

If you have ever taken a screenwriting class, you will inevitably do one of the following exercises or both of them.

The first is the “overheard conversation” exercise and the second is the “make up a story” exercise.

When I was a student, I never took them very seriously, but I did them anyway and even assigned them a couple of times when I taught screenwriting.

Since that time, I haven’t really thought that much about them... that was until this past weekend.

A friend and I decided to have a late Sunday brunch with, let’s say, bottomless “Fruit Punches.” We were in Long Beach and it was Pride Weekend so the place we were at was JUMPING.

We proceeded to sit there for just under 5 hours. Having great conversation, interacting with the people there for Pride Week and getting an endless supply of refills of “Fruit Punch.”

After overhearing a couple of pretty interesting conversations it made me remember these exercises so I mentioned them which opened a great conversation about writing dialog and why so many people have such a hard time with it.

So let me take a minute to explain each exercise and then we’ll dive deeper into each.

The first is the “overheard convo.” Basically our professors would send us out to a coffee shop and eavesdrop on a conversation and transcribe it, the best we could, into dialog.

The point of this is to train your ear to hear to how people talk.

Now when I say that I didn’t take this one seriously as a student, I mean that I wasn’t going to park my ass in a fucking coffee shop and write down some boring conversation that I overheard. Just an FYI, people who sit in coffee shops are lame.

Nobody has interesting conversations in a coffee shop. I promise you. I used to work in one.

Anyway...so when I first got this assignment in undergrad I did what my classmates should have expected me to do... actually now that I think about it, the professor should have expected too... I went to a strip club. A seedy one. It was... well, best I can put it is that it was SKANKY.

I chatted up a couple of the girls, told them what I was up to and asked if they'd help. They agreed... so they would casually bring guys to the bar and get the guys to buy them a drink and then chat them up next to me.

I heard everything and it was brilliant. The utter BULLSHIT they'd lay on a dude and the utter bullshit that got thrown back at them.

Truly amazing. If ANY of you really want a great character study...go to a strip club and just watch and listen. It's amazing.

Anyway...so that's the exercise. Again it's supposed to teach you how people talk. What they say. Their cadence.

But, as we discussed over "fruit punch," it's more than that. You have to read between the lines. You have to pay attention. WHY did they say what they said and WHY did they say it THAT specific way?

The way people speak and what they say says LOADS about them.

Here's a quick example... talk about death with someone and pay attention to the words they use.

Do they say "He died?" or "He passed away?"

Do they say "She's dead?" or "She's gone?"

Do they say different words when talking about an animal versus a family member? A celebrity versus a friend?"

Why?

Here's the deal people, we all have to be head shrinkers when we write. You need to realize that you're not just created puppets that are going to carry out your little plays. You are creating CHARACTERS. Characters, who for all intensive purposes, actually exist!

They've experienced life, death, love, loss, they have mothers and fathers OR DON'T! You're only giving us a slice of their life. What makes them do the things they do and most importantly what makes them SAY the things they say?

Start reading between the lines with your dialog and you'll begin to see that your characters are taking better shape.

And when you eavesdrop on a conversation, do the same thing. Look at the scene and try to figure out what's going on. It's so much fun, trust me.

Which brings me to the second exercise...making up a story.

I was an awesome professor. There was always one class per quarter where I'd take my students out to the bar. I would play pool with anyone who wanted to take me on and send out the rest. Their assignment was to go out and find someone, ANYone they found interesting and come back and tell me a story about that person.

Made up of course.

They couldn't interact with anyone. Just observe and make shit up.

Why take them to a bar? At 3 in the afternoon on a Tuesday?

Hmmm...have you ever been in a bar at 3 in the afternoon during the week? Let's just say the happiest people aren't out and about.

Makes the "characters" WAY more interesting.

AND, here's the awesome part of this, I got to play quite the game too. You see, when you tell someone to make up a story about somebody you get to see how their mind thinks. And I got to play "total perv or totally naive?"

How's it work? You know that drawing that shrinks use where you can either see an old woman or a young one?

Well that translates into "perv or naive." If you see a guy sitting at the end of a bar, by himself, not speaking to anyone or interacting with anyone, just drowning his sorrows in a glass... AND wearing a trench coat... where do you go?

Are you a perv and make up a story about how he flashes his pecker to little girls on the playground?

Or are you totally naive and make up a story about a sad old man, who's lost his wife, the love of his life and now spends his days drinking to attempt to forget the pain and her memory?

If you really want to have some fun, play this game with your friends at the bar next time you're out. Make it seem like it's a screenwriting exercise (which, technically, it is) but kick back and see what your friends come up with. Are they totally fucked up individuals? Or optimistic fucktards that see the world in rose colored glasses.

Lets face it, if they're your friends, you probably know this already... so hey, use it as a screenwriting exercise.

Till next week...