The Script

This is where your skills are put to their greatest test and where you have a chance to shine. A good script is as detailed and specific as a blueprint or a schematic. You must indicate clearly what your characters are saying, where they are going, what they are doing, how crucial shots are to be framed and any other information required for the director to understand your intent and for the viewer to understand the story.

While the outline hammered out the basic story line in broad strokes, now you must create the details that make your characters living, breathing people through mannerisms and attitudes and the subtleties of voice and inflection and movement. A good script must be written with a sensitivity to the sound and sense of words so they flow seamlessly across the page. The dialogue should sound natural and unforced. The script should be muscular, should drive from one scene right into the next so the reader is caught up in it.

For the balance of this chapter, and elsewhere in this book, I will give some hints and pointers in this area, but they are guideposts, nothing more. The only way to learn to write scripts is to write scripts.

But as stated, there are some lessons you can apply that will save you some trial and error in pursuing that goal.

1. Listen to people. No two people talk alike. Their word choices, the rhythms of their dialogue, their cadences and hesitations are all as unique as a fingerprint. Listen to them, and quietly pick apart how they are differ-

ent, what is emblematic of someone's speech pattern. The best test for this is to study the speech patterns of person A. Once you think you've got it down to a fine art, write a paragraph or two in that person's "voice." Then show it to person B, who also knows person A and several other mutual friends or relations. Ask that person to identify person A, using only the dialogue. If person B can figure it out, you've done your job.

2. Make your characters listen to one another. One of the worst things you can do in a script is to have your characters talking *at* one another rather than *to* one another. Have your characters respond to one another, react to what the other says. Give the sense of a real back-and-forth exchange. Let your characters get angry with one another, shocked or astonished by what the other person is doing. Don't just use them to advance the plot. Invest them with emotions and reactions, since those reactions will tell us a lot about who they are. For example, a stripper walks into a room. A matronly schoolteacher will react one way, a pool hustler another. That reaction informs us about the character.

3. Use parentheticals to take some of the burden off dialogue. You don't have to cover every aspect of dialogue *with* dialogue. Sometimes it's more powerful to let body language carry one part and only use dialogue for the important part. For instance, you can take a quick exchange and play it one of two ways:

HUSBAND

Do you have to go?

WIFE

Yes, I do. It's the only way.

Or:

HUSBAND

Do you have to go?

WIFE

(nods)

It's the only way.

The "Yes, I do" only gets in the way. What matters in the scene is the second sentence. If it's a simple response, a yes or a no, take it out of dialogue. You can also use parentheticals to imply things that the actor can use in the performance. For instance, there's nothing more to the following scene than it appears:

HUSBAND

Is everything all right?

WIFE

Everything's fine.

But now you add one little parenthetical:

HUSBAND

Is everything all right?

WIFE

(she's lying)

Everything's fine.

Suddenly the meaning, and the performance, totally changes. You can use this technique to add little nuances and be more subtle in your writing.

4. Begin each scene as late as possible, and end it as early as possible.

5. Be specific in your dialogue. God, as someone once noted, is in the details. Details are everything in dialogue and characterization. If a character likes fruit, don't just let him say, "I like fruit." Let him have specific preferences: He likes the black plums, not the red ones; he likes his vegetables steamed, not boiled. If he just finished his first flying lesson, specify what kind of plane it was. Like painting, the finer the brushstrokes, the more realistic the picture.

6. Flesh out your character beyond what's required in the story. Look in the people you know, and in your own background, for the little nuances of behavior that make a character come alive. Does she enjoy jazz? Is there an unfortunate stammer? Does she wear brown socks with black shoes? You may never even use some of this, but it'll always be there, in the back of your head, informing the characterization. If you should set a scene in the character's apartment, you'll already know whether or not she'll have Beethoven on the stereo or the Rams on the TV. Again, that choice tells us a lot about the character.

When writing "Dream Me a Life" for *The Twilight Zone*, I wanted a character to talk about his deceased wife and show how much he cared for her. Rather than just stating that flat out at the beginning, I wanted to sneak up on it a little by starting with the character talking about an argument. The emotions slide from pleasant nostalgia to a recollection of anger, through to loss and sadness. But what to pick to illustrate that?

Jam and jelly.

It's a personal thing: I call blueberry jam *jam* and my wife calls it *jelly*. It's trivial almost to the point of being laughable and thus was the perfect segue needed for this scene.

So in the episode, the character in question, Roger (played by Eddie Albert), is sitting with his friend Frank in the retirement home. Roger's just had a particularly bad night, and things are not going well for their friendship. Frank suspects it's due to Roger not yet coming to grips with his wife's death.

FRANK

Nothing's been the same, has it? Not since . . .

(beat)

Roger, it's been three years, it—

ROGER

No. It was yesterday.

(beat)

You know, I was thinking the other day about her. We could never get it straight between us, jam or jelly. I'd say, "Pass the jam, please," and she'd say, "Here's the jelly, dear." It was a game, I guess. Then one day I was in a bad mood, and we got in an argument about it, can you believe it? The stupid, petty little things people argue about—

(beat, his eyes welling up)

God, Frank, I miss her . . . so much.

Jam and jelly. There's no writing book, no school that can teach you about jam and jelly and all the other stupid things couples argue about. Except life. And it's when you're writing the script that we as an audience discover how well you've been paying attention to your own life and the lives of those around you.

7. Beware of speeches. Avoid long-winded speeches that run on for two or more pages. The thing about dialogue vs. action is that a page of action runs a lot faster when filmed and edited than a page of dialogue. A page of action can run half a minute; a page that is one solid block of dialogue can run a minute or more. Time expands when you talk. Break up large blocks of exposition with interjections from the other characters in the room.

Which is not to say you shouldn't have speeches at all; the monologue is a wonderful and very intense form. But you should use it sparingly and only where it will give you the greatest impact.

8. Avoid having characters talk to themselves. Or if you absolutely must do it (the door slams as character A exits in a huff, and character B, alone, shakes her head, muttering, "On the other hand, maybe you *don't* want to go out for dinner"), do it only when necessary, and only if you can get a good scene out of it.

9. Don't describe everything we're seeing. Case in point: While in the dialog mix stage of *Babylon 5*, I discovered that the sound editor had recorded some "extra lines" to cover some scenes where there was no dialogue. These were scenes that had been specifically written *without* dialogue, I hasten to add. Where one character was peering into a bright light, the editor had her say, "The light . . ." Where one character was trying to open an encounter suit (containing life-support mechanisms), he had the actor say, "There must be some mechanism . . ."

I cut them. Had they added some new dimension to the scene, for instance, in the bright light scene, had she said the light was hot or added some other aspect to what we were already seeing, then I would have let them stay. But do not use dialogue to narrate what we are already seeing. As Linda Ellerbee once pointed out, "If you can turn on the television, listen from another room and know everything that's happening, that's not television, it's radio."

10. When writing narrative passages, normally reserved for descriptions of place and action, avoid inserting explanations or clarifications of things that are not conveyed elsewhere in action or dialogue, with the assumption that you've therefore done your job. For example: "Alex pockets the cup because he is a collector of fine china." If that information is not given elsewhere, what's the point? If you have to explain it to the director because it's unclear elsewhere, how do you expect the viewer at home to figure it out?

11. Avoid padding, dialogue and scenes tossed in to fill up pages because your page count is short. If nothing is happening in the scene, cut it.

12. Make sure your script is properly and professionally typed. That means no hand-drawn lines indicating where bits of dialogue or scenes were supposed to go but were typed out of sequence. And no typos.

13. When setting a scene or describing an action, keep your descriptions short and to the point, letting the action continue smoothly. Nothing is served by getting bogged down in lengthy descriptions of the sun at twilight peeking through the elms. Similarly, as with dialogue, avoid long blocks of description; if it's a complex scene without dialogue to break up the narrative description, then find places in the narrative to double-space and break up the big block of text, making it easier to read.