SECRETS OF **Script Structure** | **Rules of PROPER PACING**

Script™

A Final Draft, Inc. Publication

www.scriptmag.com

Writers on Writing:

Dustin Lance Black Searches for the Real *J. Edgar*

Final Draft, Inc. **HALL *of* FAMER**

Steven Zaillian

PLUS:

- J.C. Chandor Talks the Crash in *Margin Call*
- From Script to Screen: Inside Bruce Robinson's *The Rum Diary*
- Booze Control: Terence Winter's *Boardwalk Empire*

VOLUME 17 / NUMBER 6

$6.99US

12

0 09128 48537 9

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2011

BEYOND THE PAGE

BY PETER HANSON

A series of articles about what screenwriters do when they're not writing.

Change of Art

Searching for new ways to explore favorite themes led writer Joe Forte to a thriving second career as a painter.

While many artists transition from one medium to another after the disappointment of failure, Joe Forte took a different path: After achieving success in screenwriting, he embraced a sideline in painting for the promise of a new challenge. Although, he admits, there was a frustration factor involved, one familiar to every screenwriter—he grew impatient watching scripts wend their way through the development pipeline. To date, though Forte has been a professional screenwriter since the early '90s, only one of his scripts has been produced: *Firewall*, the 2006 thriller starring Harrison Ford.

"I started painting so I could give myself the green light," he says. "The beauty of a painting is the same as the beauty of a spec script. You're done when you're done, and people want to buy it or they don't."

Luckily for Forte, he's found buyers in the art world just as he's found buyers in Hollywood: When he mounted his first major art show in 2008, he sold about half the pieces on display, and his artwork now sells for $2,700 per painting. That's a long way from the early years of his artistic experiments, when he worked privately in the pool-house studio behind his home in Studio City, California.

"I hid my painting in there for 10 years and didn't show it to anyone, because I didn't want the work to change based on someone else's opinion," he says. "I knew I was ready to have a show when I didn't care what people would think."

Typical among Forte's work is a series of "baseball card" paintings in which he riffs on the aesthetic of the traditional trading card in order to explore a favorite personal theme, male identity. Using mixed media to create a collage effect, each of the baseball-card paintings features a boldly rendered central figure surrounded by delicately integrated details and a single provocative word presented in large letters. The result is a complex system of subtexts surrounding the combined nexus of symbolic and textual focal points.

Forte recalls that when he first began the baseball-card series, he spotlighted challenging words like "average" in order to raise questions about how athletic performance relates to male identity. Noting the responses those early paintings evoked, he experimented by using overtly empowering words in a later set of baseball-card paintings: "ace," "champ," "wonder." The pieces with the potent language sold more quickly, which reiterated some of the very themes Forte explored in the artwork.

"My definition of 'commercial' is something that has a clear emotional effect on you, and, because it's clear, you want to buy the painting or you want to buy a ticket to see the movie," he says. "When I write a script that doesn't work, [the producers] use a lot of words. When I write a script that works, they use very few words. They say 'I love it,' and they do something. It's the same with painting." Indeed, Forte notes myriad parallels between his twin endeavors, observing that they nourish each other.

That symbiotic relationship is appropriate since Forte's interest in both the written word and visual communication dates back to his childhood. "The first thing I can remember doing is drawing," he says, "and the second thing I can remember doing is playing with a tape recorder and making up stories. It's all related."

A New Jersey native who studied film at New York University, Forte broke into screenwriting in the early '90s, though none of his early projects was produced. "By the mid-'90s, I had a full-on writing career in Hollywood," he recalls. "I was writing a project for Jodie Foster, I had a writing/directing deal with Sony Pictures, and I had sold a spec to Warner Bros."

But, he adds, "I started to realize how complicated it was to make your dream a reality."

Forte began dabbling in painting around 1995, and his early work was, like that of so many painters just embarking on their journeys, relatively crude representational imagery. "I was completely unschooled. When I started discovering the artist I was, I was also discovering the artists I liked, like Jean-Michel Basquiat," he says. "At the beginning, I thought painting was concretized in the past—I was probably looking at the French masters and thinking, 'That's painting,' versus thinking of painting as an alive and fluid expression that you're making up as you go."

Forte's approach was liberated in 1999, during a class taught by painter Joe Blaustein. As Forte remembers, "Everybody would draw a figure, and then you would walk around to look at everybody else's figures." Forte was impressed by another student's delicate lines, and tried to emulate her style—with frustrating results. "That wasn't in my DNA, so I started doing these fat, angry lines. Joe Blaustein said, 'Good, do more of that.' That's when I became serious about painting. I stopped trying to be a painter, and started trying to be myself when painting."

Yet, more than just liberating his brushstrokes, the epiphany helped Forte along in his lifelong journey to see beyond the prism of his upbringing. "I grew up in a very perfectionist, born-again-Christian environment," he says. "The mask was all—the presentation of perfectionist

Screenwriter and painter Joe Forte PHOTO: KEVIN PARRY

goodness. For me to be sloppy and vital and spontaneous on the canvas was amazing."

Once Forte found his artistic footing, he started sharing his pieces with the world, selling some for charity or profit, and giving others away as gifts. He recalls that his first big show, at Bergamot Station in Santa Monica, California, was a milestone. "There's nothing like standing in a gallery with your work, and people are right there—when the reaction is good, it's good, and when it's not, there's no buffer," he says. "Having that experience with your audience and knowing you're having a genuine effect on them—that's the thrill."

Now that he's into a comfortable rhythm with his artwork, Forte is able to observe the way inspiration peaks and recedes. "You have cycles," he observes. "You find this rich vein and mine it, then you don't have anything to do." For instance, the baseball-card series grew out of a long period of exploration, which produced a lot of discarded work. "It's like screenplay drafts where you're searching for an idea," he says. "In every creative process, there is waste. You're manufacturing something."

The upshot is that when an idea clicks, it's easy for an artist to become prolific. "Once you get the concept of the series," Forte says, "you just do motifs and explorations of the concept." He estimates that he created about 50 baseball-card paintings, of which about 20 were included in shows. However, if being able to generate variations on a theme is the upshot, trying to build on success is the challenge: "It's a climb up the mountain, and the higher up the mountain, the harder it gets—you're always trying to do better than before."

Forte says the same drive toward advancement informs his writing. Throughout the time he's been painting, he's worked on projects like *Firewall* and the upcoming literary adaptation *Out* for New Line. And though he takes his career as seriously as any other Hollywood professional, Forte has tried to learn lessons from his time in the art world: "Painting changed the features," he says. "Having this thing where I didn't have anything to prove made me want to have that freedom as a screenwriter."

To achieve that goal, Forte writes in his art studio so he can move back and forth between different forms of creative expression. "It helps me stay in the flow state," he explains. "I can sit in the chair and write, and then I can stand up and work on a painting. It's like Einstein taking a walk while he was working—screenwriting is my life, and painting helps me take the pressure off. It gives me perspective, and it's nourishing to the soul."

Forte believes any writer could benefit from having an endeavor that exists beyond the screenplay page. "If you are consumed by Hollywood, and it's out of fear of not getting recognized, that's going to affect your life and your work," he opines. "There's nothing wrong with being consumed by your life's work, but when it slips over into fear, that becomes corrosive and inauthentic."

Since the search for authenticity drives everything Forte does in screenwriting and painting, it's no surprise the search has now led him into a third art form: documentary filmmaking. Forte is working on a nonfiction film about his father's 86-year-old second cousin, John Alarimo, whom Forte describes as a "real-life Forrest Gump." Alarimo was a soldier in World War II, a member of the first class at NYU's film school, a Fulbright scholar, and a *bon vivant* who counted several world-famous celebrities among his friends during his glory years.

The currently untitled project is another exploration of favorite themes, and another new facet of Forte's artistic character. "All of my work is about identity—it's about the mask versus who you really are," he says, noting that his own identity, professionally speaking, has become difficult to pin down. (Personally speaking, he's a father and a husband; he and his wife, producer-writer Meg LeFauve, have two children, ages five and eight.) "Sometimes I question what I really am. What is my label? I love writing, I love painting, I love filmmaking. It's all an exploration."

PETER HANSON is the director of the screenwriting documentary *Tales From the Script* and the author of three books on cinema. His screenplay *Savage* recently sold to Picture Road, and he is preparing to direct a feature drama, *The Eulogist*, based on his own script. His website is GrandRiverFilms.com.