

Burning Annie
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3rd revision
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CONFIDENTIAL TO WRITER

Structural and Developmental Notes on 'Burning Annie'

These aren't going to be as well-organized as possible, as I'm writing without the script in front of me, from memory.

The major over-all problem is that not enough happens. I mean that in the sense of plot pivots, as described in our last discussion: I don't experience enough emotional twists and turns. The director's first comment was, "It's basically plotless" (and we're meeting tomorrow to go over what he means by that). I believe he's responding to the same thing.

For the story you're telling, the 'twists and turns' are about the audience's perception of the relationship. You must make it veer more. Let me be more specific. Currently, the story feels like this: Max wants a girlfriend. Max meets Julie. Max likes Julie. Julie is mildly curious about Max. Julie is very curious about Max. Julie likes Max. Julie is annoyed by Max. Julie is bored with Max. Julie is done with Max.

Now, the first serious problem is that Max's feelings don't change, beyond growing from mild interest to deep interest (in about 3 scenes, to boot). And because his one feeling is positive, Max looks desperate. I truly believe he would date anyone who liked him. And believing that makes me like him less. It also sucks a huge amount of drama out of the movie.

Fortunately, I think the way you've written Max leaves a lot of room for exploration in this area. Max must have standards! And I think he does, but I think they don't show up until *AFTER* he's already entered the relationship. This is the hook upon which your second Act should hang. It's also a perfect example of Alvy Singer's thing about not wanting to be in a club/relationship that has him as a member. Hold this thought.

The other huge problem with the relationship arc is that it leaves us with very few surprises. For instance, we never get to see Max and Julie clicking. Consequently, we never really believe in it. And we're not thrown for a loop when Julie gets cold. We need to really want them to be together for this film to work, and to do that, we need to see it working. We need to see chemistry, a complementarity of spirits and most important, we need to see them having FUN together (fun for them and fun for us). Then, as a result, we will be concerned when the chemistry changes.

And a part of the lack of surprises is Max' passivity. Because he stays the same (hopeful yet vaguely worried), Julie has to do all the changing. This makes her look very callous, and emotionally arbitrary (in a way that's the writer's fault, not the character's. I make this distinction because Annie Hall herself was (to me) emotionally arbitrary, too, but I perceived it as the arbitrariness of a real person, not the arbitrariness of a plot convenience). Julie, as a result of being so arbitrary, is flat. Because Max's feelings are the same, she MUST have hers change, or the story

wouldn't go forward— Max's passiveness puts the whole burden of drama on her, reducing her to mere plot engine ("when something needs to happen, have Julie behavior different to Max"). Max must share the burden-- he's our main character, after all.

I don't know how these problems look, all listed out like this, so I'm going to just jump to the conclusion. I think there's a simple and elegant way to solve all of these problems, a solution that is already hinted at by the present material, and is totally in line with the style, theme, and tone of the piece so far.

This is what I propose.

Max meets Julie. Max likes Julie. Julie is curious about Max. Julie is very curious about Max. Max really likes Julie. They spend lots of time together, sleep together, get into a pattern. Their friends start to notice. Max begins getting critical. Julie begins getting defensive, slightly, but sees it as growing pains. Not Max, tho-- he begins to have doubts. Julie assuages them: "Max, this is the road to love." Max is shaken, starts thinking long-term, epicly, not like an adolescent. He starts re-appraising Julie as long-term/wife material. Inspired by this possibility, he falls head over heels for her. But he hasn't noticed she's become slightly aloof, doing some re-appraising herself. Julie watches AH with Max. Julie gives him the cold shoulder. Max is thrown. Max is upset.

(The rest is basically what you have for the ending) Julie makes herself scarce. Max follows. Julie's decision is final. Max is disillusioned, becomes a mime. [etc]

Okay, maybe you don't like all the specifics I included. Here are the key things that we need to see (and that we see above in my little plot):

- M and J totally into each other
- M with reservations about her
- J completely taken with M

and the twist that brings it around to closure by the end:

- M finally putting his doubts aside, only to discover he's inadvertently talked J into them.

Okay, I'm done with the arc stuff. The bottom line is that currently, not enough problems are introduced and overcome before the breakup, and that we don't really believe the relationship can work because we never see it do.

NOW: Structure: It's not just to cover your ass. (pants joke, get it?)

This part is about scenes, and what they tell us. To me, the fundamental nature of good storytelling is information control.

INFORMATION

CONTROL

Or— Pop quiz, hot shot: what did we learn from that scene?

In *BA*, there are several scenes that tell us things we already know, or tell us things too late. With a little rearranging, however, it can all be fixed.

The first example that comes to mind is the phone-sex/radio show scene. To me, this is the highlight of all your writing. If I had to show one scene to people to sell them on *BA*, this would be it.

What do we learn from it?

We learn Max can be very charming. We learn Max actually does something creative and admirable: he's a DJ. We learn Max does very cool things on the air. We learn Julie is really into the stuff Max does on his show. We learn J heard one of his shows before they met.

Now, this makes it a perfect intro scene. You've got your main guy at his most charming, charming the pants off a woman who's already impressed with him, in a casual setting, all the while learning interesting but trivial things about each other. This is a perfect way to kick start the relationship.

But where does it occur? Why, it's the 3rd or 4th (maybe more, but I definitely remember it's not scene 1 or 2). By the time it swings around, we've spent so much time with Max, we know pretty much everything we learn about him already. The only real news is the DJ thing, and the time has long past to introduce this detail. And we also know all the things we learn about J, except for the now-irrelevant detail about her hearing his show.

So since it's a great intro scene, make it an intro scene! It certainly doesn't belong 3rd or 4th. When J jumps into M's conversation, have her recognize his name from the radio show-- she was in a friend's room, and it was on during his show. Who's the friend? She won't tell, she says coyly, but she loved the show. Have Zack take a moment to look at her anew-- Jesus, here's a beautiful girl trying to get him to like her for once, because she's impressed with him. Suddenly, M is trying to impress J right back (seizing the day, so to speak), and that's when you drop the killer "sore ass" moment. And as Max turns crimson, his friends come by and save him. (Hell, that scene should end with that line; anyway.)

Your current intro scene works at a 7-out-of-10 level, which isn't high enough for a scene of such importance. Think of *Annie Hall*— their intro scene is after tennis, and by the time the car is parked, you know they've got a future, somehow. Your scene should have the same resonance.

There are several other bits of M-J dialogue that I noticed were placed oddly in the overall sequence. I won't bore you with listing them, even if I could remember all of them. You should go through each scene with M and J and ask yourself, what does this piece of dialogue evoke? What does it reveal to us about them? And is that info new (a development) or is there somewhere else where it would have more impact, be more meaningful?

Speaking of dialogue and what we learn from it, being aware of dialogue as information makes it much easier to know when to end scenes-- end 'em with a laugh, a good line, or the info that you want them to remember most (esp. someone's feelings). I think *BA* requires/demands longer scenes than is normal, so I'm not saying cut everything to conform to standards. However, I am saying that some of your scenes are too long. In fact, several of your scenes move from the minute Max enters a room to the minute he leaves it, and that's almost always a mistake (often caused by wanting to account for every minute of the scene, or being in love with all your lines, or trying to

make it 'realistic,' or all three). It's easy to get so into your little world, you want to experience every moment; my Fight Club revelation, about fractured time and plot pivots, was the key to getting over this misconception or whatever it is.

Two last comments:

Currently, the dialogue isn't funny enough. You've got a very long shadow to stand in thanx to AH, so you'd better make sure every line is a zinger that should be, especially the final one in each scene (I marked down copious not-funny-enough lines in the script I mailed you, sometimes with suggestions). I can't stress how important the humor content is to this movie.

Remember, screenplays EVOKE. The information we get from the dialogue is not on the page, but between the cracks. Evoke feeling-- right now we're not as emotionally involved as we should be. Putting M and J through their paces will go a long way, but don't neglect moments of feeling, either. Feeling comes from body language, word choice, pauses, visuals, weather, bits of 'business,' the expectations (of ours) that aren't met (or aren't met the way we expected), and (my favorite) subtext. You've shown no problems with on-the-nose dialogue, so don't think that. My point with this is to remind you that feelings are your stock in trade, and you mustn't be stingy with evoking them. The feelings of Max and J are the key elements that you need to get across with each passing scene, so be sure to use all the tools at your disposal, and keep track of what you're telling us.

That's all I can remember for now. It was a really solid rewrite. More later.

PS. (Almost forgot!) Make "Anhedonia" the name of the band Julie likes in the Pub.