

SO YOU THINK YOU CAN DO BETTER

By D F Mamea

1152 words excluding byline

It's a four-hour flight to Melbourne and, despite the best efforts of the Purser, the in-flight entertainment wasn't working. I took the opportunity to finish watching an action thriller Roger Ebert had awarded three stars to.

Ten minutes into the film, *The Goddess*, seeing my pained expression, asked, "If it's so bad, why are you still watching it?"

"I think," I said slowly, "that it's good for me."

"Good for you?"

Her look said everything. Sure, I wouldn't get the two hours back but watching execrable films are not only character building, they're research. It soundly reminded of what I don't like to see in films, and why I intend to never ever use them in my writing.

1. Kids Who Don't Listen

The following exhibit is a prime example of why I hate kids in films.

INT. HOUSE - NIGHT

MOTHER and DAUGHTER peer vainly through the windows.

DAUGHTER
Mommy, I'm scared.

MOTHER
I'm scared too, honeykins.

She snatches up a CRICKET BAT.

MOTHER (CONT'D)
You stay right here. Mommy'll
be right back.

EXT. HOUSE - NIGHT

The Mother creeps out onto the FRONT PORCH, cricket bat at port arms. A RUSTLE to her right beckons her over to an inconspicuous BUSH. She approaches it, hands gripping and re-gripping her bat. Ten yards. Five yards. Two yards. The bush rustles innocently.

DAUGHTER (O.O.S.)
What is it?

MOTHER

Aaagh!

- and she turns to find her Daughter at her side.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

I thought I told you -

The bush rustles - and transforms into a giant VENUS HUMANTRAP, its bulbous head SNAPPING FORWARD and neatly beheading the Mother. The Daughter is sprayed in arterial blood as her mother's headless corpse drops beside her.

DAUGHTER

... Mommy?

What'd you freakin' expect, kid? You were freakin' asked to stay in the house! Why didn't you bloody listen?!

2. The Unnecessary Lie

You know the plot where -

- BOY meets GIRL,
- Boy asks Girl out on a first date,
- Boy's MEAN BOSS asks Boy to entertain a client's HOT DAUGHTER on the same day of his first date with Girl or lose his job,
- Boy asks his BEST MATE for advice,
- Best Mate says that Girl - being a, y'know, girl - would not understand the reason for Boy breaking their date,
- Boy tells Girl that he's got an old college friend in town that he has to entertain....

Wanna see an audience baying for the writer's blood?

3. Prehistoric Behaviour

INT. POLICE CRUISER - DAY

In a tired and dented CRUISER, a HOT DOG COP and OLD BULL COP look at the WARRANT they have to serve.

HOT DOG

"Join the police and tell more interesting work-stories."

His whiney bitch-ass rant is cut short when -

EXT. APARTMENT BLOCK - DAY

- the cops observe a STARK NAKED WOMAN run screaming from the APARTMENT BLOCK -

NAKED WOMAN

(between shrieks)

He's trying to kill me! Help me!

- and she hoofs it down the street, screaming all the while.

Hot Dog leaps out of the cruiser and starts for the APARTMENT ENTRANCE when his partner's shouts pull him up:

OLD BULL
Shouldn't we wait for backup?

The slap of ceramic on reinforced plastic as Hot Dog draws his GLOCK PISTOL:

HOT DOG
Backup's for pussies.

How will Hot Dog Cop appear in the next scene? Will he be -

- A) shot to death by assailant/s unknown;
- B) kidnapped then tortured to death at an unspecified location by assailant/s unknown;
- C) buried with full honours while his heavily pregnant FRESH-FACED WIFE weeps pathetically; or
- D) seduced by SORORITY SISTERS who've just sent out a new member (remember shrieking Stark Naked Woman?) on an initiation rite.

Now it's all very well to be an audience member and, in between the boo's and hisses, complain about the writing but who the hell do I think I am? And as many an exasperated friend has yelled to shut me up: How would YOU have written those scenes, smarty-pants?

1A. Kids Who Don't Listen

- aren't necessarily all bad because what if:

INT. HOUSE - NIGHT

... MOTHER snatches up a CRICKET BAT.

MOTHER
You stay right here. Mommy'll
be right back.

DAUGHTER watches her mother disappear outside. The CLI-THUNK of the FRONT DOOR closing seems extraordinarily loud.

CLOSE ON DAUGHTER

as she slowly looks around the gloom. She's so alone. So vulnerable.

A LOUD THUMP from the back of the house and Daughter's eyes widen as a TRAPEZOID OF LIGHT stretches across the floor towards her.

Two SHADOWS elongate across the trapezoid until we see two SHAPES THAT CANNOT BE HUMAN!

Daughter's breath catches in her throat!

We hear the SSSLITHER of tendrils across the wooden floor as the shadows grow, their owners entering the house, heading straight for the Daughter until -

DAUGHTER
(sotto)
The hell with this.

- and she slips out the front door.

2A. The Unnecessary Lie

- could be safely dealt with if:

- BOY, in a quandary over a date with GIRL versus a date with a client's HOT DAUGHTER, asks his BEST MATE for advice,
- Best Mate tells him to lie to Girl,
- Boy ignores such idiotic advice and explains everything to Girl.

Yes, I've just killed this promising romantic-comedy in the first reel. So what. I hate - I loathe - rom-coms for their reliance on this device.

The challenge for the rom-com writer is to put a different yet interesting obstacle in the way of Girl and Boy's embryonic romance. Something new. Something funny.

3A. Prehistoric Behaviour

- just isn't acceptable in this enlightened millenium so how about if:

INT. POLICE CRUISER - DAY

HOT DOG COP and OLD BULL COP admire the form of NAKED WOMAN for a couple of slo-mo seconds as she hoofs it down the street, shrieking all the while.

HOT DOG
What's she yelling about?

OLD BULL
You weren't listening either?

HOT DOG
(sheepish)
I was a bit -

OLD BULL
Distracted? Yeah, me too.

HOT DOG
(beat)
I suppose we should call it in.

OLD BULL
(nods)
There was some blood on her.
(off Hot Dog)
Go on. I'll call for backup
while you run her down.

A mental image strikes Hot Dog:

HOT DOG
"More interesting work-stories."

Thanks to shows like "Law & Order", "COPS" and "World's Most Dangerous Police Takedowns", audiences know law enforcement procedure almost by heart. Don't piss 'em off.

So:

- Knowing why the kid leaves the house won't save her mother from being beheaded by some plant hybrid but at least no-one's thinking of throttling the ill-disciplined sprog.
- Having a character respond realistically to patently stupid advice may have generate some work down the line but at least viewers aren't planning death-threats against the writer.
- And replacing blind machismo with some droll humour doesn't really work here, but at least police-procedural aficionados aren't up in arms about blatant disregard of common-sensical law enforcement practice.

See, people? Provide a compelling reason for action - or inaction - and you make that moment yours.

Once upon a time, there was an office sloth called Davo who dreamt of being in movies. One career, a family, and some extraneous letters later, D F Mamea's going one better than being a mere meat-prop: he's writing movies. Offers of work welcome at www.dfamea.com.