

IT'S NOT A GAME

Rudolph & Cunningham

Ted and Bob, you've given us a fascinating and entertaining look into modern male/female relationships, particularly, black male and female. Lots of hip characters with dialogue to match and very adult circumstances.

We begin with the MINI-COURSE IN SCREENWRITING I've enclosed with this package. This is a short essay containing some vital aspects of screenwriting everyone must know in order to write a viable screenplay. Please read this essay before we go any further. In the remaining discussion, I will refer to principles and concepts covered in the essay that will allow us to communicate in a common language. Okay, so read the material, then come back here and we'll begin our discussion.

Storytelling is an art. Screenwriting is a **craft**. Therefore, there are always two aspects of a screenplay to be considered. The first is story content; this relates to the "art" of storytelling. The second is your style; relating to the "**craft**" of screenwriting. The first goes directly to the heart of any artistic creation. Can you tell a story? Is your story worth telling? Are your characters compelling? Do we care? The second aspect, writing your story, deals with your ability to translate the story inside you to the written word. Clearly, the two sides are critical. You may have conjured the greatest story in the world but unless you can get it on paper in the form of a readable scenario, you've got nothing. Likewise, you may be the greatest scenarist ever but, if you have no story to tell... well you get the picture.

YOUR STORY

A tightly-knit band of young black men are hanging at Tim's apartment one evening when the provocative question arises -just what do black women want? Each man has his own opinion and, in a series of flashbacks, we watch Clyde, Eric and Floyd relate a personal experience with a woman. We get a very critical and most often "cynical" view of the current state of affairs between the sexes and the upshot everyone seems to agree is, the relationship between men and women is a game. Both sides "play" the other for all they're worth in order to achieve superiority in a relationship and ultimately be able to get more back than is relinquished. It's a very bleak picture for all concerned.

Tim gives us the most complete story, start to finish, of his current relationship with Sharon. Sharon seems to be all that any man desires. Beautiful, sincere, bright, sensitive and best of all, genuinely caring of Tim. Tim at first relates to her as the good guy he instinctively is. She is naturally attracted to him and the two are falling fast. But rules of the "game" dictate that Tim behave like the totally self-absorbed, non-committed, arrogant, skirt-chasing bastard that women expect all black men to be. So he intentionally cheats on Sharon with the odd rationale that he is seeking to discover if she is "running a game on him." She discovers the betrayal and is crushed. The romance is destroyed until such time as Tim, at last, sees the fallacy and destructiveness of the "game," abandons all pretense and makes an effort to get Sharon back.

Okay, now let's apply the principles of good screenwriting as discussed in the **MINI-COURSE** and begin by constructing the premise of this story. First, who's the hero? That would be Tim. Second question, what does he want? I'd like you to take some time here and work that out for yourself. What does Tim want?

In my reading of the story, Tim wants a meaningful relationship with a woman. Now if you agree with me, then we can move on and form our premise. Tim **WANTS** a meaningful relationship with a woman. There it is. That's what this story is all about. That is the premise of the story. The theme would probably be something to the effect, "Love is a game."

But let's just consider the premise for now. With this premise we can easily establish a goal, The hero **WANTS** a meaningful relationship. Indy wants to find the lost Ark. Clarice wants to catch Hannibal **Lector**. Tim wants the right girl.

I like this premise. It holds the same promise of any romantic story. With the supporting characters you supply, it could easily be a romantic comedy. There are lots of obstacles in the way of the hero reaching his goal. Most are self-imposed due to the irrational conventions of society, his buddies, the "game," and Sharon's man-eating roommate, Dee-Dee.

Okay, so we have a viable and commercial premise. Tim wants to find the right girl. We're off to a good start. But now we must answer the dreaded third question. (remember the 3 questions that must always be asked? It's in the Essay.) **WHY DO WE CARE?** Oh boy, this is always the toughest. You can have an authentic character, he may have a hugely important and worthwhile goal but... if the audience doesn't **CARE** whether the hero achieves his goal or not, then you have failed as a storyteller. This is the single most common reason for screenplay failure. You must create characters and a goal so compelling that the audience must care. Have you done that? **Hmmmm**, yes and no.

I liked Tim but, as is found in so many amateur screenplays, your characters are under-developed. Remember this, the more we know about someone, the more intimate we are with **them, whether** in real life or in fiction, then the more likely we are to admire, love, hate or despise them. We simply cannot be indifferent. Now there's a good reason why characters tend to be under-developed. It's because, **you** know your characters intimately. You can see them in your mind. You know what makes them tick. You know what clothes they wear and every tiny detail about them. **WE DON'T**. We only know what you tell us and we must conjure up the rest. Sometimes, we don't conjure correctly and then the reader has a false reading of the character. It is vital that you give us the information we need to create the same character in our minds that is in yours. Make sense? Sure, it does. A lot of this has to do with your "style" of writing and we will get into that later.

But how do we create fully-fleshed out, believable characters? The only way to do that is to create scenes depicting characters in behavior that achieves the desired goal. Remember, characters are more **fully** realized through their actions than through their words. This is a very wordy script. Lots of dialogue. It reads more like a stage play than a screenplay. (more about that later.) Back to developing your characters: give us scenes

that Oendear us to the hefo (or make us despise the villain) through their actions. Often times, making a character “quirky” is a good device. In your screenplay, what makes Tim stand out from any hundred other people we already know? Not much. He’s really a rather bland brother. Dee-Dee has a point. He’s a nerd. Nerd’s are okay. But give him something we can grab hold of. The closest you came was when you made him interested in astronomy. But that went nowhere. Use it more. He should be on his roof at night looking at stars because he can’t sleep because of Sharon because of the game because of, because of, because of.. Dig it out. He looks down at the street and sees other couples in loving poses and he wants that for himself. We feel his quandary. I ‘m starting to see a half dozen scenes here already that should be in your play but aren’t.

Okay, let’s change gears for a minute. There’s a major problem I discovered where two false moves seem inconsistent with the characters and were unbelievable. First. Tim has a sweet, romantic relationship going with a great girl. And he sabotages it. He stands Sharon up and beds a new sweetie. Okay, I understand your motivation. You, the storytellers, found that little indiscretion necessary to create **conflict**, drama and a major reversal. Fine. Your motivation is well founded. But what’s Tim’s motivation? My point is, it doesn’t work. Sure, I understand that Tim has bought into the “game” and believes it is necessary to risk blowing the whole affair with a stupid stunt. And if it were Floyd, Eric or Clyde, I would believe it. But you went to great lengths to make Tim more thoughtful and level-headed than those guys. That’s what attracts us as well as Sharon to the man, So when he jumped another girl’s bones just to “test” Sharon, I didn’t believe it.

Secondly, I didn’t believe it when Sharon fell for his lame excuse. She’s much too smart for that. He’s given her no reason to believe that he’s such a compassionate and devoted humanitarian that his only motivation for taking a sister out is to show her she’s still attractive to men. Dee-Dee didn’t buy it and neither did we.

One more disappointment. I hated the way Dad treated Mom; as **inferior**. I mean you’ve got every single black man, including the 12-year-old brother, acting like a chauvinist, misogynist, contemptible bastard. I thought that after 40 years of marriage, Dad would have learned something and might have developed some respect for women. But he’s no better than Clyde. Please re-think this and let Dad be a positive example.

Okay, so how do we fix it? Well, here’s where I suggest some major structural changes. Right now, 80% of your script takes place in Tim’s apartment where four guys tell stories in two dozen flashbacks. This could actually work as a stage play. But it’s too static for a movie. So I’m suggesting you tell the story in more linear style. Consider this:

1. The brothers meet after work and wipe ass in a pickup game on the basketball court.
2. They fall into the local haunt for beer, conversation, relaxation and maybe some romantic entanglement.
3. Let’s see Clyde, Floyd and Eric at work, running their game on the babes. Let’s see them get shot down.
4. A lady field-reporter for a local TV station shows up at the bar with a crew and starts interviewing ladies for the 11:00 news.
5. The brothers don’t like what they’re hearing. They want to give their side of the story.
6. Establish that Tim doesn’t buy into the “game” theory.

7. Life goes on. Establish Tim's normal life. Work and at home. (What does he do for a living? Young professional? Inquiring minds want to know. You indicated he's an engineer, go with it. The more we know, the more we are endeared to the character, remember?) Tim wants a meaningful relationship. Can't find it. Maybe we meet Mom and Dad when Tim goes to his weekly Sunday supper.
8. Establish Tim's love for astronomy. He spends nights on the roof looking at stars. Clyde shows up with a six-pack. Great opportunity for two best friends to chug beer, look at stars and talk about women.
9. Tim meets Sharon. Casual meeting. Sparks fly.
10. Life goes on. Tim trying to avoid entanglements at work. What is his opinion of lady engineers? Could be interesting.
11. Bumps into Sharon. Likes what he sees. A date is arranged.
12. Romance develops.
13. Sharon rejects Dee-Dee's warnings.
14. Romance reaches critical mass.
15. Tim gets scared. Now all the propaganda concerning the "game" starts to sound right. Clyde, et al. talk him into running the game on Sharon.
16. Tim reluctantly stands her up and takes a new sweetie to bed BECAUSE HE IS GOADED INTO IT BY THE BROTHERS. Bad advice!
17. Sharon finds out. Devastated. Romance over.
18. Tim is miserable. Realizes he's blown his best chance for happiness.
19. Goes after Sharon.

Okay, these are only the broad strokes of a story. But I believe it's a better story. It tracks better, gets rid of the flashbacks and allows more reasonable development of the romance with scenes intended to endear us to Tim and Sharon.

YOUR STYLE

Now lets talk about your screenplay format, writing style and presentation.

Over view: I like your writing. You are lucid, descriptive and visual. Easy to follow and understand, You do tend to overwrite which is typical of novice screenwriters (I'll point to specifics in a moment). Dialogue is mostly naturalistic but **often** stilted and, again, overwritten (specifics will come later). You seem to be meticulous, very few typos noted, and your presentation is neat and crisp. Very important. You generally follow industry accepted format with some technical aberrations which we'll discuss. Overall, a very commendable first offering, not yet commercially viable due to under-developed characterizations, pacing problems and need for more story development.

Let's get to work. The mark of a good screenplay is the ability to tell a **full** story with the greatest economy of words. Writing is rewriting, we've all heard that slogan repeated over and over. Rewriting is editing. Every pass through your script should reduce the number of words. As stated above, you tend to over write. EXAMPLE: pg. 57 Here is your text:

Dee Dee turns and starts to walk into the ADJACENT DINING ROOM.

INT. SHARON'S APT - DINING ROOM - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Dee Dee enters the dining room, walks past the DINING ROOM TABLE, and heads for a SOLID SWINGING DOOR. A TELEPHONE hangs on the wall next to the swinging door. She pauses and looks at a CLOCK that hangs on the wall. She starts to adjust her WRIST WATCH as Sharon walks up to her.

SHARON

How do you know that Tim is a nerd? You only said hello to him.

Dee Dee stops, and turns to Sharon.

DEE DEE

I know he is. He's got that nerd look about him....

Okay, let's look at it. First, I want to know why you fill your script with capitalized words and phrases. ADJACENT DINING ROOM. DINING ROOM TABLE. SOLID SWINGING DOOR. TELEPHONE. CLOCK. WRIST WATCH. You must think it has some technical purpose. It doesn't. These words are capitalized inappropriately and are only an unnecessary distraction to the reader. Lose the capitals. The only time capitalization is used within the narrative text is when you introduce a character for the first time or to denote a special effect. The telephone RINGS. The bomb EXPLODED. The man SHOUTED across the room. Dining room table has no reason to be capitalized.

Next. Your slug line (INT. SHARON'S APT. - DINING ROOM -NIGHT (FLASHBACK)) is not necessary here. On page 55 you already established that we are in Sharon's apartment, it is night and we are in Flashback. Just because you move to another room within the scene does not require the full slug line as you have given us. Especially since the dining room is really just a part of the living room. So leave out this slug line. '

Let's go on. Economy of words. Let's see how we can reduce this text to the minimum. Here is my re-working of this portion of the scene:

Dee Dee turns to the dining room and heads for the kitchen door. She pauses to look at a wall clock and adjust her wristwatch when Sharon enters.

SHARON

How do you know that Tim is a nerd? You only said hello to him.

DEE DEE

I know he is. He's got that nerd look about him....

There it is. Now compare my text with yours. See how much shorter mine is and yet it accomplishes the exact same thing. So I'm giving the reader everything he needs to know but in almost half the time. This makes for a much quicker read and gives the reader a sense of flow and movement to the story. Let's analyze exactly what I cut out of your text.

Dee Dee turns (and starts to walk into) the adjacent dining room. What do you mean "starts to walk"? Either she walks or she doesn't. Therefore, it should be merely, Dee Dee turns to the dining room.

I **left** out the SLUG LINE as already explained. Next I **left** out that she enters the dining room. She's already there. **You have, she** heads for a SOLID SWINGING DOOR. What does it matter that it's a solid swinging door, or a red door or a Dutch door or a string of hanging beads? It doesn't. Just say the kitchen door. You say, a TELEPHONE hangs on the wall next to the swinging door. **So what?** Does she use the phone? No. Then why are you telling us there's a phone on the wall? Why don't you tell us there's an Ansel Adams photograph of Half Dome on the wall too? Because it has nothing to do with the story. Then you say, she pauses and looks at a CLOCK that hangs on the wall. First of all, why do we have to say she pauses? Can't she just look at the clock? Next, where else would the clock be other than "hanging on the wall?" Let's shorten it by saying she looks at the wall clock. Then you say, she starts to adjust her WRIST WATCH... **Why does she start to do it?** Why can't she just do it?

Let's do another one. EXAMPLE: pg. 69. Your text reads:

INT. SHARON'S APT - LIVING ROOM - EVENING (FLASHBACK)

Dee Dee enters the FRONT DOOR and closes it behind her. She takes her coat off and hangs it on a COAT STAND. As she starts to walk into the living room she notices Tim sitting on the couch reading a magazine. Tim looks up and starts to stand.

TIM

Hello Dee Dee, do you remember me? I'm Tim from the --

DEE DEE

(interrupting)

-- park. Of course I remember you. Sit back down there, you don't have to get up on my account.

As Tim sits back down, Dee Dee continues to walk through the living room, the dining room, and disappears through the swinging doors into the kitchen.

Okay, here's my rewrite of the scene :

INT. SHARON'S APT - LIVING ROOM - EVENING (FLASHBACK)

Dee Dee comes home, takes off her coat and is surprised to find Tim on the couch casually reading a magazine. Tim jumps up.

TIM

Hello Dee Dee, remember me?
I'm Tim from the --

DEE DEE

-- park. Sure. Sit back down, you
look reeeeeeal comfortable there.
Excuse me.

Tim sinks back onto the couch and Dee Dee heads into the kitchen eyeing Tim the whole way.

Okay, once again, you can see how I eliminated a lot of unnecessary words and inserted some to help move the story faster and give a more accurate sense of the action. Let's look at what I took out of your narrative:

Dee Dee enters the FRONT DOOR and closes it behind her. Do you really need to tell the actress to close the door after she enters?

She takes off her coat and hangs it on a COAT STAND. **Okay, let's** not describe every single action and movement of the actors, please. Leave some of it to them and the director.

Enough of this, you've got the picture now. Streamline the narrative. Take out every word that isn't absolutely necessary to paint the picture. This is a talent that comes only through practice. The more you do it, the better you get. But economy is the mark of a professional script and it stands out visibly. The same can be said for dialogue which we'll tackle next.

Here is my-r-e-working of your scene beginning on pg. 103:

INT. TIM'S APT - MORNING (FLASHBACK)

Tim hands a key to Eric by the fish tank.

TIM

Here's the key. Sunday feed the
fish. Just a pinch. I'm back
Monday and I don't want to find
em' dead.

ERIC

No problem.

Tim feeds his fish while:

TIM

So what'd you do last night?

ERIC

Did happy hour over at Blues.
Then I went home to get totally
bummed by the Mrs. What'd you do?

TIM

Went to Housers and met this
extremely lively lady.

ERIC

Oh maaan, see that's what I miss
since I been married. Going out
every weekend and getting those
fresh babes.

TIM

One problem. I was supposed to be
at my girlfriend's house last
night. Her roommate caught me out
with the other woman.

ERIC

Uh-oh.

TIM

Took some work but I got my woman
back. She even called to see if
she could come over and cook me
breakfast. Good thing she called
first, or it coulda been grim.

ERIC

Once you're in, man, you can do
anything. Hard part's getting
them, not keeping them. When I
met my wife she used to play me
like a hit record. But once I got
in with her, boy, I could do
anything and get away with it.

TIM

Yeah, I know only this girl has
been good to me. Seems kind of
brutal playing her like this.

ERIC

Hey, you're only using standard
operating procedure with a Black
woman.

TIM

(picks up his bag)
Let me make a move. I've got
three hours on the road.

They cross to the door.

ERIC

You're doing the home thing, huh?

TIM

Need to see the folks. They're getting old.

They exit. We HOLD the empty apartment while:

TIM (VO)

Just then I remembered I forgot to turn on my answering machine... just in case that other woman called me for a return engagement.

Tim rushes back in and heads to the machine.

TIM (VO)

I was setting up the machine and happened to play back Sharon's messages from the night before.

Tim stands motionless as he listens.

SHARON'S VOICE

Tim. Please call me. No matter how late. I'm really getting worried.

That hits him in the gut. He starts to look like a sick sheep.

See, once again, I drastically shortened the scene but all of the information needed remained. Now the dialogue is shorter, crisper and more conversational. Takes practice. The more you do it, the better you get.

Now let's talk about your character introductions. Your script starts out with some guys playing round ball on an asphalt court. They all get introduced. Air Willie, Slam Jam, Baby Shaq, Ice Cream. Now I'm reading and I assume these are important characters with their cool names and all so imagine my surprise when we never see these guys again. Then your core characters show up. We get their names but nothing else. I'm not getting any kind of sense about these individuals. You don't give us their ages, any distinguishing characteristics. Nothing. You're relying on the reader to determine all of that for himself and running the risk he may not create the same characters that you've envisioned. We need more.

Your opening sequence goes 6 and one half pages and essentially only introduces your characters and provides a moment when Tim sees Sharon for the **first** time. All of this can be done much faster. Try this :

ON A BLACK SCREEN, SUPER:

Black Love Can Be So Strange;
And Strange Is Often Black Love.

FADE IN:

EXT. AN INNER-CITY BASKETBALL COURT - DAY

Six or eight young BLACK MEN play a pickup game of round ball on asphalt while a BOOM BOX blasts away. One team is mostly TEENS in their Reeboks and long shorts. The other team is made up of three MEN in their early twenties, distinguished by the street clothes they wear.

CLYDE

is 24, wearing dungaree work clothes with a SIMS ELECTRICAL patch on the back of his shirt. His name tag reads CLYDE. He's tall, got some moves, a little rusty but has some game as he drives down the key but has the ball knocked away by an eighteen-year-old.

ERIC

waves his arms frantically in the face of his opponent. He's 22, and wearing jeans and a shirt unbuttoned. Eric is a friendly fool, always ready with a joke.

FLOYD

takes a tipped ball to the top of the key and drains a three pointer. He is 24, likable, always smiling and generous with the high-fives. Eric points across court and we see...

TIM JOHNSON

arriving. Tim's 24, smartly dressed in a nice suit. Young professional type. Floyd throws him the ball and the guys urge him to join in. Tim pulls off his coat, hangs it on the fence and as he yanks his tie he sees...

TIM'S POV

A beautiful black woman is stretching at an exercise station outside the fence. She's fine from here and...

TIM

has his attention locked on too long cause just then the ball hits him in the gut. He doubles over, frowns at Clyde who is splitting a gut. Determined now, Tim, hangs his tie on the fence, puts his glasses in his coat and takes the ball on to...

THE COURT

Four-on-four now. The game continues and the old guys put up a pretty good match against the kids until...

INT. HOUSERS - NIGHT

A local sports bar and neighborhood haunt. Tim, Clyde, Floyd and Eric enter the place jammed with the Friday night crowd. They're out of breath and still wearing the clothes we saw them play ball in.

CLYDE

Damn, man, I'm getting too old for this shit.

Tim CALLS TO THE BAR...

TIM

TWO PITCHERS OVER HERE!

And the men collapse at a table in the center of the noisy room.

(continued)

Okay, one and a half pages and I have the men in **Housers** all ready to talk some trash and hit on the babes. I've introduced our major characters and given the reader a picture of each. Now see how my version is so much faster than yours and yet accomplishes the same thing. This version is more cinematic. It reads like a movie. The trick is to keep this same pace for the next 110 pages. With this pace now you'll have plenty of pages available to add the development scenes I discussed earlier. And by doing that, you'll have more story and better developed characters.

There it is, that's all I got. Now get to work

Paul Cooper