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## A Simple Plan.. A Brilliant Scene By John Hill

Good scene construction is crucial to your script. What makes a great scene? Surprises, emotions, rising tension. What are some of the greatest movie scenes ever? Maybe these...

In SPARTACUS, when Roman soldiers ask the defeated slave army survivors which one is the leader so he can die a painful death, and before Kirk Douglas can say, "It's that guy over there," others start yelling "I'm Spartacus!" "I'm Spartacus!" to try to die for him.

The scene in LOST HORIZON where the Ronald Colman character, spokesman for the upset hostages trying to find out how to get home, who finally gets to meet the High Lama (second only to the High Concept) in Shangri la, but is so enchanted with the old man's tale of creation of a utopia, he leaves in such awe that when the others badger him for information on porters and a way home, he says, "Oh, I forgot to ask..."

The roadside diner scene in GIANT at the end, when an aging Rock Hudson, playing Bick Benedict, his Mexican-American daughter-in-law and grandson with him, sees a burly racist, Sarge, who owns the place, refuse to serve other Mexicans, and Rock Hudson objects, causing a great fistfight, where they bang into a jukebox causing "The Yellow Rose Of Texas" to loudly play, and the latent racism of the Benedict generations finally triumphantly ends as Rock Hudson ends up losing, yet is the real winner.

When Woody Strode tosses the rifle to John Wayne in the alley and the Duke shoots Liberty Valence then turns and walks off into the shadows, letting Jimmy Stewart and the town think the wounded lawyer shot the outlaw, with John Wayne knowing this



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will cost him glory and Vera Miles.

In *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*, the noble defense scene of an innocent black man, but Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch loses, then, as the courtroom below empties, the African-Americans in the balcony, silent, watching, and as Atticus leaves, and the old black man gets up, along with the other blacks, then speaks gently to Gregory Peck's little daughter, "Stand up, Scout. Your father's passing..."

In *MARATHON MAN*, the "Is it safe?" dental scene, followed by Dustin Hoffman escaping as his William Devane rescuer shoots two torturers, then driving him away from the nightmare, asking fast questions, then suddenly, with wild U-turns, Dustin Hoffman discovers the nightmare only gets worse: he's being taken back to the torture place, the bad guys standing, not dead, and he's dragged back in for more, realizing his rescuer is one of the villains.

In comedy, the principle is the same: what's the worst possible things that can happen in a scene to the protagonist?

In *PLANES, TRAINS AND AUTOMOBILES*, Steve Martin goes to sleep in the rented car, while John Candy drives them along at night on an interstate, because, well, what could go wrong? Everything. John Candy throws a cigarette out wrong, and it bounces into the backseat, starting an unnoticed fire. The heat then causes him to try wiggle out of his thick jacket while driving. He succeeds in hooking each jacket sleeve in the side of the car seat, essentially pinning his own arms to his side, helpless to steer, resulting in a spin-out on icy highway, then he drives on -- only going the wrong way, almost hitting two trucks head on, they screech to a stop, shaken, get out -- the car bursts into flames, Steve Martin says, well, the joke's on you, the car's rented in your name, and John Candy says, no, I used your credit card, oh, and your wallet's in the (burning) car -- and on and on, a classic example of continuing to dogpile on the conflicts, in this case, for humor.

The *RESERVOIR DOGS* scene where Michael Madsen does a little dance with a



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straight razor, cuts off the tied-up cop's ear, then just as he's about to set the cop on fire, the wounded Tim Roth shoots him, and then says to the tied-up cop, "I'm a cop" and the tied-up cop who wouldn't talk, even after disfigurement and about to be set on fire, gasps out, "I know."

And you've got your opinions for the greatest movie scenes ever.

I mention the concept of "great scenes" in a movie scripts because that's what we're always trying to write. Terrific scenes are the coin of the screenwriting realm. But what are some characteristics of great scene construction?

Protagonist start the scene under tremendous pressure, the emotions already sky-high, things get even worse, emotions skyrocketing even higher, usually involving surprises and new plot twists that churn up our feelings as an audience and make the protagonist's life even more difficult.

A good scene in a movie can be said to be often when one person wants something from another.

Another aspect of this is from good prose writing, where the term 'narrative drive' means writing so the reader/audience senses something is about to happen - and it matters.

A good scene is written with constantly rising tension.

A good scene starts as close to the end of the scene as possible -- for maximum dramatic pressure and conflict.

There are obligatory scenes (that some newer writers veer away from writing!) where heroes confront villains, where truths are revealed and reactions from everyone happen in the same room, emotions colliding.



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It might surprise you to know I'm going to mention surprises again; fake-outs, reversals, unexpected plot twists and stunning character reveals.

To really go in-depth on a great scene, there's one in a very underrated movie, *A SIMPLE PLAN*, screenplay by Scott Smith, based on his novel.

I would urge you to rent or buy this DVD and study it for several great scenes, one in particular. It is a special novel/script/movie because it is simultaneously, somehow, high concept plot-driven and yet character-driven and somehow also very much about a theme, winning the Triple Crown.

(And if you haven't seen the movie yet, save this article, watch the movie, then use this as a study guide. Because I'm about to spoil some of the surprises, but that's tough -- this is about learning.)

The plot of *A SIMPLE PLAN* is that three men find a small plane in the woods that has crashed, dead pilot, and \$4 million in cash in a duffel bag. How they interact as they hide it, and what happens to the three of them, and their wives, is the heart of this drama. It's *TREASURE OF SIERRA MADRE* set in a rural Iowa community. And it's the mundane, commonplace setting that somehow gives it universal relevance, plus the tragic exploration of sibling rivalry, friendship, greed, fear, class differences and violence.

There are a number of great scenes in this terrific movie, but one in particular is instructive, and inspired. But first you have to get a sense of the plot and character conflicts that lead up to it, the layers of tension.

Hank (Bill Paxton) plays a middle-class, college-educated accountant for the local, small town feed store. Nice home, a pregnant wife, baby on the way; nice guy with a nice little life. But Hank has a sad sibling albatross around his neck: his loser brother, Jacob (Billy Bob Thornton, in a brilliant performance) who quit school, no job, no love life, no life at all, who has one similar loser friend, Lou, the town drunk (terrifically



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played by Brent Briscoe) who has a wife who supports him. There's always a tense awkwardness between the two brothers, Hank, the middle-class successful winner and Jacob, the unemployed loser, which gets worse whenever Lou is around, since the primary bond is between the two losers, not the two brothers.

Or is it? In some ways, this script raises the interesting question: where is the real allegiance, when there's a difference? To one's family or one's socioeconomic class? A distant brother or a close drinkin' buddy?

One moment defines the three. Hank, Jacob and Lou in the rural snowy countryside. Hank (Bill Paxton) stands there, a well-dressed adult, waiting while the two yahoos, drinking beer early in the morning, hurry off to pee their names in the snow, giggling like seventh graders. There's a subtle competition for Jacob between his brother and loser buddy, and a subtext hostility from Lou towards Hank, who sarcastically calls him "Mr. Accountant."

When these three discover the small crashed Piper cub in the woods, a dead pilot, and a big gym bag with \$4 million, the two yahoos immediately want to spend it. But Hank (Bill Paxton), smart enough to know someone will come looking for it, the law or armed bad guys, says, no, the only way they'll keep the money is if only he, Hank, hides the money for the three of them for six months, so no one spends it yet. Thus begins the conflict between the three men, with all previous jealousies and tensions suddenly rising up like greedy bile, with growing distrust.

One of many great scenes is when the brothers go back to the site. Jacob argues with a suspicious farmer, Stevenson, suddenly killing him. Hank, in shock, tells Jacob to leave, who does. Hank has to figure out how to make it look like an accident. Then Stevenson groans! He's not dead after all!

But the hurt man says he'll call the cops on Jacob in for attacking him. Hank agonizes, then strangles Stevenson, to save his brother, but also, to keep Jacob's arrest from being the thread that unravels the money theft. This puts Hank, average man we



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might relate to, further down a road to Hell paved with bad intentions.

Hank tells Jacob about the murder, saying don't tell Lou about it.

But Lou shows up at Hank's house, drunk, demanding some of the money, threatening to tell the cops about Hank killing Stevenson! Hank realizes Jacob may value his relationship with Lou more than with anything. Hank now has two loose cannons, but comes up with a plan. He goes to Jacob, tells him they need to trick Lou into saying he was the one who killed Stevenson, and get it on Hank's small hidden tape recorder in his shirt pocket, to then blackmail Lou, to keep him in line. Jacob's reaction is to say, "You want me to lie to my best friend?" And Hank has to point out that if Lou gets drunk, talks or tries blackmail, they could all go to jail. Reluctantly, Jacob agrees to help trick Lou into making the confession so they can get it on tape. Jacob calls Lou, saying the three of them should have a beer, but it's actually a set-up for the brothers to trick Lou into confessing on tape.

And sets the stage for the following terrific scene. The three men are drinking in the town tavern, chatting, joking. They all get a little drunk, but as Hank buddies up to Lou, Jacob glares at his brother; the tension rises -- will Jacob go along with the plan? Where are Jacob's loyalties? They go back to Lou's house, and continue drinking (Lou's wife is upstairs, asleep.) Lou is drunk, happy, loud and Hank pretends to enjoy Lou. Jacob stays sullen, not liking what Hank is doing. When they have a private moment, Hank says, "Come on, let's do this..." but Jacob now says he won't trick Lou. "It's not fair."

Then Jacob, acting out his hostility towards Hank, starts doing funny imitations of Hank, causing both Lou and Jacob to laugh at Hank. This makes Hank (and the audience) wonder: is Jacob changing sides? What is Jacob going to do or say? (Remember, \$4 million in cash and a murder charge are at stake on what any of them say or do next, as the drinking and jokes mask the rising tension and coming life-changing decisions.)

Between his hostile imitations, Jacob murmurs a sad truth, saying he and his brother,



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Hank, really don't have anything in common except their last names. Hank's nervous fake smiles and wary glances, tell us the tension is being ratcheted up higher and higher. Lou encourages more Hank imitations from Jacob, an indication these two losers routinely bond through mocking Hank. Lou is only aware of the joking, drunken humor level of it all, until Jacob suddenly says, quietly, seriously, "We should never have let Hank keep the money...we really shouldn't have..." Lou just giggles, not realizing yet how serious this is getting.

Jacob looks at Hank glaring at him and adds, "Look at how Hank is looking at us, like he owns us, like he's better than us..." (The class difference finally gets said, a new level of conflict.) "That's what you wanted me to do, isn't it, Hank?" Jacob says. "Choose sides?"

The silence that follows sobers Lou up. Hank realizes Jacob is out of control -- and that Hank could go to jail forever on whatever is said by these two in the next minute, because his own brother is turning on him. (You'd need a chain-saw to cut the tension at this point -- but like any great scene, there's much more conflict to come, at many levels.) Jacob jokes that what Hank will probably do is wimp out and go into the sheriff's office and confess to killing Stevenson, which will screw up the money for all of them. Now all three are angry and afraid, on their feet, talking at once, Hank trying to shut Jacob up, saying they should go, with Lou getting angry, saying, yeah, that is what Hank will probably do, go confess.

Then Jacob does something else surprising: he suddenly goes back to the original plan he and Hank had in mind, grinning, saying to Lou, let's play-act how Hank will confess to the sheriff, I'll be the sheriff and Lou, you be Hank. This is done with the joking tone of the earlier imitations, so Lou is all for it. Hank settles back down, realizing Jacob has switched sides again!

So the drunken, laughing psycho-drama of how Hank would confess is played out, with Jacob now fooling Lou into saying the confessional words as if he did the Stevenson murder himself, as Hank can secretly tape-record it by casually reaching in



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his shirt pocket to turn the tape on and off.

Once Hank has it on tape, he takes the tape recorder out and plays it back for a startled, drunken Lou, who doesn't understand at first. When Hank and Jacob explain, that it's just for insurance, so Lou doesn't talk or pressure them for the money, and Lou realizes Jacob is in on it too, and he's been had by both, he runs into the back of his house, while Hank and Jacob go out the front door.

But suddenly, Lou is back aiming a shotgun at Hank, who is on the front porch (as Jacob runs on out to the truck), demanding the tape back. The angry, drunken, betrayed Lou aims a shotgun on Hank. (This is known as ratcheting up the tension in the scene to a whole new level.) A lot of writers would find that to finally be enough for one great scene. Not Scott Smith, who keeps jacking up the conflict level of the entire scene and story like he's got a hydraulic lift under it all. Before Hank can respond, and give Lou the tape, Jacob comes back -- holding a rifle he got from his truck. Once again, Jacob has to choose, and he aims the rifle at Lou, from mid-yard, while Lou aims the shotgun at Hank, who is on the front porch!

Everyone's yelling at once, with Hank saying, okay, just put the gun down, and Jacob telling Lou to stop aiming the shotgun at his brother, and Lou yelling at Jacob, how he betrayed him in his own home, then adding, "Do you think Hank is your friend? He doesn't give a damn about you!" In case there isn't enough over-the-top tension at this point, Lou's wife, in her nightdress come down the stairs, behind Lou, yelling for him to also put the shotgun down!

Then Lou, enraged, still yelling at Hank to give him the tape back, pumps a shell into the shotgun and fires at the porch roof, just over Hank's head, the roar of the shotgun startling everyone -- then Lou again aims the shotgun at Hank, everyone else, more terrified than ever, is yelling at Lou to put the shotgun down. How more tension could one pack into this scene? This much more: Jacob fires the rifle, blasting Lou in the head, killing him, knocking him back, his stunned wife getting Lou's blood splattered on her! She screams, Hank is in shock, and so is Jacob, who just shot his best friend to



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save his brother whom he knows down deep Lou had always cared about him more than his brother.

One hell of a scene, isn't it? It would be too -- if it ended here.

But -- gotcha -- it doesn't.

Lou's wife is screaming, upset, at Lou's body. Jacob is out in the yard, going into emotional meltdown. And Hank tries to tell Lou's wife that they'll call 911 -- once they get their stories straight. Lou's wife now starts screaming, enraged that all Hank cares about is the money! So Hank says, you can have Lou's share! Now she really goes ballistic, and reaches for the shotgun! Hank puts his hands on it too, they grapple with the shotgun for a moment, Hank wrenches it away. Lou's wife looks at him in horror, now, thinking she'll be killed! Hank's saying, no, no, we have to figure this out -- only Lou's wife, certain she'll be killed, runs back into the kitchen, to get something. Hank, always trying first for reason, but always trapped into a cycle of violence, follows, carrying the shotgun, keeps trying to reassure her -- but in the kitchen she she got a large pistol and is aiming it at Hank! She fires, wildly, once, twice, three, four times -- until Hank has to raise the shotgun and blow her away, and she falls, dead!

Now Hank has to really think fast -- how to explain two dead people -- and Jacob, his brother, ever the loose cannon, in babbling shock. Can Jacob possibly keep it together enough to remember and stick to a cover story? Jacob stands over his dead, bloody friend's body, and quietly says, "Hank?" This causes Hank, who had his back to Jacob while he was staring in shock at the body of Lou's wife, to whirl, pump another shell into the shotgun, and aim it at Jacob, who holds a rifle...

Remember, this scene started with three guys having a beer.

Hank suddenly pumps and fires random shots at lamps and walls around the house, then goes to the phone, fakes an excited 911 call, then coolly wipes off fingerprints, positions the weapons in the hands of the dead couple, then tries to reason with



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Jacob, to quickly get their story straight, about how the couple shot each other. But can Jacob be trusted to stick to a story? He hasn't been trustworthy yet! But what else can Hank do?

Dissolve to the police station, later, and the officers are questioning Hank, believing him, and just when we start to think Hank may have gotten away with all this, they mention, well, Hank, Jacob's version doesn't square with what you just said...

And on and on, the tension and conflict keeps being ratcheted up higher and higher -- THAT is great scene construction. Look at what was packed into that one extended scene I just described, devious plans, secrets within secrets, overlapping pacts, changing loyalties, surprises, new bonding, lies, betrayals within betrayals, rage, humiliation, more surprises, violence, fear, panic, more lies. That is how to write a scene.

Are you setting the bar high enough in your scene construction? Are your conflicts, tensions and emotion are revved up high enough -- then can you find ways to make them all go up even higher?

**John Hill began writing as a professional screenwriter over 25 years ago. His numerous credits include GRIFFIN AND PHOENIX (2006), starring Dermot Mulrooney and Amanda Peet and QUIGLEY DOWN UNDER (1990), based on his spec script, starring Tom Selleck, Laura San Giacomo, and Alan Rickman. He has worked on staff as a writer-type producer on QUANTUM LEAP and on L.A. LAW, where he won an Emmy in 1991. He wrote a regular column for SCR(I)PT magazine for 5 years and now teaches writing and creativity at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas. One-on-one mentoring in screenwriting is available. He may be reached at Hillwithit@aol.com.**

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