

TAKE IT TO THE LIMIT

BY WILLIAM C. MARTELL

No CGI, no special effects, no stuntmen ... but *Deliverance* remains one of the most exciting films ever made because it takes the characters to their limits ... and beyond.

Most good screenplays are autobiographical. It doesn't matter whether you are writing about a damaged superhero like the Dark Knight, or a superhero who damages everything around him like Hancock, or FBI agents chasing the unexplained, or a screwed-up kid like in *The Wackness*, or a group of miniature aliens trying to keep their spaceship from falling in love. Often, the more unusual the character, the more it's really us. I know my vampire hunter and alien prisoner and treasure diver are all *me*. We create our protagonists, and we usually use ourselves as the raw material. Because we identify with them, care about them, and even love them, we often try to protect them from physical and emotional danger ... which often leads to dull and detached stories. We build barricades and buffers between our protagonists and the things that *we* don't really want to explore. But a good script requires that we remove anything that gets in the way of raw, emotional moments. We need to take our characters to the limit, then over the edge into emotionally dangerous territory. Of course, doing so is emotionally dangerous for *us* as well.

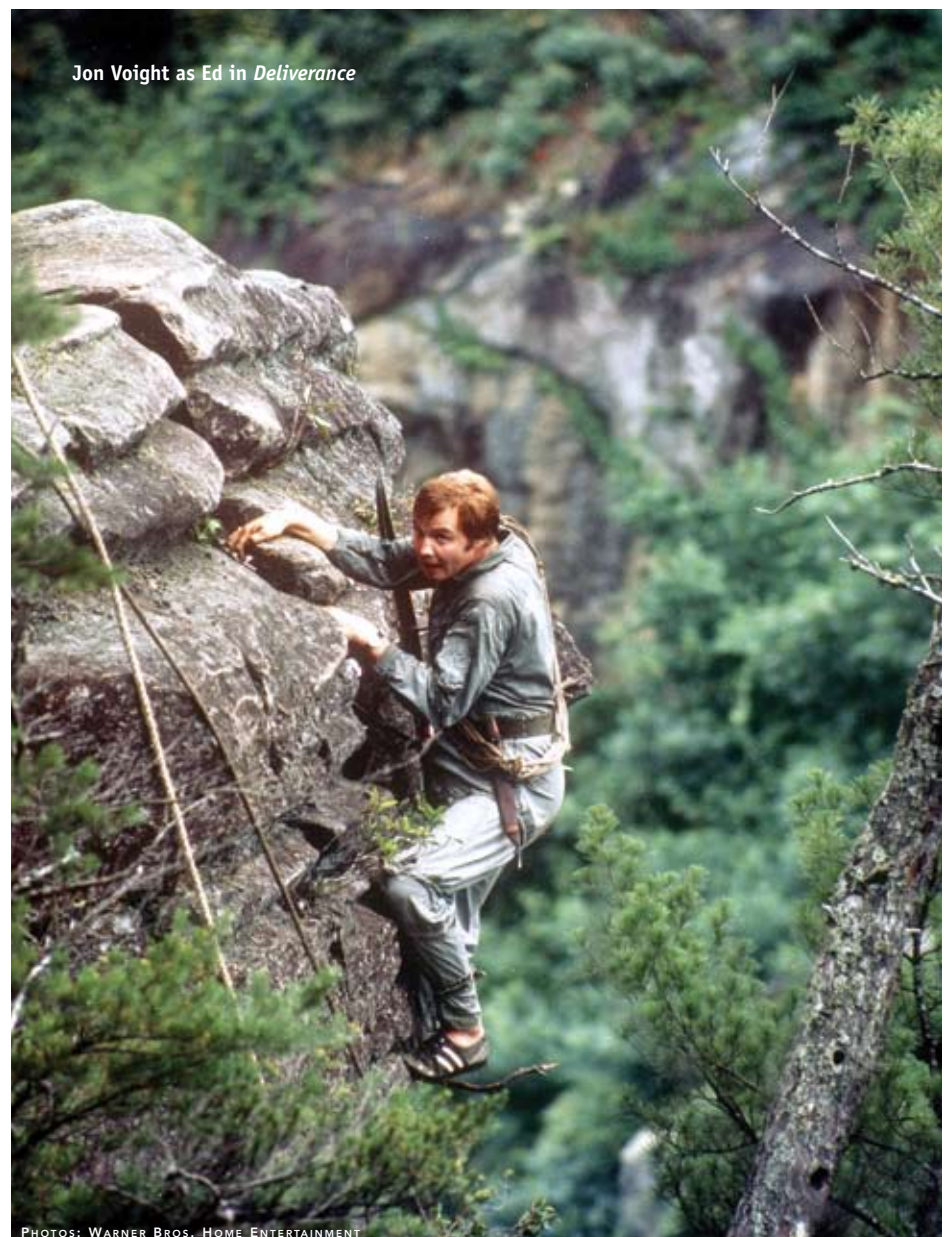
The River's Edge

We must go back to 1972 to find one of the greatest man-on-the-edge films of all time—the adventure *Deliverance*, written by James Dickey (based on his novel) and directed by John Boorman. This film takes a group of four suburban men to the very edge ... then over that edge into the darkness beyond. This is the weekend they didn't play golf. These four men have ventured out of civilization to ride the rapids on an untamed river that's about to be dammed and turned into a lake by the power company. Instead, *they* become the damned. This weekend excursion scars them for life. It isn't the second most important moment in their lives, it is *the* event that defines them forever.

Deliverance keeps taking its characters to the limits—pushing them to their breaking points,

and thereby exposing character. Not surface character; the deep character buried within. The soul of the character. The essence. Take the characters to the very edge, then over, and we find out who they really are. Without the whitewater

raft trip and the events that happen on that river—if they had spent the day at home in the suburbs watching the football game on TV or playing 18 holes of golf—we would have never found that edge and known these characters as



Jon Voight as Ed in *Deliverance*

PHOTOS: WARNER BROS. HOME ENTERTAINMENT

well as we do. We need to take our characters to their limits, right up to the edge.

Our four suburban guys are a mix of different types, creating contrast and conflict between them before they hit any rough water. Lewis (Burt Reynolds) is an adrenaline junkie who is always trying to push himself to the limit ... and beyond. His best friend Ed (Jon Voight) was an outdoor guy before settling down—now his hunting bow is in disrepair. Drew (Ronny Cox), the quiet, guitar-playing guy, is religious. Bobby (Ned Beatty) is the chubby city slicker, completely out of his element ... and nervous. When things go wrong on the rapids, each brings a different perspective to the problem. The first step in taking your characters to the edge is *knowing* your characters. Not what they look like (they look like whatever stars are cast by the studio—I'm always surprised what my characters look like!); you need to know their dreams and fears and emotional issues.

We also learn the secrets of these four men along the way—Ed may own a hunting bow, but he can't bring himself to kill a living thing ... he chokes when he has the perfect shot at a deer. These character secrets aren't just there to give us information about the guys, they are also set-ups that pay off later in the story.

Over the Edge

To expose and explore the characters—to find out what they are really made of—the story pushes them *way* over the edge. Bobby and Ed bring their raft to shore and bump into a pair of hillbilly hunters in the woods (leader played by Bill McKinney, who is in every great 1970s' movie). The Hillbillies threaten them. At first, they think it's because the Hillbillies may have a still hidden in the woods and think they may tell someone ... but that's not far enough over the edge.

They tie Ed to a tree with his own belt—

around his neck—then force Bobby at gunpoint to take off his clothes. “Them panties, take 'em off.” What follows is probably one of the most difficult-to-watch scenes in the history of cinema. It doesn't just take you to the edge, it goes *way* over that edge. After doing everything to demean and ridicule Bobby, the lead Hillbilly grabs him, takes down his underpants, and sodomizes him. It's not quick. Bobby tries to get away. The Hillbilly catches him, holds on to him ... as Ed watches, helpless. The Hillbilly forces Bobby to squeal like a pig as he rapes him.

Our four whitewater rafters have just entered hell, and how they react will tell us about their characters. The story has removed layers of civilization and taken us to some primal place where what we pretend to be has been stripped away, leaving only what we are. How will these four deal with this environment?

Just as the Hillbillies are preparing to rape Ed (“Got a real pretty mouth, ain't he?”), Lewis



Director John Boorman (center, background) sets up a shot on the river wild

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comes out of the woods with his bow and shoots the lead Hillbilly through the chest. Ed wrestles the gun away from the other Hillbilly (it's a struggle, not easy), who then runs away—disappearing into the woods. But, as legend tells us, it takes three arrows to kill a man ... and the lead Hillbilly only has one arrow in him. He staggers around, combining threat with regret. These civilized men have killed. What began as a weekend excursion has turned into murder. Except the Hillbilly continues to stagger around—Ed aims the shotgun at him but is afraid to shoot. The Hillbilly eventually collapses on a tree, forcing the arrow even deeper into him. With a final gasp, he dies. How will our four deal with killing a man?

problem—lasts seven minutes. Most of that is between Lewis and Drew arguing between the law of society and the law of the jungle. A big, juicy, dramatic scene ... ending with a vote. The decision comes down to Ed, our identification character. What should he do? There is no easy decision, no right decision, no safe decision. What would *we* do? Ed decides to bury the Hillbilly and try to forget that any of this ever happened, even though he knows that's not possible. This is something that can never be forgotten.

Even the burial scene is dramatic—because they are burying the evidence of their crime. And they get filthy digging the hole. And the Hillbilly's hand springs out of the earth—and must be *pushed down*—forced into the earth. Not an easy burial. These men are all dealing

“Take the story so far over the edge, to each character’s breaking point, and it explodes into drama ... and character is exposed.”

Edge Creates Drama

If these four guys had just stayed home in Atlanta and played golf, we would never have learned as much about them, and the story would not have been as dramatic. Take the story so far over the edge, to each character's breaking point, and it explodes into drama ... and character is exposed.

Now our four must decide what to do with the dead Hillbilly.

Drew wants to report it to the police.

Lewis thinks telling the police what happened is just going to screw up Bobby even more. Plus, if this ever goes to trial, would the other Hillbillies on the jury do the right thing?

Ed doesn't know what to do—he's on the fence between civilization and this primal world they have found themselves in.

Bobby? He's happy the guy is dead. In fact, he'd like to kill him again.

The argument over what to do with the dead Hillbilly—where each of the four gets right in each other's face over how to solve this

with the guilt of their actions, and nothing is made easier for them. If there is a complication that forces them to struggle emotionally with what they have done—it happens, taking them to the edge again and again.

Afterward, Ed can't seem to get the earth off his hands no matter how hard he scrubs them in the river. Drew can't cope with what he's done, is practically comatose.

More Sharp Edges

But it's not over. They still have to fight the river to make it back to civilization ... and the Hillbillies may be chasing them. They hit a stretch of dangerous rapids. Drew falls out of the canoe into the raging river—shot by a Hillbilly? One of the canoes tears in half, ejecting Bobby and Lewis. Ed keeps hold of his bow and becomes the new leader—Lewis has a badly broken leg bone tearing through flesh. The strongest amongst them, hobbled. The leader, the one who might be able to lead them out of this hell, is out of the game.

All that's left of Drew is his broken guitar. They search for his body and find nothing.

Lewis believes Drew was shot by a Hillbilly on the cliff overlooking them and convinces Bobby and Ed that they have to deal with the Hillbilly sniper if they hope to survive. Now it's up to Ed to climb the face of a cliff with his bow and kill the Hillbilly. Several times he almost falls. This is a great man-against-nature scene—a suburban man fighting the face of a cliff, fighting gravity, fighting the elements ... as he climbs the sheer wall of the cliff.

Halfway up, dead tired, Ed pulls out his wallet to look at a photo of his wife and son. Everything that is important to him. His reasons to live. The "Deep Survival" article in the April 2008 issue of *National Geographic Adventure* by Laurence Gonzales says that the one thing survivors have in common is that they had people to live for. By focusing on their family and friends, they find the strength to survive impossible situations. As Ed hangs on the side of the cliff looking at the photo of his reasons to survive, he loses his grip and the photo falls hundreds of feet to the rapids below. He's lost them. Lost his family. Maybe he's lost himself, too.

He still has to climb to the top of the cliff.

He still has to kill the Hillbilly who shot Drew.

But, we know Ed's secret: He can't kill a living thing.

When the Hillbilly with the rifle spots him, Ed has trouble shooting his arrow—his hand is shaking like crazy. Killing is not an easy thing to do. It's one thing to kill a man in battle, one thing to kill a man in self-defense ... but to just kill a man? Without passion? Without provocation? He can't do it. Then the danger escalates when the Hillbilly fires his gun at him. Ed fires an arrow ... then falls on his bow and quiver—an arrow piercing his side. He's shot a man, and wounded himself as well! But the Hillbilly is still staggering—in *Deliverance*, killing a bad guy isn't clean and simple. Isn't black and white. Isn't easy, physically or morally. Ed must grab his hunting knife and go to finish him off.

That's when he discovers that he's probably killed the wrong man. Oops! The Hillbilly who got away was toothless, the man he killed has teeth. Ed realizes he's a murderer. The man he killed is probably just some hunter.

He lowers the Hillbilly's body down the cliff into the water ... but when he tries to climb

down the cliff, his rope breaks and he ends up falling into the river—and tangling himself up with the dead Hillbilly's body. He's tied to this dead man. He struggles to break free of the man he murdered, but becomes more and more tangled, the dead body dragging him down! He has to *touch* the dead man to disentangle himself.

Ed sinks the Hillbilly's body into the river and the men take the remaining canoe down river to civilization, finding Drew's body along the way. Not shot. "Oh, God, there's no end to it," Bobby says. Things just keep getting worse—further over the edge—deeper into hell. There is no easy way out, no easy decision. The story takes them to the limit over and over again. When you think things can't get worse, they do.

Even when they make it back to civilization, the danger isn't over—the difficult decisions aren't over, they are still way over the edge. They must deal with the police—will Bobby be able to keep his wits and lie? Will their stories match? Will they be able to live with what they have done?

To the Limit

The more difficult the decision a character has to make, the more the audience has to think about the question ... the more emotional the script. The further characters we care about are pushed to the edge, the more dramatic the story becomes. We rip through the layers of armor to find the true character underneath it all. We force the audience to wonder what they would do in the situation. We create big, meaty, dramatic scenes. If you aren't pushing the characters to the edge, you aren't going to find the meat of the story.

What is the worst thing that could ever happen to your characters *physically*? What is the worst thing that your characters could ever have to deal with *emotionally*? What is the most difficult decision they could ever make—the one they regret for the rest of their lives? What is the worst thing they could do to someone else? The worst thing they could ever do to themselves? Make sure you don't make these things quick and easy—stretch it out until the characters reach their breaking point. Make sure your characters deal with all of their messy emotions realistically. If *you* aren't scared to write it, you aren't taking it far enough. Are you pushing your characters to their limits? 🚀



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