

Table Manners

How WGA award winner Bill Idelson
mentors writers

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What's a story?" asks the gravel-voiced old curmudgeon. I'm one of a half-dozen aspiring comedy writers gathered in his Pacific Palisades living room. None of us knows how to answer that question. Somebody ventures, "It has a beginning, middle, and end." The old man snorts his disapproval. He dismisses a couple of other feeble attempts at definition with a wave of his hand. Then he hauls his ancient body out of his chair and stands beside a cheap blackboard.

He draws a stick man. "This is the hero," he growls. Then he draws a crude five-pointed star. "This is his goal." He draws a solid blob between the stickman and the star. "This is an obstacle." He draws an arrow from the stick man to the blob and on to the star. "The story is the hero's struggle against the obstacle to reach the goal. Got it?"

It was the first session of Bill Idelson's comedy-writing class. We were all thinking, "Of course we get it. It couldn't be more simple. This is going to be easy." During the next 12 weeks, Idelson gave writing assignments that showed us how utterly we didn't get it. He led us down a rocky road... and held our individual hands all the way. Some of us learned to write TV comedy. We all learned something about ourselves. We discovered that the principles he taught us would also help us write better dramas, screenplays, novels, plays, short stories, monologues, one-person shows, sketches, operas, memoirs, and commercials.

I've taken lots of writing classes. Idelson is the only instructor I've ever had who's actually walked the talk. He's written more than 150 episodes of primetime sitcom. He's been a member of WGA for more than 40 years. He won the Writers Guild Award for best episodic comedy twice: once for an episode of Get Smart and again for an episode of The Andy Griffith Show. He was the producer of The Bob Newhart Show and Love American Style. He was story editor on The Odd Couple and Happy Days. He wrote for The Dick Van Dyke Show, Gomer Pyle, Bewitched, That Girl, The Twilight Zone, M*A*S*H, and many other shows that now air on Nick at Nite. He's the author of a funny but no-bullshit book, Writing for Dough. In conclusion: The man knows what he's talking about.

Never Idle

Idelson began his show business career at age 11 as a child actor on the hit NBC radio comedy Vic and Sade. After 12 years on the show, he left to serve his country in World War II as a U.S. Navy fighter pilot. He was decorated with the Distinguished Flying Cross and four Air Medals for flying night fighter missions over Japan. After the war he studied at the Actors Lab under Morris Carnovsky and Phoebe Brand. His fellow students included Marilyn Monroe, Jean Peters, and Dorothy Dandridge. Years later, this training in Method acting would form the basis of his distinctive approach to comedy

writing. As an actor, he appeared in numerous TV shows including Dragnet, My Three Sons, The Dick Van Dyke Show, and The Jack Benny Show. But what he really wanted to do was write.

As a child, he wrote scripts for the radio shows he was acting in. "I'd take them to the program manager, who was always very nice to me when he turned them down." He continued writing while in college. His professor's comments were "not too positive," he recalls. During his late 30s, he supported his family by selling real estate between acting jobs. On a whim he wrote a screenplay that became a classic horror film, The Crawling Hand. Shortly after that, he sold teleplays to Twilight Zone and The Dick Van Dyke Show. His writing career was launched.

Idelson started teaching in the late 1970s at a WGA-sponsored program called the Open Door, which was designed to mentor Latino and African-American writers. He enjoyed mentoring new writers and taught at the University of Southern California for three years while he was working in primetime network television. When Idelson retired 12 years ago, he continued to teach, but privately out of his home. For these courses students take a 13-week class that introduces his basic theory and techniques. Those who graduate are invited to continue honing their personal scripts in his workshop, a weekly meeting that simulates the collaboration of comedy writers around a "table." He keeps the graduate classes small (only six students), charges minimal fees, advertises by word-of-mouth, and serves coffee and cookies. Graduates have found work on Friends, 3rd Rock From the Sun, Dream On, Ellen, Grounded for Life, and Frasier.

Mentoring is a labor of love for Idelson. "I had such a struggle learning how to write. I want to save other people from having that much of a struggle. When somebody makes a breakthrough, it's almost like making a touchdown. When I get the call, 'Hey, I think I got a job,' it's really great."

His students are thrilled to inherit the legacy of the Golden Age of television comedy. Aron Abrams, supervising producer on Grounded for Life, says, "Just to know that he worked on Get Smart and Odd Couple, two of our favorite shows, made it an honor to learn from the guy." His writing partner, Greg Thompson, also supervising producer on Grounded for Life, adds, "You do feel like you're touching a little bit of history."

Idelson's assignments are based on sketches from Love American Style. "They are perfect vehicles because there are all new characters in each one," explains Idelson. "You have to figure out the hero and the struggle." Rob Lotterstein, who with his partner (Idelson's daughter Ellen) has written for Dream On, Caroline in the City, Ellen, Suddenly Susan, and Will & Grace, says of such lessons: "To a layman's eyes, Bill's telling you to write a bunch of old Love American Style sketches, but in reality each one is a building block and something I've used over and over again in my writing. Each one is a lesson, and they're all pretty much designed to make you fail. It's no coincidence that the people who take the class all get it wrong and make the same mistakes. It was an eye-opener for me. I noticed a marked improvement in my writing immediately because all of a sudden, there was no great mystery about what to do."

Idelson denies that the exercises are designed to make students fail. "I just tell them that so they'll feel better. I would allow for success. All those exercises were shootable stories that we produced. Somebody worked it out."

According to Sherry Belsing, co-executive producer on Friends, "The sketches were very daunting at first. You think you know how to write, and then you're given these specific assignments. Each one is targeted to teach you a little something that you thought you knew, but you didn't. He's an amazing teacher." Her writing partner, Ellen Plummer, also co-executive producer on Friends, adds, "You think you're a bloody genius because you put words on paper. Then it's like, 'Wait a minute, I suck! How did that happen?' I can't say enough about his class. I've referred about 20 people, and I still do today. He just makes it so simple."

Abrams says, "I went in relatively cocky, but writing sketches based on Love American Style was much harder than I thought. You learn a lot because you have to get to the story right away. You couldn't really phfumper around." Thompson continues, "Not dealing with full-fledged spec scripts is the genius of Bill's method. If you can't write three good pages, there's no sense in writing 40. Bill just gives you the simplest possible assignments, and it really forces you to work hard as a writer. One week I was parking my car, and I realized I was running to his house. I was so eager to get to that workshop because it was so much fun." Abrams points out that "it's one thing reading the books and stuff, but you need feedback, and you need feedback from someone who knows something... as opposed to someone who doesn't."

Roll Tape

After Idelson lays the foundation of story structure with the hero/goal/obstacle template, he insists that his students improvise dialogue into a tape recorder. He explains: "My theory is that no one can type as fast as they can think. If you're working with a tape recorder and eliminate the computer, you can just come out with things as they occur to you. You obviate the lag in writing, which makes it seem unreal and stilted. You can react just as you would in real life." The tape-recorder technique works well with writing partners. Each partner takes a character and together they play the scene like improv actors with a tape recorder on.

Idelson bases this technique on experience. He wrote with partners Sam Bobrick and Harvey Miller. He advocates finding a partner for comedy writing, particularly one with a background in improv acting. In fact, it was Idelson who suggested that Belsing and Plummer team up. "That was an invaluable gift he gave us," says Belsing.

His classes simulate the experience of the table in a writers' room. Students come to class with multiple copies of the pages they've written during the past week and assign roles to their fellow classmates. Each student listens to--and tape records--the reading of his or her work. Then the other students jump in with questions and suggestions. Idelson plays the role of showrunner. As Thompson observes, "There's no substitute for hearing your stuff read out loud and seeing what response it gets from people."

There are ground rules. Students aren't allowed to say a scene or character doesn't work without offering an alternative. Pointing out that an idea has been done is also off limits. "If you say it's been done, everything stops dead, but if you stick with it, it will probably turn out to be something totally different. And it shows it was good enough to go on the air," observes Idelson. "The main thing is to keep a positive attitude. If you

start turning things off before they are a-borning, you're going to put everybody in a frightened mood, and they are going to get very negative."

Nonetheless, Idelson is known for being brutally honest. Students soon learn to dread hearing him dismiss their pages as "chuffa chuffa," which he defines as "immaterial dialogue where people are just playing with themselves and not telling a story." In one legendary incident, Idelson was invited to the reading of a full-length screenplay. During an intermission, he took the writers aside and said, "Boys, I'm an old man. I could die tomorrow. I'd hate to think I spent my last day on Earth listening to this crap. I'm going home." And he left.

The purpose of simulating the table is to prepare writers for pitching stories and jokes when they get a job writing for television. Pat Hazell was already an established sitcom writer-producer when he signed up for Idelson's class. Hazell was a stand-up comic who consulted on the first season of Seinfeld. He was the co-creator (with Matt Goldman), producer, and star of an NBC sitcom, American Pie, on which Idelson performed as an actor. Abrams and Thompson were writers on American Pie. Hazell observed that although it was their first writing job, "they seemed to know what they were talking about. It was on their résumé that they had taken this guy's workshop. I got a sense that was where their knowledge came from."

When American Pie failed to get picked up, Hazell decided to take the workshop himself. "I was working from instinct and really had no formal writing education," he says. "I learned something every time I was there. Everything down to the snack break is very much like what it is like to write on a sitcom. What he gives these people is room experience that no writer who sits at a desk by himself will ever get. In a sitcom half the business is: What can we do better? What are your instincts? How can we change the story? He always gave the students a chance to do that first before he sealed it up with some salient comment about 'cut this character' or 'start the story earlier.' Part of his teaching ability is that he does it through questions as opposed to fault-finding or pointing a finger. He would let people solve their own problems."

Hazell, who is currently touring in his one-man show The Wonder Bread Years (scheduled to air as a one-hour special on PBS), confesses that, "one of the biggest problems I had was always writing from a humor sense where I used a lot of jokes. He definitely challenged me. If something was a one-liner or a joke for joke's sake, throw it overboard because it's dead weight. There are a lot of sitcom writers who fall into the trap of circling around to try to shore up a joke as opposed to the other way around. That story, defining the hero looking for his goal, building those obstacles, those are the things that are true in any version of writing a sitcom or a screenplay or anything else. It was a crucial straightening out of the arrow, so to speak, because I could always insert jokes to support the story." He points out that "any time you ran a script by Bill, it was like working on your science fair project with your mom or building your Pinewood Derby car with your dad: You just know it's going to turn out better. He uses the crusty old bear approach, but he has a warm tender center, sentimentality, and a great sense of emotion. Even at his age, he's up on the times. He watches the current crop of sitcoms. He knows what his students should be doing to go into the industry. He's got the latest Viagra joke. He's a very contemporary guy."

Food for Thought

What does it take to be good at the table? Again, Idelson says, "Improvisation." His emphasis on improv comes from his training in the Actors Lab where people were given motivations and then put together to see what would happen. "It was supposed to teach you how the emotional moment really felt," says Idelson. "What I try to teach people is how it feels to write truthfully. How does it feel to get inside your character's heads and have them respond rather than having the writer respond?" He feels the writer and the actor have the same relationship as an architect and a carpenter. "The mechanism is exactly the same. There were a lot of writers in the Actors Lab who went through acting instruction. Paddy Chayefsky, for example. It's a very parallel experience."

In Idelson's words, the goal of the actor and the writer is "to make the juices flow" in the audience. "The big part of the equation that unsuccessful writers miss is the audience. They write for some personal, selfish reason. They leave the audience out of it, and the audience rejects them, so they don't get any money. The writer must be the audience's most humble servant."

The idea is to manipulate the hero/goal/obstacle equation by making the obstacle bigger and/or the hero's desire stronger. "It's the immovable object meets the irresistible force," explains Idelson. "The juices flow in the audience when they become the hero. They're living something they don't have the guts to do in real life. To me, it's a simple equation, but it's amazing how much trouble it gives people. That's because it's against human nature. Human nature is to avoid problems. How can I get around this? How can I make it easier on myself? The exercises are designed to make you take the hard road. The hard road is the one that brings the character into the most conflict. Most of the class is getting people to have a little guts."

Idelson's mentoring can teeter on the brink of therapy. In my own case, he critiqued one of my scenes with the comment, "You avoid the emotional moment." As he said it, I realized that it applied to my whole life. When the class was over, I sat in my car and cried for an hour. It was a profound epiphany about much more than writing. It influenced the way I live. Ellen Idelson had a similar experience. "I avoided conflict like nobody's business. He taught me to embrace conflict, which was a new concept for me and a little frightening at first. But when I understood how much it enhanced the story and was necessary to the story, it started to help me in my life as well."

In fact, Idelson is a big fan of psychotherapy. He believes all good writers need some therapy to better understand human nature. He can spot students who haven't been to therapy by listening to their work. When they confirm his suspicions, he'll tell them to go to therapy and then come back. Ellen says, "Some writers might close themselves off in a little office and type away. My dad has a really strong philosophy about living fully and honestly and experiencing as much as possible. All of that can only enhance your writing." She quotes her father: "People don't have problems with writing. They have problems with living, and it is reflected in their writing."

Idelson had been teaching out of his house for a couple of years before he persuaded his daughter to take his class. Ellen was a professional actress like her mother, Seemah, also an Actors Lab graduate who performs at Theater West and is often

drafted to read characters in Idelson's workshop. According to Ellen, "I was an actress and still am. I was working at Disneyland and supporting myself by doing phone sex. My dad was aware of all this, and having been an actor himself, he saw my love of acting but also saw that, although I'm extremely talented, I was not making a living at it. He pulled me aside one day, as all good fathers do, and said, 'I know you want to be an actress, and I support that, but you're going to need something to fall back on. I suggest you take my class.' Only my father would think of writing as something to fall back on." After she finished the class, she teamed up with Lotterstein to write a spec script. They got an agent and a staff writing job within a year.

Now Ellen handles registration for her father's classes. "I've become his administrator as a payback for him giving me a career. I'm eternally indebted to him." Ellen describes her father as "the loveable curmudgeon who's really a softie inside. He says if you can't cut it in his class, you'll never make it in the writing world. He is tough, but it's because he cares. He cares deeply."

Father has confessed to his daughter that he loves teaching even more than he loved writing. "When he started teaching, he said he finally felt he'd found his calling," Ellen reveals. "I believe that to be true. Although he's a fantastic writer, he's an unbelievably outstanding teacher."

Lotterstein agrees. "In this town there are a lot of good writers, and there aren't a lot of good teachers. Bill happens to be both. He knows what he's talking about, and he knows how to explain it to you."

Indeed, as Ellen says, "His greatest joy is to see one of his students 'get it.'"