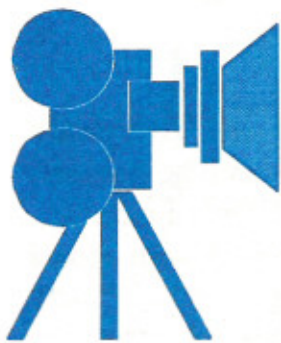


Romance in Action: The Screenplay

By Julia Ann Charpentier



Even the best authors must acknowledge the competition of film and television. Watching a movie is quick and inexpensive. This activity requires little effort and a minimal expenditure of time. Reading a novel demands concentration and commitment. Book collections are an investment of hours

and money some have shoved aside in favor of the visual story.

Fighting the motion picture industry will not result in success. Just as all books will eventually be published in electronic format, movies will take an even greater portion of the public's entertainment budget.

Learning to write the screenplay is a skill essential to all creative writers on the brink of the millenium. Romance authors are the new vogue in Hollywood, but still, film executives refuse to classify a piece as pure romance without asking for the kiss of death. Experts perceive romantic stories as internal and lacking in action. This isn't the case if a savvy writer knows how to avoid a stagnant delivery. Love stories are full of excitement and adventure, external conflict, and demonstrative scenes of intimacy.

In the April, 1998, issue of the *Romance Writers' Report*, literary agent Richard Curtis comments, "Traditionally, the first thing agents ask themselves when they take an exciting new novel is, which publisher to submit it to first. Today, however, more and more agents ask, which producer to submit it to first."

He says that submissions of category and midlist novels to movie companies will quickly wear out the welcome mat. Producers look for a feeling of grandeur. Low-percentage areas include historical, fantasy, western, and high-tech science fiction. Historicals are expensive, prohibiting many best-selling romances.

"If you can summarize your novel in one pithy phrase," Curtis continues, "you may have a hot property."

In the March, 1998, issue of the RWR, Irene Goodman, a veteran agent who specializes in women's fiction, describes the difficulty in getting her first romance movie sale. *This Matter of Marriage* by Debbie Macomber was a milestone. Goodman sold over a thousand romance novels before getting this sale.

Goodman remarks, "The long dry spell that Hollywood has cast over the genre appears to be finding signs of life. There have been a number of sales made recently that are encouraging for all of us. Most often they go to television instead of theatrical films."

In speaking with film agent Joel Gotler she determined that Hollywood is skeptical. Some executives make no distinction between subgenres, grouping all romances into one category. Contemporaries sell to the networks, Lifetime, The Movie Channel, and A&E. What catches a producer's eye?



Julie Charpentier

"You will give special attention to a romance novel if something about it stands out or if it has an irresistible character in it that a name performer will want to play."

Gotler advises writers to develop a strong male presence. Covers tend to be a turn-off, so he recommends sending the manuscript as opposed to the bound book. He recognizes the moral base in romance and sees more room for this in film.

In another March, 1998, article, Lynn Miller, author and president of Parke Media, says the power of the romance novel is internal. Television and film are external mediums that show emotion through action. "Only rarely... does a novel contain the type of

premise, plot and characters that can straddle both worlds."

Though some novels may be character-driven and not visual in appeal, this is hardly the case in active romance lines and mainstream contemporaries. Introspection must be eliminated, but the ingenious writer can find other ways of demonstrating her protagonist's emotions on the screen.

Producer and director Kac Young states that the romance novel is not structured the same as a screen play. A three-act format is necessary to adapt a book to the screen. Another director, Nancy Malone, believes romance involves the mind and the imagina-

tion and deals with feelings, not action.

Malone comments, "Another one of the reasons romance novels aren't made into films more readily is that many of the are "period pieces," in that they contain a certain innocence about love and relationships. This innocence in romance doesn't necessarily translate to today's audience."

Women in jeopardy stories are popular. A compelling hook such as danger or a paranormal element would grab Malone's attention.

Laura Hayden, author and concept-developer for Romance

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Classics cable channel, says romantic suspense and comedy have an edge. "If you want to write a book which might be more marketable to a visual medium, you need to have a plot in which some of the internal conflict can be externalized, which gives more weight to the apparent external conflict."

Hollywood's concept of romance is different from the publishing industry's standards. Television is an excellent indicator of what Hollywood buys. Lifetime looks for outstanding stories, high-concept titles, and stories for a mature audience. The target group is urban women between 25 and 49 years old.

Bob Seigel, writer and head of syndication for DIC Entertainment, fears a loss of money on romance adaptations. He says smaller, more character-driven screen or teleplays will play better on television than they will in films.

Agent Karen Solem remarks, "Too many writers are writing to fill perceived holes rather than writing from their heart.... Movie makers and publishers are looking for the same thing... if an author were to write a vivid, compelling, intriguing story full of emotions, everyone would be happy."

An unnamed Los Angeles agent thinks many romance novels deal with ordinary lives without outstanding character growth. "Unfortunately, in film and television a story is not generally about ordinary women. It is all about doing something."

In *Writing Screenplays that Sell* (1988), Michael Hauge says romance is often used as a second level of sell. It can spice up a story that would otherwise be trite. "By

adding this romantic element to the original concept, the story becomes much more provocative and possesses much greater potential, both commercially and artistically."

Hauge describes the romance character as an evolved person who overcomes his inner conflict to win love. He achieves his outer and inner motivations.

In Syd Field's *Screenwriter's Guide to Hollywood* (1989), film executive Jane Kagon, comments, "The one thing I look for is an original voice. A phrase, a new twist on the situation, the way they improvise a solution to a story problem, that's what I respond to."

Wells Root, author of *Writing the Script* (1979), calls romance the "supreme soap opera." His simplistic evaluation doesn't detract from his realistic advice on writing the love scene, a process that's deceptively difficult. Avoiding the words "I love you" will actually improve the quality of the script. Root believes this phrase is the oldest chestnut on the writer's shelf, and it's impossible for an actor to give the words a fresh reading.

Root explains, "A love scene is the primeval cliché. Adam whispered the same adoring words to Eve that all the Antonys ever since have said to all the Cleopatras. Several minutes of this honeydew can get faintly nauseating."

Conflict and comedy are ways to freshen a love scene. In the end the protagonists find happiness or tragedy. *Gone with the Wind* is a good example of a movie that used conflict effectively.

In the January/February 1994 issue of the *Romance Writ-*

ers' Report, screenwriter Jane Ferguson details the process of writing a romantic screenplay using romance as the main plot rather than the subplot. Knowing the end is helpful in writing, allowing the writer to work backward.

Syd Field's paradigm can be found in Ferguson's procedure. In Act One the heroine is featured with her need or goal stated. She meets her hero and conflict is established by page 15. The first plot point or crisis is between pages 25-27. This is where the lovers often part.

Act Two increases the obstacles. The second plot point is between pages 85-90. The lovers get together again.

Act Three features the climax, the critical point, five pages before the end. Ferguson emphasizes the importance of resolving the conflict, which allows the heroine to attain her goal, and explains, "The heroine should overcome the crisis by her own ingenuity or strength and win her soul mate."

Finished scripts are more appealing than a proposal. Producers are receptive to projects they can see in their entirety and discourage pitches out of thin air unless the screenwriter is a proven talent.

