



**SEATTLEBLACK
FILMFESTIVAL**

The Storytellers Toolkit

Masterclass

July 11, 2020

Moderated by: Shannan E. Johnson

Completed by: Patrik-Ian Polk

General Questions

How does your team (Agent, Manager, Publicist), including yourself, help structure your brand so when your name enters a room, your voice and vision are clear to ensure that you land gigs that are right for you?

Patrik-Ian Polk: *After working with them for a few years, my agent and manager have a good sense of my tastes, interests, likes and dislikes. But I also encourage them to bring me stuff that's outside my comfort zone, and I try to be openminded about the kinds of projects I consider. With my own work (work that I create myself), I can be more precious. But when interviewing for jobs, I have to maintain an open mind because every show, every film is different.*

What is your role, as a creative of color with success in the industry, in creating opportunities for emerging diverse voices and stories? In what way do you give back to the writing community?

P.P.: *I mentor young Black gay writers and actors. I'm always looking out for opportunities for my POC contacts, constantly referring people for jobs. It can be so tough to get a foot in the door in Hollywood when you don't know anyone. We have to welcome people in, specifically when we find talented new, young artists, and those artists happen to be POC's.*

What is your process for receiving notes from executives? How do you know which notes to take into consideration and where do you draw the line and push for your vision?

P.P.: *I am a lateral thinker. Unless a note is aggressively opposed to my creative vision, I can usually figure out how to make it work. First, I look at what's behind the note. What is the script missing that has led to this note. Often, a note might not be specifically useful except as an indicator of where the true problem lies. Your foot may be going numb, but the real issue is loss of blood flow due to a collapsed vein in your leg (probably not medically accurate, but you get my drift). The numb foot allowed you to find the real problem. Also, if addressing a note will lead to bigger problems in the script, then you can point out to the exec how doing so will unravel these other things. Executives are usually reasonable and if you can logically explain your position while also giving their thoughts real consideration, giving in when you agree, then things work out. Hopefully, by the time you get to the notes process, you've gotten into bed with executives who understand your vision already and are there to support it.*



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How can you tell the difference between a screenplay that should be made and one that is best used as a writing sample to get another writing gig? How do you objectively assess your work if you don't have a group of peers who understand industry screenplay standards?

P.P.: At some point, you have to trust your own instincts. But being happy with your writing or the quality of your script and its ability to sell are two different things. What sells is what sells. There's no way to predict that. Sometimes it's simply a matter of getting the right script in front of the right producer. Find other writers or industry folk whose opinions you trust, who are thoughtful in their critique, who have no agenda other than seeing you succeed. You read their work and they read yours. I have a small number of people I've done that with for years and years. But as far as what sells, just write what you wanna write. And decide which sample best suits the job you're going for in each instance.

What's a general meeting, how do you book them, and how do you seal the deal?

P.P.: A general is a meeting between you and (usually) a production company exec or a studio/network exec where you learn about the company, what they're looking for, what they're working on, etc...and they learn about you, your background, your career, what kinds of things you're working on or interested in. General meetings are usually booked by an agent or a manager. Part of their job is networking with the suits of the industry. They keep their ears to the ground so they constantly know what's out there and are constantly pitching you. If they know this particular production company has a deal at HBO and is looking for projects, and they think you are a good fit, then they'll set the meeting. Sometimes, people request the meetings because they've seen some of your work or read about some new deal you closed in the trades. Sealing the deal just depends...the goal is to learn about the company, educate them about you, come across personable and interesting, and speak well about your work. Hopefully, the exec you're meeting with is already a fan (otherwise you wouldn't be there) and will be tossing out ideas of ways you might work with them. Most generals I have usually generate at least one of the following: some project I have that I discussed in the meeting piqued their interest and they wanna read the script/ treatment/ source material; some project the company has might be a good fit for me, so they want me to read, watch, digest the material and then come in and pitch on it or meet to discuss my "take" on the material. After that...who knows?

What's the best piece of advice that you didn't listen to that you live by now? What was your journey to that revelation?

P.P.: Best advice I can give is just to write more. The more finished, viable, good scripts you have on your shelf, the better your chance of booking a job or selling something.



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What does it mean to write for the reader and not the screen? How does “the read” affect the process of getting your screenplay made?

P.P.: I don't get into this stuff really. Just write your best shit. The interesting thing I'm seeing more and more is non-traditional script writing. Meaning the “action” mainly seems to be written in less standard ways. Very conversational, interesting, creative. I think most of us know traditional script format and style and are used to reading standard action descriptions, so being creative with the style in which you tell the story on the page is encouraged.

With everything going on with the ATA and the coronavirus changing the landscape of filmmaking, how important is it to have representation to get meetings?

P.P.: Representation is always a good thing...unless it's bad representation. I'm not going to run around drumming up meetings. That's not how I want to spend my time. I pick up the phone when it suits me, but that's usually calling a specific contact (after 20+ years in the biz, I've got a lot of friends who've come up and become producers, high-level production company execs, etc...) about a specific project. But it's a great thing to be able to write something and then hand it to a manager and agent I really trust to get it and help me figure out where to send it...who will likely make it.

What materials are absolutely necessary when going into a meeting to pitch your screenplay/idea for a screenplay? Are there different/additional materials needed if a writer is seeking financing or distribution of a completed film?

P.P.: The more you have, the more thorough you are, the better...in general. But don't go in with a lot of stuff if that's not your forte or you don't have some really clever shit to show. The most important thing is to tell a compelling story, come up with a compelling project. If the project is compelling, then you can just pitch it verbally. Work on your verbal pitch as much as you need to, but you don't necessarily need supplemental materials for a pitch. That said, it's become increasingly common for people to prepare “pitch decks”—a document with pictures and references that illustrate your project visually. Some people do video pitch decks with moving images...but I feel like these are more for directors or writer/directors. I sometimes do a pitch deck to communicate the visual style of the show I'm pitching, especially if it's a younger skewing show. But the story, the idea, the words are still the thing. If you're selling a screenplay, then the script just needs to be good. There's no pitching necessary if you have the script. Be able to tell the logline, general idea and if it sounds interesting to a production company or studio or network, they'll read it. Simple. So write an interesting script. By the way, a piece of advice I got from my friend Lena Waithe—always write the script. She found that trying to communicate the ideas of her projects was an uphill battle with largely white execs who didn't necessarily know or appreciate where she was coming from. The script avoids the need to overly communicate because it's all there. So write the script.



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What's your writing process? Do you have a favorite place? Do you need to be alone? Do you listen to music?

P.P.: Before coronavirus, I used a selection of cafes in the L.A./Hollywood area as my office. I'd go, have breakfast, and sit for a predetermined amount of time. Sometimes I'd be working on a specific project. Sometimes I'd just be working on various things or emails or bullshit. But I found leaving home and going somewhere helped me be more productive. Since Corona...I have not had an easy time adjusting to working at home. But thankfully the industry is moving on. Virtual writers rooms have become the norm and I'm looking forward to getting back to work soon. Sometimes I go to a café with a buddy...we both are working on our shit...that's helpful, even though we're not really interacting or chatting much. I usually listen to music or watch the news or some HGTV show, something I don't have to pay attention to. But music is always best.

When writing on contract (writer-for-hire), what's your usual mandated turnaround time? How important is it to have an efficient writing process as a professional writer?

P.P.: Making deadlines is always a good thing. You don't want to be a writer who develops a rep for being slow. So always make your deadlines. Turnaround time depends on the contractual obligation. Just meet your contractual obligations or be early.

How many writing projects are you comfortable with tackling at a time and why? What parts of your process allow you to successfully multitask?

P.P.: I can juggle as many as I want, but usually not more than 2 or 3 at a time. But I have at least a dozen projects at various stages. When some are cold, then others heat up. When I have down time on my paying jobs, I always have some passion projects I can pick up and work on. If you're lucky, every project will have its time. One good practice is to hire a development assistant--a talented, young writer/film school student or graduate on a freelance basis (usually paying around \$20-25 per hour) to help you research, write treatments, give feedback on your writing, figure out how to address studio/exec notes, etc. That can be a very helpful resource AND you're also helping a young, aspiring creative, by paying them and also by exposing them to what the develop process is like.

Writer/Director Questions



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As a writer/director, how open are you to bringing other people's stories to life? What is your process for choosing content?

P.P.: If it interests me, I'm interested. I'm open to any story if it's a good story. As a director or producer, I'm very open to a well-told, compelling story. As a writer, I need a bit more of a connection to the source material, but if it's compelling, then that will usually work.

As a writer who is not an aspiring director or producer, do you think having a proof of concept is a good way to jumpstart a writing career?

P.P.: A good script is the best way. Period. Write great scripts. More than one. When you sell one thing, or that one sample gets you a bunch of meetings, then you better be ready with 3 more scripts and they all better be interesting and compelling and different. If you generate your own good scripts, then you don't have to do as much dancing for writing assignments and pitch meetings...

Coming into the industry knowing that you want to be a writer/ director (not a writer who directs or a director who writes), what's the best way to make yourself known in the industry in both lanes and gain the trust to be able to tackle your own projects on the studio level?

P.P.: Write a good script that people want to make bad enough, and you can direct. Write a good script and direct good short films at least, and you'll have an easier time of it. Or write something good that gets produced and is a hit, and you can likely get hired to direct your next script. Bottom line, the hotter your script is, the more people who want to make it, the more likely you will be to get to direct it. Just be able to show the powers-that-be that you know how to direct. So at least make some credible, impressive short films.

TV Writer Questions

At the staff writer level, how do you know what you bring to the table and when to make your voice heard in the room? What's your process for understanding the series and writing in the Creator's/ Showrunner's voice?

P.P.: If you're on a writing staff, then somebody thought highly enough of your writing and your intelligence and personal point of view to put you there. That means, they want your voice in

that room. Be aware of any specific POV that you possess, as that is likely one of the main things they will be looking to you to bring to that table. If I'm the only gay Black writer in the room, it would be foolish of me to ignore that perspective as it relates to the scripts/stories we're working on. Most likely, they WANT that perspective. So speak up when your unique



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perspective is needed and not present in the conversation. But also speak up whenever you think your idea, position or thoughts are valid. You'll learn by doing. Sometimes you won't speak up and then someone else will have your same idea, speak up and get applauded. Sometimes you will speak up and your idea will be shot down instantly, don't be afraid. Not every idea is good. Not every good idea is right for that script/story. The best thing you can do as a staff writer is not be precious about your ideas, don't take it personally when your ideas don't land on the page or the board, always be open to making any idea work. If an idea is adopted that you don't particularly like, try to figure out what can be done to that idea, how can it be executed in such a way as to address/alleviate/eliminate whatever concerns you have about said idea. Just always be a team player. If the showrunner says we need to go down this road, then commit yourself to making that road the best it can be. If there's something about that road that you don't like or don't think works well, figure out how you can fix it...rather than just pointing out what you don't like about it.

How do you best prepare for a meeting with a showrunner for staffing?

P.P.: Watch the show, if there are episodes available. Research that showrunner's credits. Watch some of those shows if you haven't. If you have any contacts who have worked with that showrunner, hit them up and ask for helpful information, feedback in preparation for your meeting—any info about extreme likes or dislikes could help steer you away from seemingly trivial topics that could reflect negatively or steer you towards helpful tidbits of info. Be able to speak honestly and confidently about your talents and what you bring to the table. Be real. Showrunners want support, they want creative people, they want good ideas, they want thoughtful, nice people. No one wants to work with assholes. So don't be an asshole.

If you jumped from TV writing to features or vice versa, what was that process like and when did you feel comfortable in your career taking the leap? How are the two parts of the industry similar or different?

P.P.: Going from features to TV staffing was a lot of meetings for a lot of months. Then I got that first gig and haven't stopped working since (2016). They're different in the practical ways you'd expect. But feature writers can get hired on staffs...although they usually want to read at least one TV sample. So even if you're a feature writer, make sure you have at least one good TV pilot. But there's a lot of crossover now, less of a divide between TV and film. So just write good shit.

In television, what does it mean to produce your own episode as a writer? Are all members of the writing staff given the opportunity? What skills are necessary to successfully produce an episode?



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P.P.: *Every show is different. Some shows let the writer produce their episode. This just means you are in on all the creative meetings, with the director, in casting sessions, wardrobe meetings, everything. You must have a knowledge of what the show is, beyond the teleplays. You must understand the aesthetic of the show, the talent on the show, etc. Usually, you will be answering to the showrunner and upper level producers, not to mention the network/studio, so it's not like you'll have carte blanche to do what you want. But your decisions will be filtered through higher ups, so make sure your decisions are in keeping with the series as it exists, while also being creative and helping your director and department heads be creative and elevate your episode.*

What skills and experience are necessary to be a successful showrunner? How do writers put themselves in a position to run their own show?

P.P.: *Coming from an indie film background, I'm used to wearing all the hats—writer, director, producer, soundtrack. I think that's a lot like being a showrunner. It's being the captain of a large ship, overseeing a large operation. It means being creatively and administratively on top of a lot of shit. You put yourself in the position to run your own show by writing good shit, and working steadily as a staff writer. If you're lucky, you end up on a show that runs for years and years...and then you steadily rise up the ranks. Eventually, the creators of a long-running series will want to move on to create other series. Also, the upper level writers/producers on a hit show will likely be plucked away and given opportunities to create their own shows. Making yourself useful, getting in where you fit in, when you get an opportunity to produce your own episode, kill that shit. Take advantage of every opportunity. And after staffing for a few years or more, when you write the right project or rise high enough in the ranks, you'll get there.*

What's a typical turnaround time to write an episode and how is this affected by the production schedule?

P.P.: *It varies show to show. Typically, an hour drama, you'd get at least a week, or 10 days. Sometimes more. But also...by the time you go to script, the episode has been broken in the room, you've written outlines that have gone through approval processes with the showrunner and the network/studio. So when you sit down to write, you have a pretty solid blueprint to follow. A blueprint that's been approved.*