

JumpCut

By George T. Marshall

June 2007. Attention all New England filmmakers: Winchester Massachusetts native, Pilar Alessandra has a mission in life: make you a successful screenwriter.

The University of Massachusetts Amherst graduate relocated to Los Angeles after graduation. Pilar was a self-described "movie geek" selling sandwiches out of a cart when she was hired as a



script-reader by Amblin Entertainment at the age of twenty-five. With the formation of DreamWorks, she became Senior Story Analyst and a reader liaison between the studio and Robert Zemeckis' company, ImageMovers. Work at Interscope Communications then led her to become Senior Story Analyst for Scott Kroopf's production company, Radar Pictures. She has also read for The Robert Evans Company, Cineville Entertainment, and Saturday Night Live Studios.

Pilar was later bitten by the "teaching bug" when she began teaching screenwriting and story analysis at UCLA Extension and at Writers Boot Camp. In 2001 she started her own company, "On the Page," (www.onthepage.tv) where she's helped hundreds of writers create, refine and sell their screenplays.

Her company provides ongoing classes, workshops and private consultations for screenwriters at all levels. Classes take a "dig into pages" approach, inspiring students to write or refine their screenplays in a matter of weeks.

Pilar has trained story analysts at Nickelodeon, MTV, and Final Draft and has taught writing and pitching at numerous film festivals including the Screenwriting Expo where she's regularly featured as a "star speaker."

Her "ON THE PAGE" Script Consultation and Screenwriting Program provides ongoing classes, workshops and private consultations for screenwriters at all levels. Classes take a "dig into pages" approach, inspiring students to write or rewrite their stories in a matter of weeks. Students and clients have sold to Disney, DreamWorks, Paramount, and MGM, and have won prestigious competitions such as the Open Door Competition, Slamdance Competition and Nicholl Fellowship.

WHAT SETS HER APART...

Pilar begins each ninety-minute, verbal consultation with notes to the writer focusing on the main strengths and weaknesses of the script. Where's the hook and how can it be better exploited? Which characters come alive? Where does the story grab the reader and where does it drop off? What's preventing a script sale? She then moves on to specific page notes that help the writer see exactly where an adjustment or improvement may be made. Page-by-page "script doctoring" then takes place, with edits made to scene formatting and dialogue. The writer leaves the session with a sound rewrite plan for the screenplay or teleplay and much of the work already done.

With this type of approach, it's no wonder that filmmakers who have taken her classes speak about her in glowing terms. Pilar is perceived as having the rare talent of bringing out the best in a writer. Unlike other script doctors, who pontificate on how they would tell your story; Pilar helps the writer find what they are trying to say. Through insight and gentle prodding, she has been described as working like a master diamond cutter who, with a couple of precise taps, creates a brilliant gem from a raw diamond.

Now that's high praise.

Using tools from a leading screenplay writing software: Final Draft, Pilar refines each script by placing story notes directly onto pages, editing lines of dialogue and cleaning up formatting. In addition to the doctored script, clients receive a page of analysis by Pilar, a printable version of the page notes, and a half-hour follow-up phone call.

The more I learned about Pilar Alessandra, the more I was impressed.

There has long been a screenplay component to the Rhode Island International Film Festival. Every year it generates between 200 to 300 entries. While our top prize winners are introduced to respective industry gatekeepers who have nurtured the scripts leading some to be optioned, it's a tough business at the end of the day for a screenplay to actually get produced. Why? The competition is so keen. There are literally thousands of scripts looking for a production home at any point in time.

We realized that early on and as a response created our ScriptBiz screenwriter's workshop.

Every August, about 150 or so writers descend on historic Providence, Rhode Island just before our Festival kicks off. The program is designed to guide not only the creative process of writing a successful screenplay, but also of the delicate art of promotion to filmmakers through effective networking and making a compelling and incisive pitch. It's a full day of intensive training and shared knowledge. It's really a lot of work.

A CONVERSATION WITH PILAR ALLESANDRA

I recently spoke with Pilar about her classes and this phase of her career. I wanted to know more and here's what I learned:

GTM: What originally sparked your interest in film and screenplays?

Pilar Alessandra: Bad parenting! As a kid, my dad would take me to movies my mom didn't want to go to. While other seven-year-olds were seeing Disney flicks, I was seeing Mel Brooks, Woody Allen and Stanley Kubrick movies. I was way too young. But, it was a great film education.

GTM: Can you tell us about your journey from Winchester to the University of Massachusetts Amherst to Dreamworks where you were a Senior Story Analyst?

Pilar Alessandra: At U-Mass I did a number of plays within the five college system and, after graduating, worked for a few years as an actor in Boston. To save money for Los Angeles, I did educational children's theater with City Stage, worked dinner theater at the Mystery Café and on weekends performed Shakespeare with the Publick Theater. Then I moved to LA and found out I was fairly terrible in front of a camera. Fortunately, a friend asked me to read scripts for an indy production company she was working for. This led to a reader job at Amblin entertainment (Stephen Spielberg's production company). I learned so much about story and script there. When DreamWorks was created, I became a Senior Story Analyst, analyzing projects on the development slate, as well as submitted screenplays, books and treatments.

GTM: Behind every success story is a mentor or advisor who inspired, coached or motivated. Can you tell us who inspired you and how?

Pilar Alessandra: It sounds corny, but my main inspiration is my students and clients. I see so much undiscovered talent.

GTM: You are described as a "Script Consultant." Can you tell us just what that means and what you actually do in this position?

Pilar Alessandra: Much as I did for the studios, I read and analyze screenplay and television scripts, looking at their strengths and weaknesses and the elements that make them attractive to producers. I then take the script to the next level, working line-by-line with the writer to "doctor" the script into shape. Together, we tweak dialogue, edit pages, and strengthen characters; whatever is needed to help the script meet its intentions.

GTM: Tell us how you came to create "ON THE PAGE" and what a typical workshop is like.

Pilar Alessandra: I started teaching for the UCLA Writers Program in the late 90's and caught the teaching bug big time. After my first daughter was born, I decided to start my own writing program where I could develop writing tools and also work with writers one-on-one. I always tell writers to come to class

prepared to have fun and work hard. It's like a gym for scripts. You work your idea into a script; you work your script into shape.

GTM: You work with Final Draft, a writing software program geared for screenplay construction. Why this specific tool?

Pilar Alessandra: Final Draft is great, but any screenwriting software will work for you. You just need to have something that will capitalize and indent for you so that you can spend your time creating and not pressing the tab key.

GTM: Can you tell us about some of the issues you typically encounter when working with a writer and obstacles that need to be overcome when developing a strong screenplay?

Pilar Alessandra: Many writers confuse complexity with complication. I'd much rather see a simple story well told than read pages and pages of back-story and manufactured obstacles. I often edit overwritten pages, so that the "good stuff" comes through. Too often it's buried in mountains of scene direction or run-on dialogue.

GTM: There is a lot of competition in this business; what needs to happen in order for a screenplay to be successful and actually get produced?

Pilar Alessandra: A lot of talent and a little luck. There's no doubt that connections open the door for you. But, your ideas also have to be original and your scripts polished enough to meet those opportunities head-on. Sometimes, you only get one chance.

GTM: Tough question: given the competition as I previously mentioned, why is there so much dreck in the marketplace? How or why did really lousy or derivative screenplays get produced which seem to flood the marketplace?

Pilar Alessandra: Dreck theory #1: Too many cooks in the kitchen. The key to developing material is to know when to stop. Sometimes an excess of notes strips the script of its original charm.

Dreck theory #2: Scared producers. And who can blame them? Movies cost a lot of money. However, I'm honestly seeing a trend toward fresher, riskier material these days. Studios have been burnt by playing it safe.

GTM: What does the future hold for Pilar Alessandra and what would you like to see happen?

Pilar Alessandra: More teaching, more traveling. I'm teaching in Chicago in August, San Diego in September and in October I'll be lecturing at a film festival in Brazil. I'm also writing a workbook for screenwriters and taping my classes as a DVD.

GTM: What advice would you give students at your hometown local high school about setting their goals and achieving them?

Pilar Alessandra: Try everything. Eventually your combination of skills and experience will lead you to something you love to do. Oh, and try not to be a snot-nose to your teachers like I was.

MEET PILAR ALESSANDRA:

Script consultant and screenwriting instructor Pilar Alessandra will teach, "ON THE PAGE: Creating Great Characters for Film and Television" Tuesday, June 5 from 7:00PM – 10:00PM at The Channel Café, 300 Summer St. in Boston. Writers can sign up by e-mail: inquire@onthe page.tv or go directly to her website: <www.onthe page.tv>

About the Author:

George T. Marshall is the Producing Director of the Rhode Island-based Flickers Arts Collaborative, the creators of the annual Rhode Island International Film Festival for which he also serves as Executive Director. He teaches documentary film and speech communications at Roger Williams University. He is a director, writer, producer of commercials and industrials for numerous business clients in the region. Currently he is writing a chapter on teaching digital documentary filmmaking for a new college text book entitled: "Teaching with Multimedia: Pedagogy in the Blogosphere/Websphere." He can be reached at <flicksart@aol.com>