

Building To A Crisis

This session was written by Lucy Scher and Justine Hart as part of the one-day **Drama** workshop which Lucy taught within The Script Factory's **Genre Season** presented at BFI Southbank, March 2012. The teaching points in this lecture are mostly illustrated with reference to the following films:

Win Win (dir./scr. Tom McCarthy, 2011)

The Kids Are All Right (dir. Lisa Cholodenko, scr. Lisa Cholodenko & Stuart Blumberg, 2010)

An Education (dir. Lone Scherfig, scr. Nick Hornby, 2009)

Juno (dir. Jason Reitman, scr. Diablo Cody, 2007)

Drama stories often deal in the ordinary; a foolish decision, a seemingly harmless lie but the reason there is a story to tell is because these simple actions escalate and have widespread consequences for the characters involved. This first session discusses the ways in which the 'incident' needs to be layered and structured in order to increase the dramatic tension over the course of the film and build to an inevitable and satisfactory climax.

Crises rarely drop out of a clear blue sky. They come saddled with a load of 'what ifs' and 'if onlys'. If only I hadn't ignored the call from my mother. What if I had got out of bed and taken the kids to school this morning? If only I had told the truth rather than save her feelings. And all these statements come loaded with back-story about the character and their situation.

Our job in designing drama stories is to find the crisis event that has such impact it is worthy of a film, and to design the characters that are best to tell it, specifically because they could have, even should have, done things differently.

The focus of this session is the situation your story explores:

- Firstly, we are going to think about ensuring that the worst thing that could happen does happen in order to bring on a satisfying climax to the film.
- Secondly, to make sure that the worst thing is possible to anticipate by the way you have layered the problem and structured the build-up to the crisis.

There is also the structural model where the worst thing has already happened either before the events of the film, or right at the start so the climax is when the characters finally confront the truth and/or deal with the emotional fallout. An example of this would be the 2008 film *Rachel Getting Married*. But whether you chose to tell the story of how something messy builds to crisis point, or you tell the story of the fall out from a crisis, the importance of that crisis is still critical.

This session is about both your story event/s and how you have managed them to effectively build to an inevitable crisis.

The best first question for you is this: have you ensured that the worst possible thing has happened as a consequence of the disruption to the world? And this means making sure that your first act does its primary job of making the **story matter**. This doesn't mean death, pestilence, end of the world; it means that in this story the thing that was **most frightening to be believed does happen**. The consequences for this character can be foretold from the way their world and situation has been established. The stake is high for them.

In *Juno* – the story of a teenage girl with an unwanted pregnancy, her situation is ‘pregnant’ at the start of the story. The fear of getting pregnant as a teenager is not the crisis in this story. That’s already happened. Our interest is steered towards Juno’s desire to give the baby to the perfect family so she can get back to being a teenager, and, she says, in ‘what, 30 or so weeks, we can forget the whole thing happened’.

In this specific situation, what is the worst thing that can happen?

Firstly, though, let’s check what isn’t? It’s NOT Juno changing her mind about giving the baby up – for this to be the worst thing the story would need to be Vanessa’s story, or Juno would need to be set up with some conflict about her decision.

The worst thing that could happen is that this cherished and important plan gets knocked off course, so Juno can’t get back on track and forget the whole thing happened. What happens in the film? The perfect family turn out not to be perfect. In fact, the parents Juno has found for her baby split up. This is the moment of crisis in *Juno* and it is made convincing because it’s a crisis that is completely believable in the story but totally unexpected by the character.

We have seen the cracks in the relationship: Mark’s banishment/refuge in his den, his attachment to rock music. We can see that Mark is moving in on Juno and we can **anticipate the crisis**. In this story the crisis comes quite late (end of the 2nd act) because Juno is allowed a certain naivete in relation to Mark because she is young – so it is believable and not annoying.

At the moment of crisis Mark explains his break-up with Vanessa as “We’re just not in love anymore.” To which Juno says “If you love someone once you can love them again. My friend Leah has gone out with the same guy, like, four times. You are just not trying.” The screenplay then reads:

Mark suddenly sees Juno for what she is – a teenage girl.

There is no crime in being a teenage girl. Her world view will expand as she grows up.

This is a comedy drama so a new plan is formulated, Juno is a little the wiser, and we are affirmed that whatever your age and circumstances unfortunately, life doesn't always go according to plan, but it will be okay.

In other stories the crisis or the worst thing that could happen generally comes earlier. What the worst thing in *The Kids Are Alright?* It's when Jules sleeps with 'Bio Dad' and this happens at the midpoint. Similarly in *Win Win*, Cindy turns up at the midpoint.

The consequences of the worst thing are played out over the 2nd half of the 2nd act and the wider discovery of the worst thing is often the end of the second act leading to the confrontation at the climax.

I am telling you – structure is your friend!

CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Be clear and knowing about where your crisis comes to a climax. You need to know this to ensure that it has been set up effectively so you arrive at this moment convincingly, because all your plotting and planning is to ensure that the route to the climax of the conflict is sufficiently complicated to fill the second act.

As you will have heard, you can make a 'drama out of a crisis' if it is not handled sensibly. Inherent in the event, or the interruption is some sort of crisis but what cinema **drama** needs in addition is the specific details of the character/s and their world that is going to make it worse in a way that we can anticipate and thereby offer us some meaning to telling the story.

And any of you who have done any development training or script reading with the Script Factory will know that the first question we ask of any script is: what is the main conflict? But that is very closely followed by the caveat question: is there one? Can you identify a central conflict and state simply what this story is about?

The problem with drama ideas is that they can be quite slight, and even if the first act does set up an interesting or difficult situation, if the central story idea doesn't have sufficient levels of conflict to generate 100 minutes of drama, then in the attempt to keep stuff happening you can create all sorts of problems:

- characters detour to pursue different goals to the ones they set out with
- sub-plots take over
- new antagonists or obstacles are introduced
- random events are thrown in

Alternatively, you end up with a script in which you are continually playing out the same aspect of the conflict. This is manifest by a lot of scenes or long scenes in which characters discuss why they can't do something or how they plan to do something, or how difficult this is for them, rather than each sequence building logically to the next turning point.

If it feels like your story stalls for a proportion of screen-time, if your character doesn't actually do anything towards dealing with the problem, it is probable that the root cause is to be found in how the character and their world is set up. There aren't enough relevant details.

So let's go back to the premise and consider how we can make sure that it is invested with enough conflict so that there are genuine reasons for it to take the time to **build to a crisis**.

Conflict comes from three sources:

- internal conflict
- situational or environmental conflict
- interpersonal conflict

When you have articulated the idea of your film into a sentence that expresses the conflict try to divorce your mind from the story you have been working on and think about the specific details that may help to generate layers of conflict :

My story is about Jessica, who having a been a single mum for 20 odd years has finally met a new partner at the age of 50, which is why she **doesn't** want her daughter to move back home when she flunks out of her Media Studies degree in Leicester.

Think about:

When the story is set

What point in history? Contemporary or past? Does it make a difference if the story is set in the summer or Christmas Eve? You are brainstorming details that can help you generate drama.

Where the story is set

what does the world of the story contribute to the conflict? Is it urban or rural, small town or village where folks know each other? corporate or domestic?

The values of the community / your characters

Are they liberal or conservative? Church goers? Trusting and loyal? Controlling and competitive?

Other responsibilities that your character might have

Is there something that your character has to do which complicates their response to the event?

The other people who could get hurt / betrayed by your character pursuing / achieving their aim (which we'll look at in a bit more detail later on) but think for now about who else does this story suggest in its design? For example in *The Kids Are All Right* – one lesbian mother and child meeting the bio dad doesn't offer anywhere near as good material as two mums and two kids. Similarly, there are a wide range of people in *Juno* who are affected by the situation.

Character's age / job / domestic situation

What would it do to your story, for example, if the character was older, younger, married, self-employed?

You will not be able to build to an effective, inevitable crisis without enough details to generate genuine drama along the way.

Once you have mined the idea and are confident that you do have enough proper conflicts to deploy, however you chop it up and play with it, fundamentally your drama story must have three acts. The first act has to introduce the world of the story, introduce the main character/s, deliver the interruption, and lay the foundations for the fractures in characters' outlook, their world and their relationships that are going to **enable the drama**.

The second act has to play out each crack in turn.

The third act is the final climax and the resolution, which we will come to after lunch.

In thinking about how to set up the characters outlook and relationships to ensure there is genuine drama let's look in more detail at the film *The Kids are All Right*.

We chose this film because it's not a film in which anyone has a clear goal or need that is driving the drama. Instead the drama is all generated out of relationships, those kinds of stories are often the hardest to manage.

The basic idea of *The Kids Are All Right* is the story of a lesbian couple who have raised two kids together but whose world is disrupted when the kids decide they want to get to know their sperm donor dad.

This is clearly an idea with material for some big potential conflicts. **However just like my story about Jessica – who could simply accept the inevitability of her daughter moving back home and figure it out sensibly, potentially conflicted situations do not automatically generate drama.** So, let's think a bit about how the specific story of *The Kids Are All Right* is set up, because it's the specific dynamics of a story that allow you to access all the potential conflict within an idea.

First question: who's the protagonist?

Nic. That might not be immediately obvious because each member of the family is given a full story but primarily the drama and its meaning is shaped around Nic's fears.

What's the main conflict that Nic is facing?

- her fear that she is going to lose control of her family.

The first specific detail that's important is the age of the children. Joni is turning 18 and about to leave home and be free to make her own choices. Laser isn't far behind.

The second detail that's needed in order to generate this meaning out of the situation is that Nic is characterized as a highly controlled woman. "Control" needs to be the most defining feature of Nic's character so it is clearly at stake.

So this is actually the story of Nic, a control freak, who has raised two children with her lesbian partner, and when her daughter turns eighteen the kids decide to make contact with their donor dad.

What fears – articulated or otherwise – does this situation naturally generate?

- fear that the kids want something that they've failed to give as parents
- fear that this new relationship will change their children / undermine her relationship with them
- fear that an unwanted someone becomes a fixture in their lives
- fear they'll be required to timeshare their kids
- fear that by inviting another parent into the mix, the other two could gang up on her
- fear that rejecting him will cause conflict between her and the kids
- fear that her parenting can be criticised with someone who has the right to

Implicit in all these fears is the big one – she could be ousted as 'the dad' of her family.

These fears are all fertile territory for conflict, but in order to turn it into drama these issues need to be attached to specific story elements.

In the first act we meet the Allgood family who are essentially doing really well but we also see the tensions that exist there. What's so skilful about this script is that those tensions are so recognisable and could exist forever in that family as they do in many real families without any major dramas.

But our job is not to admire the realism but to admire the way in this scenario those tensions are the cracks in the cement of this family that will generate the drama when the new dad is thrown into the mix....

So those tensions are:

In the kids we see what they lack,

- through his relationship with Clay we see that Laser lacks a good male role model.
- Joni has total self-control and lacks passion or recklessness
- We learn very specifically that they aren't allowed to go on a motorbike

In the relationship between Nic and Jules we see

- a slightly tired sex life
- Nic's lack of support for Jules' gardening business

It's the existence of these very specific tensions that will allow conflict to be generated in the relationships when Paul starts to interact with the family.

And what tension do we see in Paul's life?

- He has casual relationships and has clearly put off making the commitment and having kids, he needs to grow up
- Meaning a ready-made family would be quite convenient for this guy.

It's important also here that he's actually just a nice guy otherwise that would take us into a whole different story.

The first practical point to apply to your scripts is to check that the specifics of the story set up are anticipating the creation of drama. At the end of the first act can we look at

what we know so far and anticipate the potential conflicts that are going to arise as a result of the course of action that has been set in motion?

If you are working on a drama script that is driven by a more external goal, like beating cancer in *50/50* or pursuing justice in *Margaret*: when a character wants or needs something as a result of what has happened then you can actually do quite a literal stock take of the conflict in the story.

So we restate what the MAIN CONFLICT is:

What are the **Internal** obstacles generated by the conflict?

What are the **Situational** obstacles generated by the conflict?

What are the **Interpersonal** obstacles generated by the conflict?

Basically, you cannot write a second act if you don't have enough material to manipulate. If you think that there isn't really enough going on, keep going back to those details of the character's situation and seeing whether some more adjustments could be made to their situation to make the opposition more compelling and harder to overcome. There aren't any rules but you are looking for 4 major sequences – two getting to the midpoint when the rules change and two getting to the end of the second act.

Simplify the process to this:

The first act sets up the story world with all the details that will be relevant to telling the story. It contains an inciting incident that provides some kind of opportunity, threat or problem for the character to respond to. The end of the first act is the character's 'irreversible' decision in so far that other people are now involved and there will be consequences.

The second act develops the drama so that the consequences begin to play out building to the inevitable crisis.

The third act contains the climax and the resolution offering some meaning to the story.

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Once you've pulled out the different obstacles or the different tensions in the situation then you can start to see whether they are managed most effectively by the way the story is structured.

The real difficulty with a script like *The Kids Are All Right* is essentially it's all one argument – Nic doesn't want Paul there. But you notice, she never actually says that until the climax of the film.

This is really important point. You need to carefully choose when stuff happens and space it out so that the build to the crisis incrementally increases the tension in the story. If the argument is simple or the problem or the crisis is inevitable, planning the development of that argument or crisis is your most important structural task.

Why? Because once a character has articulated the **true conflict** all the dramatic tension about it will go.

One of the dictionary definitions of tensions is "a state of barely suppressed emotion". In real life we argue over the same ground continually; in film once an argument has been had its dull and repetitive for the audience to come back to it.

The fact that Nic doesn't want Paul in their lives is in the sub-text of every other conflict in the story but the script very cleverly deals with every reason she has for not wanting him in their lives – each of those fears we listed – before that climactic outburst. Think about holding back as well as creating surprise events.

The first half of the second act is dramatising Nic's fears that the kids want or need something from him that she has failed to give.

- he is a role model to Laser and allowed to criticise his friend Clay in a way that his mothers weren't.
- he encourages Joni to assert herself and loosen up, and how Joni starts to complain to Paul about her mom won't let her grow up.

This section of drama culminates in the scene in which Joni goes on Paul's motorbike and talks back to her mom for the first time ever. (p72) (Just take a moment to think how realistic that really is – an eighteen year old who has **never** answered back? – and it will remind you how film characters are constructed to serve their dramatic function)

Paul then makes the mistake of offering parental advice "You know, Nic. If you eased up on the restrictions, maybe there'd be less tensions..."

To which Nic replies "When you've been a parent for 18 years then come and talk to me".

Note the subtle difference here, she doesn't say you're not their parent, she's just saying that he's not qualified to input.

But actually **we know and Nic knows that she has lost this argument** because the kids like Paul and are going to listen to him and are getting something from the relationship, so the story has to move on.

We don't want to just watch her sulk that they like this guy, the **stakes need to be raised** otherwise the drama will become repetitive and dull.

Which is why in the second half of the second act the story moves on to the relationship between Jules and Paul – this is the ultimate betrayal. It absolutely had to happen because it's about Nic being ousted as the 'dad' of the family and as we have said quite simply the worst thing that could happen. But it also ultimately gives Nic the moral high-ground which enables her to redeem herself by forgiving at the end of the film.

Another way to check whether the tension is maximised is to ensure that the **confrontations are inevitable.**

Obviously Nic is going to find out that Jules and Paul have been sleeping together. And oh what fun it is to watch!

A key principle to remember is that audiences stay engaged when they can ANTICIPATE something happening.

What you must not do is introduce events that we can't anticipate. This is very common! Watch out for it...

For example if you were working on a story like "The Kids Are All Right" and in the middle of the film Paul was involved in a terrible motorbike accident and the fact that he might die makes Nic realise how important it is for the kids to get to know him, the audience are likely to feel quite duped and cheated.

Why? Because it's not dealing head on with the conflicts that the story set up, that are very knowable and engaging. A bike accident is just a random dramatic event that we can't possibly have anticipated and therefore why we were bothering to care about them sorting out their relationships if a completely unforeseeable event was going to provide the solution?

Juno is a brilliant example of this kind of story management. It is possible that we didn't see the crisis coming – I didn't when I first saw the film - but the idea that Mark has a mid-life crisis, thinks he wants Juno, isn't ready to be a dad etc.. is so clearly set up and so true to who those characters are and what's going on in their lives that, though it may feel shocking, it also feels true. This is your ambition when you are building to the crisis. If your audience can see it coming you want them cringing with anticipation, and if they can't necessarily see it coming, you want them to recognise the truthfulness in the crisis as it unfolds.

Practically speaking: can you define the conflict or the problem that your character has and from that glean the worst thing that could happen? This will only be achieved with an appropriate inciting incident and an end of act one that defines a question that will clearly complicate the way forward.

What are the details of the characters' world that will ensure that drama emerges out the situation they have landed in? The potential for conflict because it is an interesting idea is not enough. Each tension must also be attached to events so the conflict can be played out dramatically.

Always remember that the worst thing that can happen may not necessarily be a physical consequence, it can be an emotional consequence.

I have been watching the box set of *Breaking Bad* recently and have just finished series 2. For those of you who don't know, it is quite brilliant, and the story is this: Walter is a high school chemistry teacher; he has a 16 year old son with cerebral palsy (as does the actor), a pregnant wife, a cancer diagnosis that is pretty serious and he needs money. He decides to manufacture crystal meth as this is the fastest way to get cash. It is also the most stupid course of action and one that he simply cannot share with his family. As series two ended, we hear 16 year old Walter Junior being interviewed for a news piece

about the success of his website which is raising money for his dad's cancer treatment. Unbeknownst to him, his dad is using the website to launder his drug money, and he has to sit there and listen as Walt junior says his dad is the best thing in the world: the most trusting, loving, loyal brilliant dad and he needs him around. Thank you for giving.

Walter getting killed by the Drug Barons is the easy option compared to this. My heart is broken.

So go complicate things and don't worry too much in your planning stages about getting your character into a situation you don't know how to get them out of. That can be a writer's gift, not a problem, because if the route out isn't obvious then it's an opportunity for you to discover how your character would deal with it – let them find the way out. And, we're more likely to want to stick around to see just how they do handle it.