



**Television Producer and Director
Phil Cooke interviews Barbara Nicolosi,
creator of the Act One Screenwriting Workshop in Hollywood.**

If you've always wanted to make that movie or television program that will reach the unreachable, then you need to hear from Barbara Nicolosi, one of the founders and instructors of the acclaimed "Act One Screenwriting Workshop" in Hollywood. Barbara has successfully taught screenwriters from across the country the secrets of successful storytelling, and her workshop is rapidly expanding to other cities. Recently, Phil had the opportunity to interview Barbara and find out a little of how she's impacting Hollywood:

Phil Cooke: Tell me a little about the Act One Screenwriting Workshop and your background teaching screenwriting.

Barbara Nicolosi: When I first arrived in Hollywood, my belief was that the entertainment industry was minimally anti-God, and certainly anti-Christian. Armed with a background in marketing, and a graduate degree in cinema, I landed a job at a production company that was known for developing projects that reflected a Christian worldview. After having read hundreds of scripts mainly from believers, it became very clear to me that Christians in Hollywood were not being persecuted - we were committing suicide. The level of the writing that comes from the Church into the mainstream media is generally pathetic. First of all, there just aren't enough projects coming from people who have God in their framework. Those that do, suffer from being so desperately earnest that they make for terrible entertainment. Christian productions tend to be marred by an absence of creativity, thoughtfulness and professionalism. I

became convinced that if we were going to make any inroads into mainstream entertainment, we were going to need to seriously train a new generation of writers.

Fortunately, the Holy Spirit inspired several Christians working in the industry with the same insight. At the invitation of Inter-Mission - a ministry to Christians in Hollywood, we came together to create a program that would be a complete education in the screenwriter's life and craft, as well as provide spiritual and ethical formation. Now heading into our fourth year, we have over 75 professional writers and producers on our faculty, and are beginning to see our alumni sell projects to the secular industry.

Phil: How important is the ability to tell a story?

Barbara: It is the absolutely critical first decision that a writer makes. Far too many writers start writing before they have really hashed out a story that is worth working on. There are so many things to consider before you start. From a Hollywood perspective you have to understand the elements that make any story suspenseful and entertaining. Is this story compelling, relevant, commercial and affordable? Is the story's arena intriguing? Is my plot clever and fun? Are there roles here that will give actors something to sink their teeth into? From a Christian perspective, will this project draw people toward the good? Are my characterizations respectful of human dignity? Will my viewers feel violated by this project or inspired?

Phil: Can storytelling techniques be learned?

Barbara: Yes. There are definitely rules and devices that can be mastered that provide a framework for solid storytelling. Once a writer has mastered these and has a proficiency in the craft, then there is scope for individual artistry and talent to come in and play with the boundaries and formulas of good storytelling.

Too many new screenwriters do not respect what works in the art of storytelling. They haven't read enough great literature and analyzed enough classic fictional characters to be able to detect that patterns that are present.

Phil: Christian television doesn't feature many story based programs - should that change?

Barbara: Without a doubt. It's a matter of being smart fiscally and getting the most cultural bang for our bucks. There are so many levels of communication possible in a screen production. Just on the level of visual impact, a production can create images that speak a thousand words. Then, decisions about the way those images are composed and juxtaposed add deeper levels of meaning. On an aural level, clever dialogue, contrasting ambient sound, and of course the musical score can all add more textures and layers to a production. Most Christian scripts exclusively depend on dialogue driven narratives to achieve an emotional effect. They feel flat and boring to the viewing audience which has so many more tantalizing projects to consume from secular producers. Christian television tends to remind me of a painter, who has forty different shades on his palette, but elects to only use blue.

Phil: What will it take to really make an impact in the media for Christ?

Barbara: We need to stop sucking our thumbs and whining like victims. We need to commit ourselves to excellence and artistry and the highest standards of professionalism in entertainment. We need to support those Christians who are working in the media mission field, with prayer and training. We need to stop elevating mediocrity, just because mediocre projects are the only thing coming out of the Church these days in entertainment.

We need to banish fear and commit ourselves to working side by side with the secular people in the industry so that we can learn from them and eventually become their friends so we can witness to them. The Church has a very outsider mentality when it comes to Hollywood which is bad strategy. There is no need to reinvent the wheels of popular culture. We just have to take them over.

Phil: Jesus was a master storyteller. But why don't more pastors and ministry leaders tell stories today?

Barbara: My experience is that people of faith have very little faith in people. They don't think people will "get it" if they don't splay out their message in ten foot high neon lights. Also, coming up with parables is hard work. It is one of the hardest activities a

person can undertake. Christians tend to be lazy and not willing to do for God what secular people are willing to do for money.

Phil: What are some of your typical classes about?

Barbara: I often give a presentation called, "What Hollywood Knows About Storytelling." We will look at how the industry evaluates a narrative project (and actually even a documentary one) on the level of story. Is it commercial? Is it relevant? Is it smart? Does the plot gel? We will also look at some aspects of professionalism that Christians need to be committed to if they are going to succeed as apostles in the mainstream media. Too often, Christians distinguish themselves for treating people with less professionalism than the pagans do. It is a very bad witness and undoes everything we preach with our lips.

Phil: If I work as a media professional at a church, Christian TV station, or ministry - why should I come to your workshop?

Barbara: Hopefully, you will come away from my workshop with a much better understanding of the shape of the entertainment industry as a mission field, and what is required of those who would be apostles in that arena. You will find many tools to evaluate the projects that come to you so that you save a lot of money and time by not starting out on a production process that in the end will bear very few fruits in the culture or in the Church.

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