



ROMANTIC COMEDY A FRESH APPROACH

By Kate Tremills

If comedy is the hardest material to write, romantic comedy is the hardest to write without cliché. This article explores the art of balancing humor with tenderness, while using conflict to create a truly memorable script. Use these concepts to breathe fresh ideas into a classic genre.

THE FORMULA

Even writers who don't work in the romantic comedy genre are well aware of the formula. Girl meets boy, girl loses boy, girl gets boy. The formula involves a simple plot that revolves around love. Love and the humor found in the mishaps of trying to make love work.

By definition, a formula reduces a story to a simple equation. Romantic comedies that push the genre envelope don't reject the formula, they keep it fresh. Original ideas, real conflict, full-blooded characters, strong plot, and depth. These build the formula into a genuine story.

To write a great romantic comedy, you must respect the genre. The search for love is an inherently funny and vulnerable adventure. We've all experienced or at least heard about the crazy dating scene, the pain of break-ups, and the difficulty of forgiving someone we love. This is the heart

of romantic comedy. The main storyline can still be reduced to the formula, but the humanity of the story must always be real.

REFERENCE POINTS

When preparing to write a romantic comedy, the first question you must ask yourself is, "Has it been done before?" Unlike dramas, the fact that the plotline uses a formula heightens the risk of repetition and cliché. Keep your work fresh by using these creative reference points. Use them at every writing stage to ensure you're staying true to yourself, to your characters, and to your audience.

DEPTH

Memorable movies provide an audience with an interesting world, a classic question, and/or a unique conflict. What can you offer that's new to the genre? Is your main character searching for more than just love? If not, how is the search unique?

The quintessential romantic comedy, *When Harry Met Sally* doesn't just offer two people searching for love. The film also poses a classic question: "Can men and women truly be friends?" The core thread of humor in the film revolves around this

question. The film was made in 1989 and the question still rings true today. Reach for that level of truth in your writing.

The search for love is one of the core aspects of being human. Romantic comedy taps into this strong identifier for every person. Whether your character is cynical, optimistic, or opportunistic, you have the potential to touch people on a deep level. Don't throw that away. Use it.

High Fidelity spoke with an honesty about men and love that struck a deep cultural chord. Men identified and women were relieved to hear the long-suspected truth spoken out loud. The main plotline was still boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl. But the main character wore all of his flaws on his sleeve. We immediately identified with his vulnerability and honesty.

The more you invest in your story and in your characters, the more it will show in your script. What questions have you always been dying to ask? What character do you never see on screen? What truth needs to be told? Tap into your own experience. Listen for the threads of truth in conversations around you. Ask your friends of both genders what they want in a mate. Weave these cultural truths into your story and you will touch audiences on a whole new level.

ORIGINAL WORLD

Nothing intrigues an audience like a world they haven't experienced. Invite your audience into a new environment. The world can be as simple as the inner politics of a coffee shop or as complicated as a culture. Either way, you are inviting your audience into a secret club full of intrigue, wonder, and hidden knowledge.

My Big Fat Greek Wedding explores an original world while revealing the truth of family politics. The film gives audiences a humorous look at Greek culture in North America. The main character invites us into her culture, while the love interest reflects the outsider's experience. The writer brilliantly balances an original world with the common truth of child-parent struggles.

The familiarity of the love formula gives you the leeway to play with extreme environments. As long as the audience has the touchstone of emotional truth, they won't get lost in a new world. Brainstorm a list of small and large worlds. Cross-reference your list with the substantial history of romantic comedies. Has it been done before? If so, what would be a new twist?

You might even want to consider mixing genres, but be aware that you will be taking on the challenge of mixing traditions. Run your ideas past your writer's group and your friends. Above all, be sure that the world intrigues and touches you. Your care for the world you create will show in your writing. And always remember that honesty is the core of both humor and love.

CONFLICT

For some reason, romantic comedy writers tend to shy away from conflict. Maybe they think it will take away from the tenderness of the piece. The truth is that the more conflict your characters have to overcome, the more tender the moment of reconciliation can be. If your script has limited up and downs, the resolution will lack dramatic effect.

Love and hate are two sides of one coin. Work this emotional tension to its full effect. Emotional conflict creates sparks and chemistry. And chemistry can naturally evolve into love on screen. Besides being true emotionally, conflict between your characters makes scenes come alive, gives the plot a strong pace, and adds reality to your story.

Audiences don't want to watch easy sto-

ries. They want to watch a story with substance; a story in which characters have to fight for what they get. And they want to laugh when they recognize the truth and the pain in the situation. Because we've all been there, but it's too painful to laugh when it's your own life.

One of the ways to introduce conflict naturally is to choose main characters that are complete opposites. Think of *French Kiss*, *Addicted To Love*, and *Bringing Up Baby*. The plot, the humor, and the character arcs all blossom from the natural conflict between opposite character types. You'll discover an endless supply of comedy and conflict in handcuffing two completely different characters together in one story.

Another natural source of conflict is to write characters that are at odds in their purpose. The plot and the comedy are driven from the built-in fight. Examples of this comedy style are *Runaway Bride*, *What Women Want*, and *While You Were Sleeping*. These plots sometimes walk a delicate line of deception. While deception provides an easy climax scene, you've created a large obstacle to overcome in the eyes of the audience. Honesty, vulnerability, and strong character development will serve you well in overcoming the deception hurdle.

Finally, offer the audience an original adversary. *Forces Of Nature* uses the weather to create obstacles. *Gross Point Blank* builds to a showdown between rival hit men. *Splash* works the physical and social obstacles of being a mermaid. Original adversaries keep the audience intrigued and laughing. They will also set your story apart in a heap of scripts.

FULL-BLOODED CHARACTERS

Creating real, full-blooded characters is your best release from the restrictions of the romantic comedy formula. You may still be working with the dilemma of finding love, but we've never seen *your* character deal with the dilemma. Play with age, culture, and experience. The search for true love is very different for a nineteen-year-old virgin than it is for a sixty-year-old widow. The same is true of a nineteen-year-old widow and a sixty-year-old virgin.

Don't sell your characters out because you're afraid the audience won't like them. Real people have faults, quirks, problems, and enemies. These elements give your audience room to relate to your characters. Faults give them vulnerability. We may find it painful to watch your characters make

mistakes, but we'll relate and understand.

Think about the people you love. Some of their most endearing qualities are their quirks. Quirks make us original. They set us apart from the billions of other people in the world. For your audience to be invested in your story, you must create characters they can fall in love with. Otherwise, why would they care if the story works out? Remember that your main plot is rooted in the dilemmas of love. If your audience doesn't love your characters, they won't care if your characters find love.

DRIVEN PLOT

If you watch the first romantic comedies, very little happens beyond the love plot. Today's audiences are far more sophisticated. They expect a story that moves quickly, knocks them out of their seats laughing, and makes them cry. A driven plot gives your story a strong pace and sets up purpose for your characters. Even more important, a driven plot will pull a jaded reader, who has seen the formula more times than s/he wants to count, through your pages. All of your pages.

The plot needs to come out of your character's journey, but have fun in creating that journey. How can you play with your character's search? What can accelerate the pace? How can an original adversary get in her way? Use all of the five reference points to weave strong plotlines that make an audience wonder what could possibly happen next. Love is a journey that's riddled with crazy obstacles and you get the fun of cramming them all into a 90-page script.

EMBRACING THE CHALLENGE

Romantic comedy gives writers and audiences the ideal blend of laughter, tenderness, and reality. We get to explore something that touches all of our lives with the built-in emotional release of comedy. Embrace the potential this genre offers you and your stories. The best romantic comedies touch a cultural nerve, change our perspective, and let us laugh at being human. Write an original piece about the quirks of love and audiences will flock to your film. ■

Kate Tremills is a writer/producer based in Vancouver, B.C., Canada. She works as a writer and editor in many capacities including screenwriter, business writer, columnist, and story editor. She has five feature screenplays and several short scripts to her credit. Kate can be contacted via e-mail at ktremills@telus.net.