

## ACTIVE READING FOR SCRIPTING

### What to Look for When Adapting Text into Screenplay/Teleplay Format by Prof. M. George Stevenson

When scripting from a text, it's important to remember the two functions of a script:

- 1) to **tell the story**
- 2) to **be a blueprint** for production

A good script will satisfy both functions and do so without making one or the other of them too prominent.

Let's look at a passage from a "treatment" of *Romeo and Juliet* by E. Nesbit:

Presently amid the dancers Romeo saw a lady so beautiful and so lovable that from that moment he never again gave one thought to that Rosaline whom he had thought he loved. And he looked at this other fair lady, as she moved in the dance in her white satin and pearls, and all the world seemed vain and worthless to him compared with her. And he was saying this, or something like it, when Tybalt, Lady Capulet's nephew, hearing his voice, knew him to be Romeo. Tybalt, being very angry, went at once to his uncle...

If called upon to adapt the passage, the first questions that need to be asked are basic:

- 1) Where are we?
- 2) Who needs to be seen onscreen?
- 3) What actions do they take?

#### 1) WHERE ARE WE?

This one's easy: The answer is in the first words of the passage: "Presently amid the dancers..." So we're obviously at some kind of dance hall or a mansion big enough to have a big dance floor. We know it must be big because there are a lot of dancers and we know there are a lot of dancers because the fair lady Romeo spies is surrounded by enough people to be "amid" them.

So our location, which always introduces a scene in Screenplay/Teleplay format, is the following:

INT. CAPULET BALLROOM - NIGHT

It's ALL CAPS because it's blueprint function is to be the "Location Slug," which will eventually be broken out and organized into, among other things, a production schedule.

It's an INT. [interior] because even though it could be a courtyard and thus outside (an EXT. [exterior]), it's easier to plan a big scene like this without having to take weather into account.

It's NIGHT even though it could be a DAY because 1) that's when most dances take place and 2) it's more romantic that way, no? [This is another reason to make it an INT . : It's easier to pretend it's NIGHT while inside than having to block out the sun at a courtyard dance.]

## 2) WHO NEEDS TO BE SEEN ONSCREEN?

This question is a bit harder to answer specifically as it takes many dancers to fill a ballroom, so there are clearly a lot of people there. But the passage only contains four names – Romeo, Rosalind, Lady Capulet, and Tybalt – and two of them, Rosalind and Lady Capulet, aren't *necessarily* present. Two others definitely *are* there but not named: “a lady so beautiful and so lovable” and whomever Romeo is “was saying this, or something like it” to when Tybalt recognizes his voice.

So let's make a list of the people who *HAVE* to be in the script because the actions they take are the basis of the passage; i.e., in order to fully dramatize the passage, they *MUST APPEAR*. Who's on our Must Appear list?

- 1) DANCERS
- 2) ROMEO
- 3) “a lady so beautiful...”
- 4) the “lady so beautiful's” dance partner
- 5) Romeo's conversation partner
- 6) TYBALT

Is there anyone else who *HAS* to be there?

No – we're done.

*CAN* there be other people there?

Of course – but we'll let the dynamics of the action dictate that.

## 3) WHAT ACTIONS DO THEY TAKE?

Now that we have the LOCATION and are armed with our list of Must Appear Characters, we can get down to business: What happens? As always, let's ask ourselves two questions:

- 1) What is everyone doing?
- 2) How much of it do we need to specify?

The last on our Must Appear list – the DANCERS – are the first to appear and the easiest to deal with: They're EXTRAS a/k/a ATMOSPHERE – i.e., human set decoration – and we don't need to concern ourselves with them except to mention their presence in ALL CAPS, so that we'll remember to include them in the One-line Breakdown [an organizational tool we'll work with later in the semester] for the scene:

INT. CAPULET BALLROOM - NIGHT

The dance floor of the grandly appointed room is filled with beautifully dressed DANCERS, who form a variety of patterns while executing an energetic series of steps.

Do we need to specify more than that? No, that's enough of a general picture that we can see the setting. It's also a perfect ESTABLISHING SHOT, i.e., the opening of a sequence that shows us the big picture at the location before moving in to the particular events that occur.

Why start with this? Because that's how such scenes are generally shot: starting with the widest angle and working toward the narrowest. So for blueprint reasons, it's not a bad idea to write it that way. Remember, a screenplay/teleplay is essentially a word-based presentation of the pictures and sound we'll be seeing and hearing. Unless we're going for something disjunctive and/or avant-garde, following the usual order of presentation is no different than beginning a joke with "Knock-knock!" rather than "Who's there?"

Also note that the passage is the Third Person, Present Tense – "is" not "was"; "executing" not "executed." This is because the storytelling aspect of screenwriting means that we need to present our material as an unbroken stream of "now," just as it will be experienced by the eventual viewer.

So what's our next "now"? ROMEO, of course – but what is he doing? :

Romeo saw a lady so beautiful and so lovable that from that moment he never again gave one thought to that Rosaline whom he had thought he loved. And he looked at this other fair lady, as she moved in the dance in her white satin and pearls, and all the world seemed vain and worthless to him compared with her.

Looking and thinking. Is that something we can see? Not really. So let's begin with what we CAN see: the "lady so beautiful..." dancing.

Do we know who she is? Not yet – it's her first appearance in the text, which brings us to another way in which screenplay/teleplay writing differs from pure storytelling: Because we're dealing entirely with visuals, we can't finesse the apparent.

The "lady so beautiful..." is JULIET and HAS to be designated as such because she'll be played by an actor<sup>1</sup> and we can't get around seeing that particular actor when we shoot the scene. If we know the story, we'll suspect who we're seeing is JULIET, both from the context and the opening credits, but if we don't, she'll appear to the audience as ROMEO sees her: The most striking young woman on the dance floor.

So we can also see ROMEO looking at JULIET, but the focus of this part of the passage is what he's thinking, which we can't see.

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<sup>1</sup> I'm not suggesting Elizabethan-era casting of boys as women; in recent years, it's become standard to use "actor" to refer to all actors, male or female.

Or can we? Let's try something:

INT. CAPULET BALLROOM - NIGHT

The dance floor of the grandly appointed room is filled with beautifully dressed DANCERS who form a variety of patterns while executing an energetic series of steps.

ROMEO (20s, handsome, a bit spoiled)<sup>2</sup> appears at the top of the stairs leading into the Ballroom. He wears Harlequin garb, with a black and white painted face. Nervously looking down at the Dancers, he relaxes as he sees no one who might know him,<sup>3</sup> when something catches his eye.

ROMEO'S POV: JULIET AND PARIS ON THE DANCE FLOOR

A vision in white satin and pearls, JULIET (19, conventionally beautiful, sheltered) LAUGHS as her dance partner, PARIS (late 20s, obvious ladykiller) reverses a move and throws the whole group out of step.

ROMEO IS STRUCK DUMB [ALL CAPS here indicate a return to the master shot]

He can hardly believe his eyes: Juliet is the most beautiful girl he has ever seen.

Juliet continues to LAUGH as she, Paris and the other Dancers awkwardly, then gracefully resume their pattern.

BENVOGLIO (20s, rich but tough) arrives next to Romeo; he, too, has a painted face and wears a jester costume. Seeing Romeo's rapt expression, he waves a hand in front of Romeo's face.

BENVOGLIO

Still on Earth? Or has the  
sight of Rosaline transported  
you?

ROMEO

(still rapt)  
Who's Rosaline?

Does that cover all the material so far?

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<sup>2</sup> Technically, this "ID slug/Cast Breakdown line" would have occurred when ROMEO was first introduced.

<sup>3</sup> Remember, as a Montague, he's literally in enemy territory.

It does: Romeo sees Juliet and falls in love at first sight and we SEE his thoughts.

How? Through the cinematic technique called MONTAGE, which is the juxtaposing of images to create associations. We see something catch Romeo's eye, THEN see what it presumably is [Juliet], then see Romeo's reaction:

1 (beautiful girl) + 1 (mesmerized boy) = 3 (boy mesmerized by beautiful girl)

We then underline that reaction with a third party seeing Romeo's reaction and commenting on it. The flow of images tells us the story; the bit of dialogue just makes the meaning unmistakable.

There are other techniques at work helping us create this impression. Because it's considered amateurish to "direct on the page," that is, to tell the eventual director his business by indicating the desired shot size, good scripters use implication and specificity to get their points across.

The easiest way to imply a new shot is to make a new paragraph, the easiest way to imply shot size is by noting exactly what is being seen.

Notice how paragraphing and specificity in the script above helps make the images clear:

- Paragraph 1) The ballroom and the dancers, by implication an ESTABLISHING SHOT
- Paragraph 2) Romeo at the top of the stairs, by implication a MEDIUM SHOT (MS)
- Paragraph 3) Juliet from Romeo's point of view, by implication a MEDIUM WIDE SHOT (MWS) <sup>4</sup> that shows Juliet and Paris and a Juliet CLOSEUP (CU)
- Paragraphs 4-5) Romeo's reaction, by implication a CLOSEUP (CU)
- Paragraph 6) Juliet oblivious to Romeo, by implication a CLOSEUP (CU) and a WIDER SHOT that shows the Dancers resuming
- Paragraph 7) Romeo so smitten he gets teased, by implication a TWO-SHOT (2S) of Romeo and Benvoglio

Those implications will be helpful when it's time to create a storyboard from the screenplay. For now, they're primarily ways that the script can be almost entirely visual without lapsing into technical jargon; that is, a way for a non-producer/director/crew member to be able read for story and not get put off by the blueprint.

But wait, you ask: Who's Benvoglio? He wasn't in the passage.

Nor was Paris. They are, respectively, Must Appear Characters #4) the "lady so beautiful's" dance partner, and #5) Romeo's conversation partner.

Why shoehorn them into this scene? Logic and convenience.

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<sup>4</sup> The ALL CAPS LOCATION-style CHARACTER'S POV slug is an accepted convention for when we're to see something from a character's perspective.

Though this information isn't part of the paragraph in question, Paris is Juliet's main suitor, so why NOT have him be her dance partner?

Again, while not in this paragraph, in the overall story, Benvoglio is the one who told Romeo about the ball and, as importantly, ISN'T Mercutio, who will meet Romeo *after* the ball but doesn't know Romeo's ditched the idea of Rosaline.

By including them here, we have not only made logical choices for our heretofore anonymous characters, we've also made two minor characters that much more recognizable AND saved on adding two more personnel to the payroll.

So what do we have left?

This: And [Romeo] was saying this, or something like it, when Tybalt, Lady Capulet's nephew, hearing his voice, knew him to be Romeo.

Let's see what we can do with it:

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ROMEO IS STRUCK

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BENVOGLIO

Still on Earth? Or has the  
sight of Rosaline transported  
you?

ROMEO

(still rapt)  
Who's Rosaline?

BENVOGLIO

Forget Rosaline - who's dancing with  
that fop Paris?

ROMEO

I don't know but I'm going to  
find out.

A few steps below, TYBALT (20s, ex-fat-kid turned jockish  
bullyboy), cocks an ear - I know that voice.

ROMEO (CONTINUED)

I've never seen such a  
goddess.

(grabs Benvoglio)

You know everyone! Who is she?  
Who IS she?

Tybalt is now staring at Romeo and Benvoglio with suspicion:  
Something about those guys is wrong.

BENVOGLIO

If she's with Paris, she's as  
rich as she is beautiful.  
Maybe a cousin on Lady  
Capulet's side?

ROMEO

She's a jewel! A pearl!

Tybalt puts it together - not just crashers, Montagues! -  
and sizes them up. He'll need backup.

BENVOGLIO

Oh my God! She's the daughter!

ROMEO

Whose daughter? Tell me!

Tybalt, a murderous look on his face, roughly pushes past

them.

TYBALT

Your host's!  
(calling)  
MY LORD UNCLE!!!

Romeo tries to follow Tybalt to get more information but Benvoglio stops him, bodily.

ROMEO

What's her name? I love her!

BENVOGLIO

Idiot! We need to go. Now!

Does that feel conclusive?

It does – everybody except Juliet and Paris, who aren't paying attention, is not only ready to move on, they're on their way or about to be.

But it is also the essential value we, as scripters, have added. The passage ends with:

*Tybalt, Lady Capulet's nephew, hearing his voice, knew him to be Romeo.*

So, technically, we've covered all the bases when he see Tybalt realizes that Romeo and Benvoglio – who was his opponent in the opening sword fight – are Montagues.

But by going beyond this and engineering valid reasons for all of these characters to want to exit the location – Tybalt to get backup; Benvoglio and Romeo to get away from Tybalt, despite the draw of the now-identified Juliet – we have provided the sense of an ending, which will serve both us and the overall script well as we move from scene to scene.

How did we accomplish this?

First, via active reading, which is to say taking in what's written, and then thinking through:

- 1) what has brought the characters to this location [beginning],
- 2) what they are dealing with by being there [middle] and
- 3) what, if any, actions they will take and what they will mean [end].

Second, we've found character-based rationales for the actions specified in the treatment, and used them to imply or state what will happen next:

I don't know but I'm going to find out;  
and  
Whose daughter? Tell me!



Third, we've written a "button" or exit line<sup>5</sup>:

We need to go. Now! –

that either implies or states that the action the audience should care about going on in this location is over.

A three-step analysis to find a three-step solution, a process we will repeat for each sequence or segment in the treatment until we have adapted it entirely. [At that point, another set of analytical tools will be put into action.] And it's not an option. Without clear beginnings, middles, and ends, we won't have added the value of clarity, which is the primary reason we're scripting instead of blueprinting.

And if we don't have that clarity, it's hard to pinpoint what is or isn't having its desired effect. Believe me, it's a lot easier to hear a client say that you've got to change "I'm the king of the ship!" to "I'm the king of the world!" than to hear that the script isn't working because, well,...hmm, um, *it just doesn't work, okay?* – which is what not having clear beginnings, middles and ends tends to get you.

Finally, a last word about last lines, the composition of which can be one of the great joys of scripting. Think of "Fasten your seatbelts, it's going to be a bumpy night," from *All About Eve*, "I love the smell of napalm in the morning. It smells like...victory," from *Apocalypse Now*, and "I'll have what she's having," from *When Harry Met Sally*: They're all quick, evocative, and both conclusive *and* promising of more to come.

So while you can't always go out of a given scene as powerfully as when Don Corleone says, "I'm gonna make him an offer he can't refuse" in *The Godfather*, you can always make it clear that it's time to go. Do that consistently and no client in the world can complain about your craft.

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<sup>5</sup> Something Shakespeare frequently indicated with a rhyming couplet, such as Romeo's "*I'll go along, no such sight to be shown./But to rejoice in splendor of mine own,*" which ends the scene in which he finds out about the Capulet feast.

FYI – Here's the scene in Shakespeare's text, a tribute to the latitude that playwrights give stage directors:

*SCENE V. A hall in Capulet's house.*

[...]

*Enter CAPULET, with JULIET and others of his house, meeting the Guests and Maskers*

CAPULET

Welcome, gentlemen! ladies that have their toes  
Unplagued with corns will have a bout with you.  
Ah ha, my mistresses! which of you all  
Will now deny to dance? she that makes dainty,  
She, I'll swear, hath corns; am I come near ye  
now?

Welcome, gentlemen! I have seen the day  
That I have worn a visor and could tell  
A whispering tale in a fair lady's ear,  
Such as would please: 'tis gone, 'tis gone, 'tis  
gone:

You are welcome, gentlemen! come, musicians,  
play.

A hall, a hall! give room! and foot it, girls.

*Music plays, and they dance*

More light, you knaves; and turn the tables up,  
And quench the fire, the room is grown too hot.  
Ah, sirrah, this unlook'd-for sport comes well.  
Nay, sit, nay, sit, good cousin Capulet;  
For you and I are past our dancing days:  
How long is't now since last yourself and I  
Were in a mask?

SECOND CAPULET

By'r lady, thirty years.

CAPULET

What, man! 'tis not so much, 'tis not so much:  
'Tis since the nuptials of Lucentio,  
Come pentecost as quickly as it will,  
Some five and twenty years; and then we mask'd.

SECOND CAPULET

'Tis more, 'tis more, his son is elder, sir;  
His son is thirty.

CAPULET

Will you tell me that?  
His son was but a ward two years ago.

ROMEO

[To a Servingman] What lady is that, which doth  
enrich the hand  
Of yonder knight?

SERVANT

I know not, sir.

ROMEO

O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!  
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night  
Like a rich jewel in an Ethiope's ear;  
Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!  
So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows,  
As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows.  
The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand,  
And, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand.  
Did my heart love till now? forswear it, sight!  
For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.

TYBALT

This, by his voice, should be a Montague.  
Fetch me my rapier, boy. What dares the slave  
Come hither, cover'd with an antic face,  
To fleer and scorn at our solemnity?  
Now, by the stock and honour of my kin,  
To strike him dead, I hold it not a sin.

[Tybalt goes on to confront his uncle, Capulet,  
with the trespassing Montague]