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Chapter: Work-in-progress: The Writing of *Shortchanged*

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Abstract:

There are many ways to write a screenplay. This chapter traces one writer's process to find a way that worked for her, a way to write a screenplay marked by the imprint of both creativity and craft. "Work-in-progress: The Writing of *Shortchanged*," is a first-person account of the writing of the first draft of the low-budget feature, *Shortchanged*, funded under Screen Queensland New Writer's Workshop. *Shortchanged* was written over a six-month period and informed by a family secret that had echoed and invaded the writer's mind. This chapter considers the first-time screenwriter's struggles to find her own voice when presented with a plethora of advice from "how to" books written by script "gurus". Written in the first person, it is a reflective account of the screenwriting process and contains excerpts of the writer's journal and script working documents as well as references to the emerging body of academic theory in the field of script development. Most of all it highlights the importance of valuing the writer's creative process (McVeigh 2014, 2015, 2016) and staying true to the initial creative spark that inspired the work writer's work, the dramatic centre (Cooper, 1997), as a way of maintaining focus and momentum during the writing of a screenplay.

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Chapter: **Work-in-progress: The Writing of *Shortchanged***

Ideas as such are overrated. It's the work behind the idea that is important.
(Nick Cave, 2013)

Introduction

There are many ways of writing a screenplay. For me the business of writing the low budget feature, *Shortchanged*, was about researching the teachings of the experts, some of whom are known as Hollywood script "gurus", and finding my own process. Most of all it was about learning how to stay true to my central idea when faced with indecision and uncertainty about "What happens next?"

Research into the individual and their writing processes during script development is an emerging field. In their article, 'Script Development: Defining the Field', screenwriting researchers Batty et al., interrogate the definition of script development and note that there is still much research to be done:

The literature on script development ... is wide, varied and multi-faceted; and ... arguably fragile and still emerging ... this comprehensive overview... points to the potential for further research (2017, p 240).

The practice of script development may take many guises including personal journaling, readers' reports, improvisations with actors and intensive workshops. Kerrigan and Batty, posit that "These aspects give script development a strong sense of not only industrialization, but also emotion whereby constant negotiations are made between the self (ideas, visions, feedback) and the commercial product" (2016, p. 136). Batty et al. suggest that considerations of plot, character, story, theme and emotional impact are paramount in script development and they question: "What development actually entails: which aspects of screenwriting craft beyond plot are used in/by/for script development, and what tools are used to achieve this?" (2017, p 228). They also note that script development during the first stages of the screenplay has not "received sustained attention ... partly because it is a process often veiled and mysterious... sustained and agonizing (the 'development hell' version); or simply personal, private, difficult to account for and articulate" (2017, p. 220). Elsewhere, Batty, in his discussion of theme as a tool for use in screenplay development, underlines the importance of the individual in the process and suggests how matters such as a pre-occupation with plot can "take the writer out [sic] of the project rather than into [sic] it" (2013, p.4)

It is this notion of the individual "writer in the project" and the fact that the screenwriting process is unique to each individual and may involve different and often ambiguous modes of working, that is of interest in this chapter. The idea that individual screenwriting processes may be difficult to articulate is underlined by Screen Australia, who advise filmmakers to develop a bespoke approach to story development emphasizing that it involves "art, craft and heart". "It's a process that needs to be flexible and responsive, embracing a diversity of tools and approaches that will enrich and focus creative vision at the heart of a story" (Screen Australia in Batty et al., 2017, p.239). It is this process which balances the "what if" scenarios of creativity and the demands of craft that is considered below.

In this chapter, the work of the individual "writer in the project" at the stage of the writing of the first draft is considered. Using a reflective methodology, I examine my own creative process and present under-explored elements of screenwriting research, including craft decisions made as

evidenced by first person journal entries, self-questioning and writing experiments. This work-in-progress was scaffolded by workshop deadlines and the six-stage creative process model outlined below. It was also guided by the concept of “the dramatic centre” (Cooper, 1997) which served as a means to maintain focus during the “mysterious and often messy” screenwriting and development process.

The role of Creativity and Craft in the writing of a Screenplay

To examine what “creative story development” (Screen Australia, 2017) means and how it aligns with craft, it is useful to consider the contemporary literature around Creativity. Kerrigan and Batty cite creativity researchers, Wallas (1976), Bastick (1982), and Csikszentmihalyi (1996), to situate screenwriting as part of systemic, iterative and recursive creative processes (2016, p 137). Psychologist, Csikszentmihalyi, defines Creativity as a contribution to a system that recognizes the creative output as a tangible cultural, social or economic product (1990).

Hollywood screenwriting manuals (Field 1979; Seger 1994; McKee 1999) generally do not emphasize the creative process as their focus is on the craft of screenwriting. However, McKee does acknowledge that craft and creativity are integral elements of the process. He states:

Without craft, the best a writer can do is snatch the first idea off the top of his head, then sit helpless in front of his own work ... But when the conscious mind is put to work on the objective task of executing the craft, the spontaneous surfaces. Mastery of craft frees the unconscious (McKee, 1999, p. 22).

In her screenwriting manual, *Writing Great Screenplays for Film and TV*, Dona Cooper suggests that the creative process may be considered as a means of imposing order on chaos. She contends that to avoid uncertainty many writers “cling to the seeming certainty of formulas” but in doing so they lose contact with their “own personal insights and passions” which make writing more vivid and original (Cooper 1997, 27-29). For Cooper, the integral nature of creativity and craft is a type of system of questions and answers where “you can focus on the craft to trigger the ‘function’ questions in your mind, then search through your creative instincts to find the answers” (Cooper, 1997, p. 29).

To develop my own “bespoke” approach to screenwriting, to understand “how the creative process works” and “find an approach that works” (Cooper, 1997, p. 25) for me, I developed my own personalized model of the Creative Process (McVeigh, 2015) building on the work of creativity theorists, Todd Lubart (2001) and Anne Paris (2008), with stages as outlined below.

Table 1: The Creative Process

1. Envisioning
2. Contemplation and Inspiration
3. Preparation
4. Immersion
5. Crafting
6. Publication (2015, p.58)

It must also be noted that these stages may or may not flow in a chronological order and may be recursive. They will be discussed in detail below with reference to the writing of *Shortchanged*. However, following is a brief discussion of what each stage of the process involves. Stage 1: *Envisioning*, sees the writer wanting or needing to write a screenplay. Stage 2: *Contemplation and Inspiration* gives rise to the “creative spark” that impels the writer to write. Stage 3: *Preparation* involves the various ways in which the writer researches the material about which they will write.

Stages 4 and 5: *Immersion* and *Crafting*, are the stages where the writer is actually writing and re-writing and deploying the tools of screenwriting craft. Stage 6: *Publication* is the first public reading of the script whether it be for example, by a producer, funding body or in a read-through with actors.

Acknowledging that there were stages in the creative process freed me from the threat of writer's block. It also freed me from the confines of a following a rigid structure for writing the screenplay as proposed by screenwriting gurus like Field (1994), with for example, his advice to tie turning points in the three-act structure to page numbers in the script. Rather, I used structure as a guideline for the development of story at later stages of the script's development and opened myself to Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) notion of "flow". In doing so I was guided by Cooper's advice to access the mode of thinking I needed to use, whether I was creating or crafting depending upon what stage of the creative process I was involved in:

The right side of the brain helps you to develop an instinctive sense of what you want your story to accomplish, while the left side helps to determine which tools of the craft will best achieve that goal (Cooper, 1997, p.28).

In the following sections I illustrate the way in which I used the steps of the creative process above to guide my work, by outlining my work-in-progress writing of the first draft of *Shortchanged*.

The Creative Process - Envisioning, Contemplation and Inspiration

Even though one may envision a screenplay about an idea or event that has intrigued you, knowing what to write, or why you are inspired to write, is difficult to crystallize and often comes in fragments. Screen studies and screenwriting theorist, Jill Nelmes, believes the initial spark for a screenplay is triggered at a subconscious level and is personal.

The writer uses his or her life to pull out ideas, concerns, observations that have an emotional punch or dramatic quality and moulds these into a story (Nelmes, 2007, p110).

American avant-garde filmmaker David Lynch notes in his treatise about creativity, *Catching the Big Fish* that the notion of inspiration, of "getting" the idea a writer wishes to develop, may be termed the "lightbulb" moment. He also notes that developing this idea is fragmented.

An idea is a thought. It's a thought that holds more than you think it does when you receive it. But in that first moment there is a spark. In a comic strip, if someone gets an idea, a lightbulb goes on. It happens in an instant just as in life... It would be great if the entire film came all at once. But it comes for me, in fragments (Lynch 2007, 23).

As befits all good fiction, my lightbulb moment, or my creative spark, that was to be developed into a story in fragments, came unexpectedly and it was personal. It was a yellowed newspaper fragment tacked to a makeshift gallery of family memorabilia that alerted me to the story of Mary Magdalene, my great-aunt by marriage. She made herself known to me one scorching hot summer's day at a family reunion on a long-lost ancestor's abandoned farm. Mary Magdalene was a mother who murdered her three children by drowning them in their sleep a century ago. After the event, she had put them back to bed as if nothing had happened.

The apparent unlikelihood of the event haunted me. I had to learn more about her. A reticent bachelor uncle knew a little. A garrulous cousin knew more. Later that day, with my husband, my three-year-old son and my baby, I travelled to the local cemetery to find the children's mute and silent graves.

I spent five months from that creative spark of inspiration to the writing of a preliminary document for the screen, completing as much research as I could about Magdalene's life, the murder and the topic of matricide. The more I researched her story, the more I felt for this mother of three, a woman trapped in a role dictated by her times - the social mores and sheer hard work of living and working in a harsh and challenging landscape. I learnt that the "best" room in my grandparent's house, the room where I always felt cold when "sleeping over" whether in summer or winter, was the room where Magdalene had put her dead children to bed for the last time.

I was chilled to the bone with the thought that I had slept in their bed. I was haunted by the fact that the only way it seemed she could keep her children was to put them to rest for ever. I was tormented by the lost love and opportunity for all those involved - and the way they had all been shortchanged in life. I felt a deep connection with her as a new mother. I wanted to explore her life more and share her story, and to perhaps find in her horrific crime an insight into what can happen if a mother is pushed too far.

The Creative Process - Preparation

Initially, I thought that I would share Mary Magdalene's story via documentary in a writing style but I wanted to challenge myself to write a feature film. I completed a one-day workshop, "Writing the Treatment", run by the Australian Writers Guild (AWG) and successfully submitted the treatment to Film Queensland's (now Screen Queensland) 'New Writer's Workshop Low Budget Feature Initiative'. This workshop involved working with a script editor and five similarly funded new writer colleagues on a six-month long journey to write the first draft of a low budget feature. Following is the synopsis for *Shortchanged* which I submitted in application for the workshop. Along with the treatment, it formed the blueprint for the low budget feature script that was developed during the New Writer's Workshop:

Synopsis: Shortchanged

Eliza always knew she'd make it. But the cracks are starting to show in her showcase life. Just as she is offered the job-of-a-lifetime, the lure of a dark secret, hidden for generations, invades her world. Eliza is haunted by memories of her ancestor, Mary Magdalene. Finally, she is confronted with the knowledge of a heinous crime that she is not sure she has committed. Will Eliza's journey to the top be stopped dead in its tracks?

Set against the pacy modern face of Brisbane's high-rise CBD and the sleepy lost world of the Darling Downs Goomburra Valley, *Shortchanged* deals with the big questions of life - family, happiness, commitment and the uncertain rewards of success (McVeigh, 2018).

The Creative Process - Immersion & Crafting

Where to start?

The synopsis and treatment that I had submitted for the workshop were written spontaneously over a one-week period with little regard for the dictates of craft. However, for me, the demands of writing a long form screenplay meant that I needed to learn the craft of screenwriting. This involves considerations of theme, character, structure, metaphor, dialogue and emotion and as noted above, is still dominated by "how to" manuals. I found that there were texts that suited my way of thinking, creating and writing, and texts that did not. In the end, I took a little from each and developed a "bespoke" process that worked for me.

In the following sections of this chapter I discuss the way I addressed key craft factors including the creation of character and the development of story, via the treatment and scene breakdown, as well as my use of the notion of the “dramatic center”, the tool I used to bring order to the chaos of writing.

Keeping on track.

As is noted by Nick Cave in the quote that opens this chapter, writing isn’t all about ideas - everyone has good ideas for a story. It is writers who capitalize on them. Once I had discovered my process for generating and crafting ideas, the discipline of the New Writer’s Workshop ensured they came to fruition. The workshop program required submitting screenplay material in a predetermined sequence of deadlines over a period of six months which included the key components: character notes, story outline, treatment, rough and polished first drafts. But adhering to the deadline schedule didn’t eliminate the intrinsic chaos of writing. Often I would wonder, “What am I writing about? What do I think I am doing here? Why do I need to say this?”

I contemplated Ian W. Macdonald’s concept of the ‘screen idea’ as a litmus test to evaluate the central truth of what I wanted to say. For Macdonald ‘the screen idea’ is an essence, an idea, “any notion of a potential screen work held by one or more people, whether or not it is possible to describe it on paper or by other means” (Macdonald, 2004 pp. 90-91). However, for me the concept of the “screen idea” was too theoretical; it was not visceral enough to access the emotions I wanted to explore. I found that the most powerful tool to create order out of chaos was Cooper’s notion of the “Dramatic Centre” (1997). It’s worthwhile considering this notion because the core of what a writer wants to say is often elusive and ephemeral. Cooper notes the focusing power of the dramatic centre when discussing her own writing:

Clarity on my dramatic centre also helped me understand exactly what questions I wanted the audience to be thinking about ... Once I knew the epicenter of the idea, I had both the inspiration and the clarity to make exciting and unified choices (Cooper, 1997, p. 37).

But for Cooper, finding the dramatic center is not easy. How does a writer capture this chameleon? Cooper advises:

One of the ways I know I’ve found the real dramatic centre of my idea is that I feel a visceral click, a compelling mix of relief, clarity, certainty, and excitement (Cooper, 1997, p.41).

This advice helped. When I was floundering for focus, by trying to recall that first shocking reaction, that spark, that impelled me to tell the world about Mary Magdalene’s story, I found that I could access the dramatic center of my idea. I only had to imagine myself at the farmhouse again, at the grave of those young children. When I put myself in Mary Magdalene’s shoes I conjured the cold, barren and remote world of her despair. This image and its associated “visceral click” in the pit of my stomach gave me the compelling drive to keep on track.

What comes next?

As a novice screenwriter I started my writing by obsessing about structure and “What comes next?” McKee asserts that character and structure are so interlocked that “The event structure of a story is created out of the choices that characters make under pressure” (1999, p. 106). Following this advice, I found that by taking a step back from the action and becoming well acquainted with my characters there was no longer any need to rely on the machinations of plot to keep the story alive.

The process of creation of fictional characters is different for each individual writer. Some writers like bower birds with a system of collecting images and characteristics of potential characters from their friends, relatives, or acquaintances. Some sit in coffee shops and watch the world go by. Others are like archeologists. They intricately research the backgrounds of real people and use them as models for their fictional characters.

I utilized all of these processes to some degree - I researched Magdalene's life and times, I reflected on the images I had first taken at the family reunion where I first learnt of her story - the newspaper clippings, the dry and stony landscape, the children's graves, the spartan cottage. They all evoked a solitary and salutary existence. I sat in coffee shops and wrote stream of consciousness.

For each character I wrote a "backstory" (McKee, 1999, p.183). However, I was not happy with the characters I had created. They appeared to be shallow, contrived, and they were not characters who would be "best revealed through action that advances the story" (Seger, 1994, p. 154). They also appeared to lack complexity.

I found Linda Seger's advice in this area helpful. Seger notes that "Character influences the story because the character, particularly the main one, has a goal. This goal gives direction to the story" (Seger, 1994, p. 149). She terms this relationship between the character's motivation and action towards this goal as the "character spine" - in effect the combination of who the character is, and why they do what they do. Characters need this spine to reveal to us what they're willing to do to get to their goal. Seger suggests that if any of these elements are missing the character lacks direction and the story becomes confused and unfocussed (Seger, 1994, p. 150).

I found the merging of Cooper's concept of Dramatic Center, with Seger's concept of Character Spine to be an invaluable process for creating a complex character - thus impelling them by motivation and action - to explore the central precepts of my story. In *Shortchanged*, I attempted to distill the essence of the character Eliza via her character spine, which gave rise to the question: "What is her dramatic line?" (See the table below):

Table 2: What is Eliza's dramatic line? Creating the Character Spine

Eliza wants to have it all. And this means for her there must never appear to be anything in her life that she can't control or that anyone knows she can't control (McVeigh, 2018).

This process aside, I was still unhappy with the character of Eliza. I felt that she was not believable and that I didn't know anyone who was remotely like her. To address this problem, I tried to capture Eliza's voice. I talked with actor friends and asked them how they psych'd themselves into role. On their advice, I spent whole parts of my day trying to act like Eliza would in the context of my own life. I then tried to translate these new attitudes and feelings that I experienced into her dialogue in the script. I imagined myself putting my Eliza character on a coat hanger and taking her in and out of the cupboard to "wear" as appropriate.

Story Moments & the Treatment

Writing a treatment for the workshop required me to conjure the look and feel of the film and to broadly describe the character's journey through the world of the story in the present tense. While I had previously written a treatment for the film, so as to be selected for the workshop, the story had changed significantly as the development process unfolded.

To develop this new treatment, I conjured up images of events of events and people I wanted to incorporate in my story, what I call “Story Moments”. Moments such as these are the springboards used by many writers. For example, instead of creating characters or imposing structure, American screenwriter, Joan Didion, starts with “pictures in my mind”, these being “images that shimmer around the edges”. She therefore allows the story to become rather than to be formulated (Didion in Horton, 1994. p. 33).

I used the “Story Moment” as the first step in writing the treatment. I started with a central visual image, elaborated by a present tense description of what would initially be a moment, then a scene, and finally a sequence. Underlying this was the focus of the dramatic centre - the feeling of a woman driven to the edge to commit the unthinkable - and the need to drive the main character, Eliza, towards her goal through the choices she makes based on her motivations (her “character spine”). The table below contains an example of one such “story moment”.

Table 3: Story Outline/Treatment

Scene X

We see Eliza coming home after the celebration. The atmosphere is of pervading loneliness. She looks in on the empty beds of her children’s bedroom. She flicks late night TV from station to station. We catch snatches of urgent buy-now ads, eerie new age music, and the final words of a true crime program: “She took them from their beds and drowned them like two unwanted kittens”. She listens to her phone messages - mundane messages of daily life - then a message from her little boy - “Good night. Sleep tight. Don’t let the bed bugs bite” (McVeigh, 2018).

The Scene Breakdown

Writing the Scene breakdown after the creative work of writing the treatment was the most technical part of writing the screenplay. In building terms, it could be classified as the mechanical engineer’s analysis of what is in the script and why.

Within the New Writers Workshop, the Scene Breakdown was the term used for the intermediary step from Treatment to Rough First Draft. This document contained scene headings and a scene-by-scene description of the screenplay with action summarized in a few sentences. Every scene was numbered, just as it would in the script. There was no dialogue. What the characters would say was noted in prose form. While not every writer tackles the time-consuming process of writing a Scene Breakdown (which no one else will read), it allows the writer to instantly see “whether the structure works, what the dynamics are and whether momentum is maintained” (Drouyn, 1994, p. 102) as outlined below:

Table 4 - The Scene Breakdown – Self Editing Questions

This was the technical part. I found it heavy going at first. I think I got bogged down in my initial summaries but sped up towards the end. Then again, I don’t know about the climax scene. And the visual - I trust I’ve tackled it sufficiently. And the characters on the periphery? Why are they there? (McVeigh, 2018).

While writing the scene breakdown was tedious, it was deeply useful in helping me to reflect upon the logistics of character, location and plot. It also helped me to consider how these elements connected to my dramatic centre, and in particular, to focus on Eliza's journey. This meant eliminating scenes and characters that were not essential to the key action.

The Creative Process - Publication - The Rough First Draft

The crucial point in the overall writing process was the writing of the rough first draft. - a document that would in effect be "published" as it would be read by potential collaborators and funding bodies as a completed work.

It was the time to stop driving, reading, dreaming, drinking in coffee shops and to "write". We were given three weeks to write the rough first draft, but in truth we had taken a number of months to get to this stage. I aimed to write eighty pages of the screenplay in full, using dialogue and stage directions based on the scene breakdown.

For this stage I was keenly anticipating the intense experience of writing continuously from beginning to end. During this period, I lapsed in and out of the stages of immersion and crafting. At times I immersed myself in the world of my characters - lapsing into how I felt my characters would be feeling and reacting, many times in a given day. I was obsessed with them. I found my feelings echoed by William Froug in his *Zen and the Art of Screenwriting*:

As you get inside your characters, you will know them intimately and they will become so real that they will speak their dialogue to you. This is one of the true joys of writing (Froug, 1996, p. 144)

As the script neared the climax, and whilst in the process of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) writing was limited to one hour periods, as the experience was emotionally draining. This intense period never involved rewriting or editing - the focus was on writing new material. I started each writing session where I had finished, reading only the previous page to refresh my memory. This of course is all part of keeping the story alive. By writing quickly I found it easy to maintain momentum and the energy of the storytelling.

Admittedly the process is different for everyone. By the deadline I had written a first draft that was suitable to be read by others and could be submitted to funding bodies for consideration for development assistance.

Conclusion: Where to from here?

The treatment that I had originally submitted for workshop funding was for a high budget contemporary drama with period drama flashback sequences. It was to tell the story of Eliza, the high-powered publisher who uses her research skills to uncover a horrendous crime hidden in her family history. In laboriously unravelling this story, Eliza is faced with a scenario that parallels the sense of entrapment in her own life. The film was to have a strong visual contrast between each of the locations and mise-en-scene.

The script that resulted from the workshop process was for a character-driven, low-budget feature film. It relied on the creation of a strong lead character, rather than big budget sets. The storyline changed quite significantly. With the loss of the period drama flashbacks and the varied locations, much of the screenplay unfolds in Eliza's home and office and at the family farm.

In writing this screenplay, I learnt that there are many great ‘how to’ feature film screenwriting books and I read them earnestly. I learnt that the process of writing a screenplay is one of continual refinement from one draft to the next. I learnt to value my own voice and to reflect upon what is important to you, for as Froug argues:

The single most important gift you must bring to your screenplay is writing what you feel deeply about. Very likely what you are about is what every human being on this planet is about ... you are a bottomless well of experiences and emotions, and as a screenwriter, the place to put them is in your script (Froug, 1996, p. 197-198).

Writing *Shortchanged* in workshop mode was an invigorating and thought-provoking experience during which I wrote a screenplay inspired by a hidden family story that had affected me strongly. In this chapter I have discussed the “personal, private, difficult to account for and articulate” (Batty et al., 2017, p. 220) aspects of screenwriting craft and shared a model of the creative process that enabled me to manage the uncharted territories of writing fiction and the no man’s land of “what if?” and “what next?” The chapter serves as testimony that there are many ways to write a screenplay and that for each and every writer it is important to find the process that works for you - a “bespoke” process that celebrates the “art, craft and heart” of screenwriting and the power of story.

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