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Shtumi in the Spotlight: How to Turn an Info-Heavy Story into Riveting Drama





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“That first draft must have been 300 pages.”

If I had a nickel for every time someone’s said this to *Spotlight* director—and my co-writer—Tom McCarthy or me in the last couple of weeks, I’d have a lot of nickels. We’re constantly asked how we managed to squeeze so much information—about the *Boston Globe*’s 2001-2002 investigation into sex abuse within the Massachusetts Catholic Church—into two hours on the screen.

Well, for the record, our very first draft was 131 pages. And our final shooting script tallies 132 pages, give or take. How did Tom and I boil down “all that information” into a reasonably sized script?

Condensing true-life stories into screenplays is hard. I’ve spent the past dozen years trying to figure out how to do it and I’ve still got lots to learn. Part of the secret to making talky, information-heavy movies cinematic is making sure the talk you *do* have is as clear and concise as possible. I’ll get specific on that in a second. First I have to talk about shtumi.

My first writing job was working for John Wells on *The West Wing*. At the end of the fourth season is an intense cliffhanger in which the Speaker of the House has taken over the presidency. I was fresh out of law school, so Wells asked me to research the 25th amendment, which deals with the line of succession to the presidency.

I read everything I could on the 25th amendment. I even called up Akhil Reed Amar, a leading constitutional expert on the U.S. line of succession. Then I wrote up three different memos and pitched at least a half a dozen different story ideas on how all this could be turned into high drama at the White House.

Wells didn't take a single one of my pitches. And shortly after receiving the third of my less-than-memorable memos, my good friend, writer Debora Cahn, pulled me aside and taught me an invaluable lesson—one that gets at the key to moving from a talky, expositional scene to one with real dramatic value.

What you need to focus on in any given scene, Debora explained, is not the *information* you're trying to get across, but the *shtumi*.

What's shtumi? It's a Yiddish term that Debora picked up when she was working on the TV comedy series *Inside Schwartz*. It's derived from the word "shtum," which means "silent or speechless." So the shtumi is the thing in a scene that will leave an audience speechless.

In comedy, that can be a lot of things. But in drama, it's the transaction at the heart of a scene. It can be (and often is) a plot transaction, but most successful scenes have a core *emotional* transaction, one that has very little to do with facts, information or political issues. Whether you're having Toby discuss the importance of a constitution in a new regime, or you want Leo and Bartlet to argue about Middle East peace, if there's no central emotional transaction—if the scene doesn't have a shtumi—you're sunk.

I've spent the better part of my career trying to clean up the informational clutter in my writing and find the shtumi. Which brings me back to *Spotlight*.



Michael Keaton as Walter "Robby" Robinson and Mark Ruffalo as Mike Rezendes, reporters for the "Spotlight" section of the *Boston Globe*. Photograph by Kerry Hayes

No one understands shtumi better than Tom McCarthy. During the shoot, on more nights than not, we'd be riding home from set after a long day and Tom would say, "Let's take another look at the scene we're shooting at the end of the week."

I won't say this didn't give me pause. After all, we'd already rewritten most of our scenes at least a dozen times before production started. And monkeying with a fairly tight scene at the last minute is not for the faint of heart. But, invariably, when I'd look at the scene in question, I'd realize that we *hadn't* nailed it—we hadn't found the shtumi. So we'd push and push on the scene until we'd gotten to something cleaner. Something tighter, something deeper. Something better. Shtumi.

One of my favorite examples of this is the Mike and Robby scene that happens about a half hour into the movie. In this scene, Mike (Mark Ruffalo) and Robby (Michael Keaton) resolve to talk to abuse survivor Phil Saviano despite the push-back they've received from others inside and outside the Globe. Here's the version of the scene we had going into shooting:

INT. ROBBY'S OFFICE, GLOBE

Robby's looking over some of the clips Matty pulled.

MIKE

Shouldn't you be golfing?

Robby looks up. Mike's in the door.

ROBBY

Couldn't get a tee time.

MIKE

Is that what they call it? A tee time.

ROBBY

Yeah, they also call it a leisure activity. You should try it.

MIKE

I run.

ROBBY

You run to work.

MIKE

Saves gas money.

Robby smiles.

MIKE (CONT'D)

That the file on Saviano?

ROBBY

Yeah.

MIKE

Ben and Kurkjian think he's a dead end.

ROBBY

I heard. I got an email from Ben.

MIKE

Look, I know I can be a little eager sometimes...

ROBBY

That's a nice word for it.

MIKE

But, I just... you think Ben's missing it on this one?

ROBBY

He doesn't miss much.

MIKE

Yeah, but, I dunno if it's because of Baron or 'cause it's the Church...

ROBBY

Baron's an outsider. Church does a lot a good in this town.

MIKE

Those aren't reasons not to go after this.

ROBBY

No. They're not.

They look at each other. On the same page. Resolved.

MIKE

I'm gonna shower. Then we dig in?

ROBBY

Good idea.

Mike smiles and starts to go.

ROBBY (CONT'D)

Mike? We gotta get this right. Air tight. Or the Church'll bury us.

MIKE

The Church? The whole frickin' city.

Mike leaves. Robby picks up the file, gets to work.

The scene's not bad. It conveys essential information: People Mike and Robby respect at the Globe think Saviano's a waste of time. But Robby and Mike decide to push ahead anyway. And this is clearly risky.

So what's missing?

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Here's what we did to this scene in the middle of shooting, after one of those late night conversations. I've highlighted the parts we've changed:

INT. GLOBE, ROBBY'S OFFICE – MOMENTS LATER

Robby's looking over some of the clips Matt pulled.

MIKE

Hey. Shouldn't you be golfing?

Robby looks up. Mike's in the door, towel around his neck.

ROBBY

Golfing's not a verb. And I couldn't get a tee time today.

MIKE

Is that what they call it? A tee time?

ROBBY

Yeah, they also call it a leisure activity. You should try it, Mike.

MIKE

I run.

ROBBY

You run to work.

Mike shrugs, true. He eyes the clips on Robby's desk.

MIKE

So what are you doing here today?

ROBBY

Looking at clips. On Saviano.

MIKE

Ben and Steve think he's a dead end. They gave me a lot of crap at the game.

ROBBY

Yeah, Ben sent me an email.

MIKE

He did?

ROBBY

Yeah.

MIKE

What do you wanna do?

ROBBY

Bring him in.

MIKE

So just ignore those guys?

ROBBY

I think we have to start ignoring everybody on this one.

MIKE

I'm good with that.

(then)

You think Baron has any idea what's coming down the Pike?

ROBBY

No. But I don't think he cares either.

MIKE

That's refreshing.

ROBBY

Unless he's wrong.

Mike registers this.

Same information. But look at how we use it differently.



(L-R) Josh Singer, Tom McCarthy and the real-life Robby Robinson on set

First, the characters have more to play. When Robby tells Mike that Ben sent him an email, Mike is surprised. So there's more for Ruffalo to do. This also tells us something about Mike. Finally, Mike's reaction gives more power to Ben's objection.

Second, the transaction of the scene, the fundamental plot movement, is much clearer. “What are we going to do? We’re going to bring in Saviano. We’re going to ignore everybody.” Mike and Robby are making the same decision, but by spelling it out, it’s somehow bolder. It feels like a stronger character move for both men because it’s explicit.

Finally, we say more with less. Instead of restating information we already know about Marty being an outsider and the power of the church (talky talky talky), this information is just alluded to en route to a larger statement about Marty’s character. Instead of telling you that the team needs to get this right, we show you how important it is that they get it right by having Mike react to the notion that they might be wrong. Of course, it helps when you have an actor as good as Ruffalo to land the scene.

The second scene is clearer, tighter and deeper on character. It’s shorter, yet it conveys a lot more. Just look at the emotional arc: In the first version of the scene, both Mike and Robby have pretty linear arcs. They enter and exit the scene in pretty much the same emotional place; maybe they’re slightly more certain of themselves, but they basically end the scene the way they begin it—knowing they want to push ahead with the investigation.

In the final version, however, Mike’s emotional arc is a lot more interesting. Mike enters with less certainty. He’s been affected emotionally by the push back, more so when he finds out that Ben’s emailed Robby. He’s not sure what they should do. And while he’s excited when Robby suggests they push ahead, his excitement is tempered when he considers (for perhaps the first time in the movie) that his instinct about the story might be wrong. There’s a real emotional transaction here. We found the shtumi.

This was probably our 21st draft of the scene. You have to be relentless about this. Managing information, figuring out how to use it to accentuate rather than overpower a scene—it’s a process, just like every other creative endeavor. No one gets it right on the first draft. But with time, helpful friends and collaborators, and great, great effort, you can get there... as long as you don’t focus on the facts, but focus on the shtumi. MM

This article appears in *MovieMaker’s Complete Guide to Making Movies 2016*. *Spotlight* opens in theaters November 6, 2015, courtesy of Open Road Films.