressure to write to a unified “female audience”, to channel all females into one character,
  - Most shows have multiple male protags, which allows a more complex and complete view of masculinity, and reinforces an idea that there is only “one way to be a woman”
  - When you have multiple female protags you can off-set the expectations, and strive to create a more authentic voice for each individual.
- Women will write full female characters because women are full. This is the same way that men write full male characters.
- On “likeability” and making female characters more “likeable”:
  - First question you have to ask is “unlikeable to whom?”
    - Don’t listen to men who’s only note is that they found the character unlikeable. That women have to be “likeable” at all times is a patriarchal concept that doesn’t extend to men. Why can Don Draper be a womanizing alcoholic for six seasons and still be “likeable” when a woman can’t?
    - Seriously. If you don’t make the viewer confront their own instincts, force them to get the real reason why they don’t like this woman, then how can you hope to change things?
      - Likeable characters project a damaging ideal that belittles real life and perpetuates bad ideas through generations. We need to “unlearn” the tropes.
    - Part of the FemaleGaze is not listening to how male viewers/readers want your female characters to be/act.
  - Furthermore, as long as what is “unlikeable” about a character stems from an authentic choice they have made, it will be understood and real.

- Audiences care when they get to know a character, likeable or not, because that's what happens when you get to know people. You don't have to trick them with your "Save the Cat" BS.
  - Investment earned is stronger than investment forced upon you. Just make the character captivating and you'll get there.
- Also, you haven't lost out on a job "because they didn't want another white dude in the room." You just assumed it was your job until some bitch took from under you, that the woman who got it was inherently less qualified than you.
  - That arrogance is part of the problem.
- The "Damaged Woman" trope:
  - It's BS that women have to be damaged, brutalized, or hurt to justify their stories.
  - Female Gaze means expanding our idea of drama to something that doesn't need a woman to have a dark and stormy backstory to justify her character's existence.
  - Like a male character, a character's want, trajectory, and obstacle are all you need.
- Good rule of thumb: Does female character dictate her own choices and movements? Or are they dictated for her? If it's the latter, there's a good chance you should re-write.
  - Character ultimately comes down to choice motivating decisions.
- Ultimately, the female gaze means showing new perspectives, and honestly, as storytellers, aren't we in the business of new perspectives?

### **In the Writing Room on *Kim's Convenience***

- Find it important for writer's to come in prepared, but not to come in with fully plotted out ideas.
  - Easier to grow a story if it begins with a funny scene, or an interesting problem, etc.
  - Looking for a jumping off point for the day.
- Drama rooms and comedy rooms are similar in dynamic. Too many snacks. Too much laughing.
- Ego needs to be checked at the door. Best idea moves forward. That's it.
- No phones in the room.
- Hours: Rigid hours so we can get to it, and then go home.
  - 9am – 11am: Work Period 1
  - 11:15am – 1pm: Work Period 2
  - 1pm – 1:30pm: Lunch
  - 1:30pm – 3:30pm: Work Period 3
  - 3:45pm – 5pm: Work Period 4
  - Home: 2+ hours of work.
- Episodes begin with discussion of what a character is trying to do, why we care, and who is standing in their way?
  - The obstacle must be rooted in another character's personality.
  - Look for interesting dynamics between cast members that interest you (doubles, triples)
    - "What relationship is being mucked up?"
  - Is the story of the character's own making?
    - Always funnier when we make our own trouble
- Don't let secondary characters steal the thunder from your leads.
- Every joke needs a personal in for the character
  - Makes the character emotionally invested in the plot. Scenes aren't just "hijinks" then.
- Episode ideas are endless. 10:1 Unused ideas to used ideas.

- Unused ideas are put on cards on the “Boneyard” board for later use (potentially)
- Script template unique to each show. Tailored to each program.
  - Ours: Cold Open/Act One/Act Two/Tag
  - ~34 pages. ~16 scenes.
  - Cold open unrelated to later stories (stands alone).

#### US Producers Panel - (Gran Via Productions, The Middleton Media Group, Color Force)

- For a pitch to be a pitch, it needs to be a fully fledged take on a season AS WELL AS an introduction to who you are as a writer, and why you’re the one who has to tell this story.
  - If you can’t say what’s it about (what’s underneath the cool plot turns and rapid fire diaglog) in the first five minutes of your pitch, it’s going to be a pass.
- Don’t chase trends. Studios don’t know what they want.
  - To make them champion something they need to feel its authenticity, they need to be excited about it to carry it through to production.
  - Readers also know when a script has been reverse engineered for the marketplace.
- Voice is the tone, character, and theme that is unlike anything they’ve read. Does this script go in a direction that no one else would take it in? Surprise, again, the most valuable tool a writer has.
  - **Voice is finding something interesting to say, and an interesting way to say it.**
- We don’t read unsolicited material. If it wasn’t sent to us by an agent or a manager “I just delete those emails without opening them.”
  - Legal liability if you go on to make something in the same world as an unsolicited script you received, and people can prove you read it.
  - LOOPHOLE: Get a friend in the industry to pass your script on to their friends in the business.
    - Gran Via employees a Barista who gave his sample to one of the directors they were working with. He now re-writes everything that comes through their doors.

#### Marti Noxon – *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Mad Men, UnREAL*

- As TV becomes more competitive, how do you stand out? PASSION
  - It’s an answer you hear a lot. So what does that even mean?
    - Something that hasn’t been seen before.
- Types of Passion:
  1. Passion to Engage / be understood / to understand
    - A curiosity for the world and how it works.
    - Keeping your eyes open for stories.
  2. Passionate Engagement with Yourself
    - A curiosity for what makes you tick, what makes you you.
    - This pursuit helps you get to the heart of your story.
      - This is called “The Nugget” and it is what will make whatever you write uniquely yours.
    - Dig into the reasons why and what you get out of yourself
      - You will find what is uniquely yours through this.
      - This is what makes you stand out.
    - The biggest problem for new writers is that they just consume other media, so everything they write feels as if it was written in a vacuum.
      - Their work does not breath, it merely recycles.

3. Passion for Empathy and Compassion
  - This means pursuing the stories that give you “a big feeling,” stories that bring up empathy and compassion in you.
    - Part of this means working to find Empathy and Compassion for things you don’t normally have empathy and compassion for.
    - It’s one thing not to agree with a pov/character/idea, but you have to demonstrate that you understand it.
  - This passion means finding a reason for every character to have a unique pov, no matter what.
- Giving the viewers low expectations are a blessing
  - Joss Whedon didn’t call *Buffy* just “SLAYER” because he wanted to surprise his audience.
  - Genre is a great tool for this. Find a genre to dump your POV into. Make it commercial.
- If you don’t have to pitch, don’t. Spec. Do it yourself. Because too much gets lost in translation.
  - If you’re going to chase your story, why would you filter it through someone else?
  - Pitch when you have your story, and not before.
- When you pitch, you are pitching the show, the script, and your love for the project.
- **Passionate engagement with yourself and the world is the root of your challenge.**
  - Feel deeper, ask more.
  - When you get that feeling, that click, that’s what sells.
    - What’s it about, and why do you need to tell it.
- Also, please pursue female characters that don’t require a male catalyst. Please.
- Plot can’t drive character.
  - Joss Whedon would look at the *Cards* and say “This is just a bunch of moves” meaning its all plot and no story, all external movement to keep it interesting and no internal movement to make it real.
  - Characters **must** make choices based on who they are.
    - The best moments for me are always the ones where, as a viewer, you go “oh yeah...they *would* totally do that. I just didn’t see it coming.”
- The non-writing reader is the bane of your existence as a writer. Jealousy and anger abounds.
- The art of showrunning is the art of delegating.
  - The worst showrunners try to do everything, even though they’ve never looked at a budget before, never talked to actors, etc.
    - **The show adapts to you.** Never read a budget before? They’ll get you a kickass line producer. Never been in an edit suite? They’ll hire post-supervisors and editors that can help you with that. ETC.
- Re: “Edgy Female Characters” as a writer its your job to find an organic way into that for your character. It’s a stupid note, but like all stupid notes, you have to make it work.
- Sleep makes you more efficient. So sleep.
- On her prolific output: I’ve written so much because I treat projects like bad boyfriends. When one acts up, or one gets boring, I just go back to another.
- On getting an Agent: Be relentless. Talk to other writers. Make your own luck.
- If you find yourself blocked, go to a class or a talk. Stretch your creative muscles. Get inspired.
- On honing an idea: keep track of things you find interesting. Find the parts of the story people haven’t talked about yet. Research spawns more ideas from that.
  - Find your way into the story, the character’s psychology.

- That's where you find the specificity in the universal.
- When young writer's get into the room they need to gauge the temperature of the room, and then dive in.
  - "I'm suspicious of people who don't talk at all – is there something wrong with them? – But I'm also suspect of people who don't have doubts."

### Story Design for the Current Marketplace with Corey Mandell

- People who believe in screenwriting "rules" are ruled by confirmation bias.
  - It provides them a source of comfort, but ultimately its constraining.
- As writer's our success depends on the subjective judgements of others. There's no control in that, but we want to believe there is because its safe.
- Everyone wants to believe in the rookie screenwriter selling his first script for a million dollars. But it's Publicity BS. I know its Publicity BS because its part of what I do for a living.
  - As a result we think success is determined by luck or by access
  - In reality, it's working on your weaknesses until they're strengths.
  - Biggest mistake a writer can make is thinking they've "made it" or "crossed the finish line."
    - You need to keep pushing.
- **"You can't always get the career that you want. But you always get the career you deserve."**
- The truth of the matter is that if you write something extraordinary showrunners and executives are upset at themselves if they have to pass on it.
- So how do you progress without paradigms or rules?
  - You do it with objectives, tools (when you get stuck), and process (working on weaknesses)
- There are four objectives of great writing structure.
  1. Never bore your reader
  2. Don't bend character to suit plot
  3. Never make the ask until you've fully earned the "yes"
  4. Escalate through the character's heart of darkness
- The focus of this talk is on #3 and #4
- Four tools for writers (Ways to get into your story)
  1. Compelling Conflict (Unstoppable force meets immovable object)
  2. Compelling Question (What would you do if...?)
  3. Heart of Darkness (How can you make the worst thing to ever happen worse?)
  4. Bisociation (Making disparate ideas one and the same – i.e. can you save someone's life by killing them?)
- Great writers navigate into impossible corners and find organic character-driven ways out.
- Never make the ask until you've fully earned the "yes"
  - This means making sure your reader has enough essential context to join you on your wild journey.
    - **Do not launch your story until you've reached this point**
    - Launching before this point is how you get a disconnect between the movie in your head and the movie your audience/reader is getting.
- As an exercise, write out every piece of essential context needed to get into the story.

- Walter White doesn't start cooking meth until we, as an audience, know a) that he is the last person in the world to cook meth, b) why he is the last person in the world we would expect to cook meth, and c) why Jesse is that last person in the world he would do it with.
    - We need to know not only what is happening, but why it's happening.
    - You cannot launch before then.
- Different stories have different launch points. Each launch point is unique to the amount of essential context endemic to the story.
- After you figure out every piece of essential context to your story, only then do you get to dress it up and make it exciting. If you do it before then, the movie will not play the same in our heads as in yours.
- You need to train your brain to think in the following order:
  1. Idea generation
  2. What's the essential context?
  3. How do we make it interesting, exciting?
  4. Is it clear?
- If you falter in any of these steps, you go back and do it again.
- Do not conflate design and execution. They are separate entities.
  - This is made easier if you don't let design determine your story.
  - "Do not mistake the menu for the meal."
- As writer's, our bread and butter is escalating conflict. A story escalates, or it dies.
- The best writing, though, comes when you escalate through a character's heart of darkness.
  - What is your character's personalized nightmare? How can you make it worse, tailored specifically for them?
    - Drive through their HoD.
    - Ask, along the way, are things getting hard, harder, or easier?
- Understanding both sides of an unwinnable argument is drama.
  - In *The Americans* pilot is built around this concept. Phillip and Elizabeth are dropped into a scenario where their Hearts of Darkness are conflicting.
- Great writers escalate through the character's HoD. Extraordinary writers escalate through their own Hearts of Darkness.
  - What specifically scares you? Find the kernel of fear that becomes your core idea. Build your story out of something that's real.
- Writing is an energy-transference business. If you write from your head we will know it.
- For those who worry about "too much exposition" I see more scripts fail everyday because writer's couldn't communicate their vision properly than I do from "hack writing"
  - Hack writing is the easiest thing in the world for a reader to pass on. But if you cannot communicate your ideas and your stories clearly, you will get meeting, after meeting, after meeting that ends without a sale and without a job.
- If you write compelling conflict which is compelling because it stems from the character's organic heart of darkness, you will be fine.
  - Hack writing isn't the enemy you think it is. It's bad writing sure, but it's not what's wrong with your story.
- Separate your essential context from your engagement.
  - You must do context first, then dress it up.
- Great writing makes your reader want the exposition, to want to know what happens on the next page.

## Business Side of the Studio with Rick Olshansky (co-head AMC studios)

- The license system of shows is dying. Networks want to own their shows these days because its becoming the only way to make \$ in a world saturated with content.
  - *Mad Men* is a licensed show. Lion's Gate developed it and asked AMC if they wanted the right to air the show for half the production budget. Lion's Gate keeps the rights to sell the show to other territories, etc.
  - *The Walking Dead* was developed in house, and so AMC retains all the rights to the show.
- Shows are purchased/developed based on how it would work for AMC or its subsidiary networks.
  - Will buy based on the network's brand
  - Show's will stay on despite ratings, to a point.
- All AMC shows go straight to series. We do not shoot pilots. (Hulu adopting this model too)
  - Instead of making a pilot, AMC will put that money into a writers' room to create 6+ scripts.
    - Buying a better idea of what the show is.
  - AMC buys rights for a bunch of scripts (70+) every year.
    - These scripts are narrowed down by readers.
    - Process leads to four to six series a year being picked up to full development.
  - Development Rooms are scheduled twice a year. Two or Three rooms running at once.
    - This is done so the shows can be judged competitively.
    - Not competing for just one spot. If all three are great, all three will go to series, just dependent on network schedule.
      - At this point we're looking for reasons not to make them.
- Scripts typically come from a pitch, not a spec.
  - "Intellectual Property" pitches make it easier to envision a project than, say, a straight original pitch.
    - Worth bringing in IP material, even if its just to give a better idea to the networks of what your show is.
      - Especially true for new writers. We don't know who you are, what your style is. This helps sell you.
  - New writers are paired with non-writing producers to keep projects makeable.
    - Rare that the writers don't already have a producer attached though. Most projects come as part of packages.
- We don't chase the market, we chase our brand: "premium cable tv on a basic cable network"
  - This is why ratings are not paramount, because acclaim can be monetized as well. Emmys are worth something to a lot of people.
  - (But if people don't like AND don't watch it, you're in trouble)
- This model is better because 6+ scripts show the writer knows the show and you can budget around that. Pilots leave too many questions marks.
  - Let's you know what you're buying.
  - Pilots cost ~\$5 million to shoot. Rooms cost ~\$150,000 for 6+ scripts.
- Season orders are usually 10 episodes, with an "enhanced" first episode that has more shoot days.
- There is little risk to this model because shows that don't work out can be sold to subsidiary networks to recoup potential loses.

## Paul Haggis Masterclass – *Million Dollar Baby, Crash*

- When things are going badly, get fired. Shake things up.
- “I became a writer when I started thinking about where the work came from in me. I found out what the show was really about instead of looking at it like a series of plots.”
- Tell stories simply, cleanly.
- The only way to make projects is to care so much that you don’t care if it succeeds or not. You just *have* to make it.
- All writing is story, which is why I outline.
- If I know what the character values, needs, and what they would sacrifice for, I’m good. I don’t worry about the middle if I have that.
  - Write Act 1 and Act 3 first. If I’m going to get lost, its in the weeds of secondary characters, subplots, etc.
  - Move on to Act 2 when you’re happy with Act 1 and 3.
- Good stories come from questions that haunt you, and pushing through the cliché to make it yours.
  - “What would you do for love?” “Well... Everything I suppose.” “BULLSHIT.”
    - Ask yourself by putting two things you love on a scale, and forcing yourself to choose one. The answer you give, if its honest, is where the interesting meat of your story is.
    - Put your character in a similar position where they can’t answer the question.
      - Great drama is the question that wakes you up with night sweats.
- In terms of process I aim for six hours of actual writing in an eight hour day.
- On working a job to support your writing – “Get the shittiest job possible. Because it won’t let you settle. If you find a job that gives you even a little bit of creativity you will stay there. Because staying put is easier than writing.”
- Writing is about pursuing the “not-reasonable” direction. What’s the worst way to take something?
- Stories come down to endings. If you wanna write an ending, and the ending is why you wanna write it, it’s a movie (and not TV).
  - As a writer though for TV need to know a landing area for your series. You can’t pitch without it.
- When re-writing, ask what doesn’t make sense and find a way to motivate it from character.
- On when you’re finished:
  - The voice inside your head will tell you when its done.
  - If they can’t shoot your draft, or it’s not good enough, don’t send it.
  - But that being said “Works of art are never finished merely abandoned.”