

HOLLY BRIX

Screenwriter and School of Film instructor Holly Brix talks about zombies, living on a Hollywood studio back lot, and teachability.

When did you first realize you wanted to be a writer?

I'm originally from Seattle. I was a drama student at the University of Washington when I realized that it was the words that really attracted to me to certain playwrights. It was the words that were important to me. So I left acting and started writing. It was that proverbial 'aha moment' for me, in retrospect. Then I took a summer internship working for Portland filmmaker Sharon Genasci on a documentary she was shooting in Rome which gave me great hands on experience and a sample of my work to send out to film schools. I got into USC, and that was the beginning.

Why do you call Portland home now?

After USC, I lived in LA as a writer for nine years. When my husband and I decided to start a family, I felt like I needed to go home, and Portland felt enough like Seattle to feel like home. Portland is a great environment for a writer. Living here is kind of like living on the back lot of a Hollywood studio, where they have fake cities set up to film. Portland is like that—only it's not fake...it's a real place. There are trees everywhere, kids riding on bikes and people outside walking around. It kind of blew my mind at first because it was so different than LA.

What genres do you write in?

My wheelhouse is thrillers and horror—really scary, bloody stuff, which I really love doing.

What are some key ingredients to writing thriller and horror dialogue?

When I'm working on a thriller or horror movie, I always try to find out, what's really scary about this? What scares me about it? What scares all of us about this thing? Then I try to exploit that. With zombies, for example, it's not so much that zombies are inherently scary, it's that mindless mobs are scary. Just seeing someone's entrails isn't scary, but having your entrails taken out of your body could be scary, depending on how it's written. It's tapping into what is truthful about what's going on, what is behind the fear, and then building the suspense out of that.

Can you talk about your creative process?

Our first instincts as writers are always six or seven bad ideas that we saw on TV or in some other movie. So it's about letting your mind go through all those bad ideas to just get them out and then trying to get to something that's a little more truthful. When I'm writing for producers, and they already have an idea in mind about what kind of film they want to make, I want to make sure that I'm honoring their idea but making it better with my plot, my characters and my suggestions of where the story should go. As far as my own work, that's the hard stuff. Some of my ideas are half-baked and some of them never go anywhere. Then there are other ideas that stay with you, and they want you to pay attention to them. So for me, over time, that's how I decide what kind of my own stuff I'm going to write—what hangs around.

How do you divide your time between your writing assignments and your own creative writing?

I give my first good hours of writing every morning to the work I'm being paid to do. Then if there's any time left in the day, I work on my own stuff, the passion projects, the ones with no director, no talent attached, and you're not sure if you're ever going to get any money out of them, but you love the idea.

When did you know that you could work as a screenwriter for a living?

The turning point for me was my seventh script. That script placed in a screenwriting competition, got me my first real management team and my first big agent. That script started my career. It didn't sell. But it started my career. The next script I wrote sold.

How did you get the opportunity to pitch stories and get writing assignments?

I had to have a body of work and many writing samples. Whenever there's a writing assignment, all the agents and managers submit samples for their clients, and the producers look through and whittle the list down based on whose writing samples they like. They usually have four or five writers they actually want to hear from.

What is it like working in a male-dominated field?

I like it in the sense that there's always an opportunity to exceed people's expectations. In my work in thrillers and action movies, sometimes it helps because there are not a lot of women who write in those genres. People are interested to hear your take on it, especially if it's a female hero.

You teach *Blueprinting Your Screenplay* at the School of Film. What does that involve?

All stories have certain elements in common. Regardless of what genre you're writing, there are certain moments in a story that are going to happen in every story. The better understanding you have of what those moments are, then you can take this great, unique idea you have and figure out for yourself what those moments are in your story. If you work those out, you find that you're starting to make a script because you're placing all these pieces together. Blueprinting, for lack of a better term, is just plotting out and trying to make sure that you're not trying to reinvent the wheel, that you understand story and you're just making sure that your unique story has some of these universal elements woven through it.

So you write full time and you teach (since 2006) at the School of Film. What is teaching like?

I find it really energizing to have that creative discourse with people and find out all these ideas that people have that they've had floating around in their heads for years. I've learned the hard way how to structure some of my own ideas, and it's fun to teach a class and to pass that on, to give some tools as to how you take an idea you have and actually turn it into something that has plot and is moving somewhere.

Do you have any advice for students?

I would say, be teachable. It's not enough to have talent or an ear for dialogue or some good ideas. Talent is a piece of the puzzle, but being teachable, being willing to learn, being willing to fail, and being willing to just keep trying, is the bigger part of the puzzle. Don't take yourself so seriously and keep at it. If you really want it, you've got to just keep trying to get better at it.

