

DRAMATIC TENSION

BY WILLIAM C. MARTELL

Creating dramatic tension increases a film's production value without costing the producer a cent—all it takes is for a screenwriter to create a volatile situation.

As writers we can create scenes of suspense, dread, humor, amazement and tension that cost nothing to the producer ... and because these scenes rely on *situations*, they don't even need great actors to succeed. Last issue we looked at eight elements that add production value and shelf life to a movie without costing the producer a cent. This issue, we'll explore dramatic tension.

Unresolved Conflict

Tension is present, but unresolved, conflict. It is a caged tiger ... looking for a way out.

Summer's first blockbuster, *Spider-Man 3*, seemed to be suffering from "tension deficit syndrome"—the moment conflict surfaced, it was almost instantly resolved. Everyone was forgiving everyone else without those few dozen tense scenes between transgression and resolution that make the story interesting. The end result is a dull, unemotional film. Surprising because the co-writer Alvin Sargent won an Oscar® for a film bursting with dramatic tension called *Ordinary People* (1980). Sargent also co-wrote the second film in the series, which suffered from the same problem—Aunt May instantly forgives Peter Parker's role in the death

of her husband, completely letting him off the hook. With great power comes great responsibility ... unless you are forgiven for every mistake you were responsible for. Of course, things like dramatic tension have no effect on box office, right? Wrong. *Spider-Man's* domestic box office was about \$30 million more than *Spider-Man 2* and almost \$70 million more than *Spider-Man 3*. The less dramatic tension, the less each film made.

A great example of dramatic tension can be found in *Street Smart* (1987), written by David Freeman (the screenwriter, not the seminar guy), about down-on-his-luck news magazine

Donald Sutherland and Mary Tyler Moore in *Ordinary People*

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reporter Jonathan Fisher (Christopher Reeve) who completely fabricates a story about a modern pimp working in Times Square. No wild clothes and pimpmobile; this guy is a smart businessman who may come from the streets, but has built an empire. He owns a condo in Hawaii and invests in the stock market. Jonathan is hoping this faked article will help him keep his job.

His editor loves the article and wants to make it the cover story. That may seem like good news for Jonathan, but the added exposure may result in someone discovering that the story is bogus ... the tension has begun! His editor would also like to meet this pimp—what a character! Maybe do a photo shoot for the cover? Jonathan convinces his editor that the pimp would rather not be photographed, his business being illegal.

The issue is a huge hit when it comes out. Jonathan has gone from being on the verge of

unemployed to flavor of the month. He's hired as a TV news reporter with his own segment—"Street Smart." Everyone is talking about the pimp in his article. Everyone wants to meet him. This interest creates a conflict that cannot be resolved. Jonathan obviously can't introduce any of these people to the pimp because he does not exist.

Or does he?

Because, when you give a detailed description of a Times Square pimp, odds are that some actual pimp fits that description ... and that pimp is Fast Black (Morgan Freeman, in a frightening role) who is on trial for murder. The district attorney prosecuting the case believes Jonathan may have evidence in his interview notes that will help make his case ... and decides to issue subpoenas. The conflict has just escalated, and the tension along with it.

We have our tiger—the front-page news story that is completely fabricated ... it could

escape at any time. We also have our cage—Jonathan cannot let the truth out about the fake story without ruining his life.

Situation

The first step in creating tension is to establish the unresolved conflict. After that we need to create *situations* that bring the conflict to the surface. It does no good to have Jonathan fake his article unless situations are created where the authenticity takes center stage. Jonathan is called into court and asked to produce his notes or go to jail for contempt. Okay, he can't just say, "The notes don't exist because I made up the story"—that way he loses his job and will probably never work again as a journalist. And he can't produce the notes. So, what is left?

They send him to jail for contempt, bringing him before the judge a few times in case he has changed his mind and now wants to release the notes.

Scene after scene, Jonathan must pretend that the notes do exist ... and this creates tension. What if they discover there are no notes? The more the judge and district attorney pry, the more tension. The good news is that being sent to jail has made Jonathan an even bigger star. The bad news is it has thrown more focus onto that fake article.

Everyone is sure that Fast Black is the pimp from the article ...

And Fast Black's lawyer wants to know how much Jonathan knows about the murder. Now *everybody* wants to see these notes that do not exist.

It's Gonna Blow!

Just when the tension of having everyone want the non-existent notes reaches the breaking point and it looks like Jonathan will spend the rest of his life in jail for contempt, he confesses to his lawyer in private that the notes do not exist and the story was fabricated. His lawyer, actually the news magazine's lawyer, has a private session with the judge and explains the situation. Jonathan is released without having the information



Cate Blanchett and Judi Dench in *Notes on a Scandal*

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that his article was fake revealed to the public. Fast Black's lawyer has no objection to letting Jonathan out of jail ...

Because a new, even more tension-filled situation is going to replace the old one. Fast Black wants Jonathan to create notes for the fake article that will provide him with an alibi for the time of the murder. Jonathan says he can't do that—journalistic integrity, you know.

Jonathan returns to his TV news job even more famous than before. He has everything he could possibly want ... except his girlfriend (Mimi Rogers) thinks he should come clean with his boss and the public about the fake story. His public and professional life are great, his personal life suffers.

By pushing the tension to the breaking point then allowing it to blow off some steam, we can keep the conflict simmering. In films like *Ordinary People*, about a highly dysfunctional family, there are huge explosions

of temper where family members scream at each other yet do nothing to resolve the conflict at the core. No one forgives anyone, they just storm off.

Street Smart does this one better by lowering the pressure on one conflict as it raises the pressure on another. Jonathan's relationship is so rocky that he ends up in the arms of another woman, Punchy (Kathy Baker), Fast Black's #1 girl. Now he must hide this affair from his girlfriend, which isn't easy because ...

Fast Black invites Jonathan to ride around with him—see what his life is *really* like. Jonathan can't refuse without the world knowing his article was fake, but the more time he hangs around Fast Black, the more he witnesses the pimp's brutal, hair-trigger temper. He almost kills a kid for fouling him in a basketball game, he almost slices open the face of one of his girls with a broken bottle, and when Jonathan tries to calm him down, the broken bottle ends up on his neck. Fast Black

is like the sweating explosives in *The Wages of Fear*—anything might set him off. Jonathan may get killed just for saying the wrong thing. The tension has escalated from being discovered as a fake to possibly being killed in order to make his story look real. Bigger tiger, same-sized cage!

High-Tension Scenes

All of this comes to a head in a great, tense scene where Jonathan is forced to invite the hair-trigger Fast Black and Punchy to a party the magazine is throwing. Everyone who is anyone is there—the cream of high society. Any one of them might say the wrong thing to Fast Black and get stabbed between cocktails. Jonathan wants to keep the dangerous pimp close by to control the situation, but that is impossible. Soon, Fast Black is trying to “turn out” the editor's wife and some other society women, and Punchy is trolling for new clients while saying hello to a few old ones. Jonathan completely ignores his girlfriend—escalating the tension there—as he attempts to keep the out-on-bail killer from adding to his crimes. The tension continues building throughout the scene until it's about to explode ...

Then, when the party is over and Fast Black hasn't killed anyone and Punchy hasn't engaged in public sex with any of the guests, a forgotten pressure-cooker blows: His girlfriend accuses him of having sex with Punchy, and they get into a huge argument that ends the relationship.

Another great, high-tension scene is found in *Notes on a Scandal* (screenplay by Patrick Marber) where “battle axe” school teacher Barbara Covett (Judi Dench) has a crush on new art teacher Sheba Hart (Cate Blanchett) ... and discovers that the new teacher is very popular with one of her teenage students. She's sleeping with him. Barbara tells Sheba she knows of the affair but, of course, she won't tell anyone because they are friends. We know Barbara's real motive is blackmail. This tense situation escalates throughout the film, coming to a head in an explosive scene where Sheba, her husband, and two children are going to a school play starring her son and Barbara blocks the driveway. Her cat has just died and she wants Sheba to ditch her son's play and console her. Or else she will tell Sheba's husband about the affair with the student.

With her husband on one side yelling for

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her to get in the car because they will be late and Barbara on the other whispering that she will expose the secret, Sheba is trapped in the middle of one of the most tension-filled scenes ever put on film. She is caught in the middle with both sides tugging at her, and no real solution to the problem. If she gets in the car, the secret comes out and her marriage is over ... if she *doesn't* get in the car, she will have to explain why, and her marriage is probably over. This scene keeps tugging her in both directions until she makes her choice and gets in the car to see her son's play. Everything explodes after that, and the tension changes from fear that her husband will discover the affair to the fear of what Barbara might do next.

Two Tigers, One Cage

Another way to create tension is to put two sworn enemies in a situation where they must be on their best behavior, even though they want to kill each other. In the first *Spider-Man*, screenwriter David Koepp has a great scene where Peter Parker, who is really Spider-Man, has Thanksgiving dinner at Aunt May's with Norman Osborn, who is really Green Goblin. Moments ago these two were in a battle to the death ... and now they have to sit down for a meal with all of their friends and family and act civil toward one another.

Tension builds because we know their secret identities. We know that they should be battling it out instead of asking to please pass the cranberries. As the dinner stretches out, it finally reaches the breaking point and Osborn excuses himself, rushing out of the room, out of the house ... his son chasing after him. He can't tell his son the truth—that he's a supervillain battling one of the other guests who is a superhero. In the world of comic book heroes, you must protect your secret identity at all costs. No one can know who you really are behind the mask, and that's the cage.

They may battle as "super people," but without their masks, Osborn is the father of Peter's best friend and they must pretend to like each other. This tension continues to escalate until the final battle; and even after Green Goblin has been vanquished, the conflict still exists—it has just been passed from Norman to his son Harry, who now knows that his best friend killed his father. The key to continuing tension is *not* to resolve the conflict.

Five Steps to Tension

1. Tension is created through *situations*. No expensive explosions or CGI, just writing.
2. You must set up the situation so that the audience fully understands what's going on inside the character—we know that Jonathan has faked the article in *Street Smart* and that he must keep this secret from being discovered. You need a conflict, whether it's an explosive secret or two people who should be locked in combat. We know that putting these two in the same scene *should* result in violence. We *expect* it to result in violence.
3. There must be a *reason* why violence cannot erupt—a reason why the character *cannot* show his emotions or that the secret *cannot* be exposed. Whether that is Spider-Man and Green Goblin as their alter-egos who sit down for Thanksgiving dinner or Jonathan in *Street Smart* who has to pretend that Fast Black is his article's subject ... and later trying to keep him under control at the society party. If the character doesn't have a compelling reason not to show his emotions, he'd react like any normal person would.
4. The situation must keep pushing the characters' buttons. Pushing them to react. A hidden secret is no good unless people are digging around and may discover it. A truce between two people at war is no good unless they have chances to destroy each other. Buried tension isn't as good as tension that is simmering and about to boil over.
5. Once we allow the tension to explode and dissipate, we must either find another source of tension or have that explosion *not* resolve the conflict but actually make it worse. Tension is present, but *unresolved*, conflict. The moment the conflict is resolved, the tension is gone ... so Aunt May can't forgive Peter Parker without removing the drama from every scene they share from that point on. Just as tension is a situation created by the writer that costs a producer nothing, the *lack* of tension removes production value and excitement by not creating the situation at the script stage, or by removing the tension instead of escalating it.

Street Smart is a great example of dramatic tension and *rising* tension because it doesn't resolve the conflict until the very end. Things just keep getting worse for Jonathan until he has no choice but to become even more violent and unpredictable than Fast Black—a great explosive ending to a great movie. 🚀



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