

Romantic Comedy Writing Secrets

by William 'Bill' Mernit

If creating a successful romantic comedy really was as easy as plugging a couple of stars into a standard boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-gets-girl structure, the market would be glutted with genuinely funny romantic comedies. But can you remember the last truly great 'rom-com' you've seen? Only one or two in the past few years topped the box office. And as a story analyst who sees and rejects romantic comedy specs on a weekly basis, I can tell you that the ones that really work are all too rare. So in the interest of helping fellow writers (and good date movie-starved audience members everywhere), here's half a dozen key pieces of inside knowledge I'd like to share. Follow these leads, and studios won't be so quick to 'pass' on your project.

~~ WRITE THE CHEMISTRY

We go into a romantic comedy already knowing that our leads are going to meet, lose and, ultimately, get each other. So creating two unique characters an audience will fall in love with and NEED to see united is the most important key to such a movie's success. All great characters have purpose and credibility, are empathic and complex. But romantic comedy leads have additional requirements. They're emotionally incomplete people who get completed by their mate-to-be. One (if not both) of your protagonists should have an inner conflict that the story's romantic relationship confronts and ultimately resolves. The 'chemical equation' in 'Moonstruck' makes sense: Loretta, a woman lacking passion in her life, combusts with Ronnie, an operatic Mr. Passion. Creating such 3D leads with interlocking needs is how chemistry happens in a romantic comedy, and it's got to be on the page first, if you want to attract stars who can get a movie made. What do you think Meg Ryan's looking for in a role, a Meg Ryan type? No, she's looking for a wonderfully written, never-seen-before part played opposite the kind of suitably significant leading man that'll catch a Hugh Grant's eye. So whether your couple be made up of opposites or two sides of one coin, write compelling characters -- who believably belong together.

~~ EXPAND YOUR GENRE

What most people think of when they hear 'romantic comedy' is a man and a woman trading witty barbs across a restaurant table. But this kind of typical talking-heads fare is far from all our genre can be. In fact, some of the most successful romantic comedies are hybrids -- movies that have expanded their audience by cross-breeding with other genres. Romantic comedies can be action-adventures ('Romancing the Stone'), gender-benders ('Tootsie'), sports comedies ('Tin Cup'), ghost stories ('Truly, Madly, Deeply'), political ('The American President'), satirical ('L.A. Story'), period pieces ('Shakespeare In Love'), crime stories ('The Mexican'), teen movies ('Clueless') and more. This kind of cross-genre inter-breeding has kept our genre healthy for decades, and it's something to think about as you shape your romantic comedy with an eye towards the marketplace. You may already be edging into another genre's territory in your story. If so, maximize that element and plunder all it has to offer. Studios are more likely to be intrigued by a romantic comedy that also promises the kind of big screen action that a crime, adventure, sports, etc. movie provides.

~~ AN ACTION'S WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

And while we're on the subject of holding the big screen, consider making your romantic comedy a MOVIE, as opposed to a stillie. Great movies move -- and romantic comedy duds talk themselves to death. I know that many of us lovers of the form are drawn to it precisely because it's often about wonderfully pithy, sharp, delicious repartee. But too much talk can be the difference between a pass (because what you've written is more like a play or a TV show) and a green light-because your romantic comedy can really pull people into a multiplex.

How active is your script? How visually exciting? While you may not have the mudslides, wild chases and fireworks 'Romancing the Stone' delivered, you may have a set, a setting, world or a physical comedy opportunity that will open up and enliven your movie. Even the verbal-witty 'Four Weddings and a Funeral' featured a Scottish reel in colorful kilts. 'Annie Hall' is packed with sight gags, from the cocaine sneeze to the errant lobsters. Make sure your script makes use of all the cinematic storytelling techniques a good movie-movie uses.

~~ TWEAK THE FORMULA

Yes, there is a predictable paradigm for plotting that most successful romantic comedies employ (you can see it in hundreds of movies, and analyzed in my book). But that's all the more reason for you to be exceptionally clever, imaginative and ingenious about your romantic comedy's story concept and execution. Four movies from the past decade that were truly memorable made their mark by putting a spin on the standard construct. There was 'boy doesn't meet girl until the last five minutes of the movie' ('Sleepless in Seattle'), 'boy meets girl after they're both dead' ('Defending Your Life'), 'boy only meets girl in and around weddings (and a funeral)' ('Four Weddings') and 'boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy loses girl, boy loses girl, ad infinitum, until he finally gets it right' ('Groundhog Day'). Try to come up with a concept that will enable your rom-com to stand out from the crowd. Failing that, a hook in the execution can make the difference. 'Bridget Jones's Diary' has the diary to hang its story on; 'High Fidelity' uses breaking-the-fourth-wall conversations with the audience. Take a bold leap and find your tweak. It may make all the difference.

~~ ROMANTIC MEANS SEXY AND COMEDY MEANS FUNNY

Everybody remembers the 'fake orgasm in the deli' scene from 'When Harry Met Sally.' But can you remember any similar scene from a romantic comedy in the dozen years since that was just as raunchy and hilarious? Not many come to mind, which may be why some recent rom-coms that HAVE pushed the erotic envelope have really scored with their audiences. The zipper scene from 'There's Something About Mary,' the dress straps 'Jerry Maguire' breaks, 'American Pie's pie -- successes like these show that the humor to be found in sexual situations is well worth pursuing. So mine that humor. Activate intimacy -- which is what truly erotic and funny encounters are about: people being vulnerably, painfully exposed, whether it's literally, metaphorically or both. At the same time, don't forget that any comedy should provide at least a couple of truly funny set-pieces. Has your romantic conflict gotten so serious that the script is light on laughs? Find the humor in it and maximize. Steep your characters in painful, truth-baring situations, and look for gags to build bigger gags on. Smiles and chuckles don't sell a script. 'Ha- ha!' laughs-out-loud do.

~~ MAKE IT BE ABOUT SOMETHING

He's a this, and she's a that, and high jinks ensue isn't enough. At the core of any great romantic comedy is some kind of thematic idea grounded in the writer's personal point of view. Why are you writing this particular story about this specific couple? What about their story reflects some insight you have about the relations between men and women or the human condition? What question are you asking that your screenplay's story development answers? Highfalutin' as it may sound, the romantic comedies that endure -- and strike a real chord with their audiences -- are the ones that explore universal issues. 'When Harry...' is about whether men and women can overcome gender differences. 'Tootsie' is about how no man (especially when he becomes a woman) is an island. 'Annie Hall,' with Alvy 'I don't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member' Singer and 'I have no idea what club I could ever belong to' Annie is about self-esteem issues. Your romantic comedy should be posing a question, or poking at a truth, that you, the writer, are passionately invested in exploring. That's the real key to involving an audience, and no amount of cute one-liners can take its place. So have your movie MEAN something. It will help it to get made -- and to matter.

Billy Mernit teaches 'Writing the Romantic Comedy' and 'Writing the Character-Driven Screenplay' at the UCLA Extension Writers' Program, where he was just awarded 2001's Outstanding Screenwriting Instructor of the Year. Author of the book, 'Writing the Romantic Comedy,' published by Harper/Collins, Mernit serves as both a private script consultant and a story analyst at Universal Studios. During his many years in the entertainment industry, he has written for NBC's 'Santa Barbara' and composed songs recorded by Carly Simon and Judy Collins. He and his wife, Italian artist Claudia Nizza, are the co-authors of 'That's How Much I Love You' (Tallfellow Press).