

Lew Hunter

From Guide Rock to Screenwriting Guru

Part 1 of 2 By Matt Goodlett

For someone considered to be one of the preeminent screenwriting teachers in the world, Lew Hunter didn't have much early exposure to movies.

"My mother wouldn't let me go see any movie except for MGM or Paramount musicals. I remember going to see *Phantom of the Opera*. My mother, of course, thought she was taking me to a musical and I saw [*Phantom*] through the cracks in her gloves as she tried to cover my eyes," Hunter said.

Hunter used to think that he was unfortunate because he had insufficient educational opportunities as a child growing up on a farm in Guide Rock, Nebraska. "But then I realized that I grew up in my mother's lap reading Shakespeare, *Beowulf*, and *Don Quixote*," he said.

This education in the classics must have formed an adequate foundation for his many achievements involving screenwriting and movies. Some of them are more nostalgic than others. For television he produced episodes of *Batman*, *Bewitched* and *Combat* in the early 70s. He's written and produced projects for ABC, CBS, NBC, Paramount and Warner Brothers. He wrote and produced the award-winning television movie *Fallen Angel*. In all, Hunter has written over 155 scripts.

Many of his most impressive accomplishments have come as a teacher. Hunter established the screenwriting program at the Sorbonne in Paris, taught there as well as the Croatian Summer Film Academy for four years, was a faculty member at UCLA for over a decade and became Chairman Emeritus in 1988. Most telling is that in a sendoff that would rival Mr. Holland's Opus he was honored by 1,500 of his UCLA students and colleagues at a red carpet event when he retired from the university.

On a bright day in early spring, Hunter and his wife, Pamela, drove into Omaha from Superior, Neb., in a light brown minivan with a slap-on advertisement for his Superior Screenwriting Colony. For those unfamiliar with the colony, it's a fourteen day writing intensive seminar held in the summer and early fall that receives students from all over the world. Hunter recalled one session in which 13 people participated and seven countries were represented. This year the program is being divided between 10 beginning screenwriters and 10 professional or semi-professional screenwriters.

Hunter and Pamela are a match, he in a red Huskers t-shirt and Pamela in a red blouse. Both have warm, easy smiles. He has the build of a former football player but the arthritis in his hands is due to jamming his fingers while playing basketball in his youth.

Arthritis is the reason that he finally gave up typing on his old standup typewriter, a 1910 Remington stolen from Ernie Cofax by proxy, and switched to a computer. Cofax was the late-night forerunner of Letterman and up until six years ago, Hunter said that every nickel he made as a writer was made while typing on Cofax's old typewriter.

On the phone, Hunter sounds a touch like Larry Flynt, the way words can become lost in his jowls. In person, his voice is sonorous in the way a gravel road is as a pickup rolls over it. He still had a healthy tan from his recent return from a season teaching at UCLA. Throughout the interview, he and Pamela finished each other's stories like good couples do.

While his profession keeps his hand in movies, Hunter had brushes with literary giants. When he was a young

man he was enrolled in a Master's program that John Steinbeck guest-lectured to.

"After he spoke everybody was standing around and asking him questions and when it was my turn I asked, 'Mr. Steinbeck, what can I do to be a writer?' He looked at me, twisted his beard, nodded and said, 'Write.' And he turned around and walked off."

Hunter was left speechless at the time but said it continues to be among the best advice he's ever gotten. Simple. It's reminiscent of the way that Hunter ends emails and occasionally phone conversations--"Write on!"

Several years ago Hunter was going through roll call, matching names to faces at his screenwriting colony and discovered that Megan Steinbeck--John Steinbeck's granddaughter-- was participating. "I was so taken by teaching John Steinbeck's granddaughter," he said.

Pamela said, "She's a wonderful person, a wonderful writer. Megan was born after [John] died, so the trust was already set up. She got nothing. She's as poor as church mouse. She'll even park her car and walk about a mile and a half because she can't afford the parking at UCLA."

"Now she's working for Morgan Freeman. I imagine she probably reads his scripts. A lot of times actors will have someone they trust read scripts for them and recommend roles," Hunter said. "She's only 28. She's going to be one of the greats I bet."

Though his meeting with John Steinbeck was brief, Hunter did form a lasting relationship with Ray Bradbury, the author of *Fahrenheit 451*. While working as an executive at Disney, Hunter came across an un-produced script for Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*. Disney had just completed movies like *Mary Poppins* and *The Shaggy Dog* that relied on, what at the time were cutting edge special effects. Although Disney didn't make *The Martian Chronicles*, a friendship budded and Hunter eventually had a part in getting *Something Wicked This Way Comes* produced.

Hunter recalls the time that he and Bradbury went to see *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Hunter refers to it as an aural, visual experience because of the scope of the movie and the fact that Bradbury spoke to him throughout it. "Ray and I loved it. When Ray speaks it's like a beautiful multi-colored balloon is coming out of his mouth and is popping and then another balloon...He's just so picaresque in his description," Hunter said. "I went to see it a second time, having remembered what an experience it was and I thought it wasn't that great. It was really good but it wasn't 'wow.' Then I realized that seeing *Close Encounters* with Ray Bradbury whispering in your ear, nothing could be better."

When speaking of Bradbury, Hunter seems struck by the novelist's enthusiasm for writing, even though it's a trait that the two seem to share. When listening to Hunter talk you can't help but get caught up in his stories, wondering where they'll peter out, come to a crossroads, and start in a new direction, until finally you just sit back and enjoy the ride.

Hunter doesn't seem jaded as some writing teachers can become, but he does believe his students should be pragmatic about screenwriting.

Often, among the first questions that Hunter gets asked is how to get an agent. "They're just finishing their first script that they've ever written and they're expecting to get an agent and this is really a misconception because I don't know any writer that sold their very first script." Pamela brings up a few exceptions that are also found in Hunter's book, but the odds are not great. **Continued on page 27**

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"I don't think you should really even consider yourself a screenwriter until you've got four to six [scripts] that you're happy with," Hunter said.

Pamela said, "Oliver Stone wrote 20 scripts before he made a shuckle as a screenwriter. And I say that not to discourage but to encourage."

Still, Hunter gushes over the talent some of his students possess and genuinely seems interested in seeing them succeed.

When he first started out Hunter said that even he thought everything he wrote was wonderful. "Of course many people think everything that I write is s---," he said laughing.

He said after making money at it, gaining experience, and maturing as a writer he became more practical and recognized that when he'd written something terrible there was always a way to make it better.

"I don't really believe in writer's block. I believe a real writer sits there until something comes out of him or her, and then makes notations and he can fix it, tomorrow, or later in the day or three weeks from then," Hunter said.

One movie that Hunter feels needed fixing is this summer's *Spiderman 3*. "I thought *Spiderman 2* was the best superhero movie I'd ever seen, because they blended the special effects with the humanness and the ante. *Spiderman 3* was just so boring and the special effects took forever."

Hunter is quick to denounce special effects for bloating movies, particularly those of Steven Spielberg, but also recognizes the potential that they've given to screenwriters. "That's one of the most exciting things about being a writer today. There are no restraints on you except your own imagination and your own energy."

Another possible reason for the thud of *Spiderman 3* is that it ignores one of the rules found in Hunter's *Screenwriting 434* under the playful subhead "Split Bananas not Heroes or Heavies." It states simply: "One heavy, one hero" and then expounds, "Two villainous characters cancel each other out, substantially reducing the power of your threat to the hero, and the power of your drama."

Hunter can remember a time when there were two heavy limitations for a screenwriter: special effects and censorship.

"When I was at Nebraska Wesleyan as a freshman in 1952, one word shocked the nation in the movie *The Moon is Blue*. The word 'virgin' was used and the country was electrified," he said.

Hunter's UCLA classroom has become a free forum for the discussion of screenwriting by professional screenwriters who are guest-lecturers. Hunter had the sessions taped and will donate the tapes to the UCLA archives. The transcripts of those meetings are being compiled into the book *Naked Screenwriting: 22 Academy Award-Winning Screenwriters Bare Their Heart and Souls to You*. The number of screenwriters talking about their craft for the book is rising and includes: Francis Ford Coppola, Oliver Stone and William Goldman—the screenwriter of *The Princess Bride*.

Hunter recalled, "Bill Goldman said, 'Oh god, the horror of it all is that we all do it so differently,'"

Hunter believes that's the joy of it.

"Every one of these writers that has taken my class has a different way in which they tickle the muse. Some of them do it in bursts; some of them are very deliberate. Sometimes it comes bursting out like a volcano, and other times it's like a glacier." ■