Frank Pierson on - Dog Day Afternoon.

There are those of us who begin a film by constructing a plot and trying to find characters who conflict will cause that plot (and no other) to happen. I prefer to begin with a character whose drive touches some unconscious aspect of myself and then proceed to work out a story that dramatizes this character's dilemma, by finding complimentary characters who's drives are in conflict.

Dog Day Afternoon was advertised as a true story but was extensively fictionalized in order to make it a story as opposed to a documentary recreation, a series of events one after another in chronological order. I had to find a story driven from within, by personality.

For me, Dog Day began with a huge pile of clippings, news and magazine reports of a bank robbery motivated by the need of the homosexual wife of the robber for a sex-change operation. I also had a huge pile of transcripts of tape-recorded interviews with all of the various people involved, the hostages the robber held in the bank, the various cops and FBI people who eventually captured him and shot and killed his partner, with the robber's family and friends, his homosexual wife, and his heterosexual wife. It was overwhelming.

The incident exercised a morbid fascination. It came at an earlier and more innocent phase of the TV revolution; it came on an afternoon in one of New York's unbearable heat waves when people will do almost anything for distraction. The robbers were (in that day before police took control of reporters' coverage) able to appear on the television news shows, and Sonny, as we called him in the movie, took full advantage. Millions watched, thousands actually got in their cars to go to the scene, including some hundreds (one police officer thought thousands) of off-duty police.

The first problem in dramatizing this event was to identify what it was that was so fascinating. It was tempting to believe that the public event was the interesting aspect, a television first, as it were. But this is the stuff of documentaries; it was an interesting color of the action, and certainly provided a good deal of the specific actions and backgrounds and could be exploited for stage business. But this is not drama.

The problem lay in the character of the hero. In all of the material I was supplied (and backed up by further interviews I did myself), there was nothing from Sonny. He was involved in a contract dispute with Warner Brothers and wouldn't talk to me. (He had signed a legal release, however, so we were free to depict him as a character.) I had a biography. It was in the newspapers and the tapes - it was all event. I knew the bare bones of his history, where he'd gone to school, that he'd been a rather conservative young man who'd been a Goldwater delegate at a Republican convention, that he had a wife and two children who loved him, that he once worked in a bank and so knew how banks worked and where things were kept. I knew his height and weight and that he looked a lot like Al Pacino. I knew he'd married a man (Ernie) in a Catholic church ceremony, without getting a divorce from his female wife. I knew he'd been unable to keep a job regularly as his life grew more and more chaotic. I knew his homosexual wife grew exasperated with him as he was sexually demanding and jealous. I knew his heterosexual wife was exasperated with him for all kinds of reasons. I knew he'd gone into the bank to steal money because he thought a sex-change operation as a birthday present would make his homosexual wife happy.

His behavior in his life and in the bank was riddled with contradictions, quixotic gestures of kindness alternated with raging defiance, noisy outbursts of anger with sudden quiet. The tapes of those who knew him, especially those who knew him best, were wildly confusing. Even within the same tape. It was as though each person was describing a different man, and some, several different men.

I could find no way to write the story around him, and yet I couldn't see who he was in a way that would let me write him. He was a stranger to me. Some weeks went by in this way, and I was getting nowhere. I was on the verge of giving up and telling my agent to get me out of the assignment.

I knew what was wrong. I could not find in this character anything I could understand and identify with, that would let me feel the way he felt and understand why he did the things he did. It was impossible to imagine the things I would have to make up to create the story.

A story doesn't exist, except as a series of unrelated incidents, unless there is some driving principle, a will driving the action, that makes all of the incidents inevitable. The fact that Sonny robbed a bank to get a sex-change operation for Ernie would seem to satisfy the criterion of a will that drives the action. But it was not enough to give a sense of style, of how he would go about it, of why the hostages rather liked him, and so forth.

I set myself an exercise, a little like a quiz crossed with improvisation. I asked myself what kind of man could produce such contradictory responses from those who knew him? And what did his relationships with all of these people have in common?

I saw that in each case the person had loved him and that in every case he or she felt betrayed. When I began to see this, I dug deeper into their testimony. In each case, in a way peculiar to that particular case, he made a promise, tacit and unspoken but nonetheless a kind of emotional contract with the person involved, which, given the circumstances of his life, was impossible to fulfill.

For example, his heterosexual wife had grown enormously fat. But he refused to allow her to call herself fat; he pretended even went to preposterous lengths to pretend that she was in fact thin. So of course, since she was forbidden to diet (it would be a tacit admission that she was fat), she grew fatter, and the pretense grew like a lie in their lives, to proportions that she dimly perceived; she grew angrier and angrier. All these people loved him and yet they were all
angry at him because he based his relationship to them on false premises that grew out of promises he made that nobody could keep.

The final promise was robbing the bank to get money for the sex-change operation, which turned out to be a televised fiasco in which people would get killed. Ernie was not grateful; he viewed it as typical of the kind of disaster that Sonny created around him, with all the best intentions. Then it struck me that Sonny conceived of himself as a magician with the power to make dreams come true, to fulfill hopes and ambitions. He loved the needy and unfulfilled, and he went through life trying to fulfill their dreams of themselves, to make them whole. And once they were whole, they could give back to him the love he had given to them. But this was an impossible dream. All he was able to do was fan their hopes. He was a convincingly dreamer because he believed the dream was real. And when the eventual disaster materialized, he was blamed for letting them down. Instead of love, he got back from everyone waves of anger and resentment.

Now of course this is wholly imaginary. I never met the real-life Sonny, and have no way of knowing if this is an accurate psychological portrait. But it made sense of a vast pile of unrelated facts. And of course I didn't think of this fictional Sonny as being so articulate and aware that he would know this about himself; it was the way he acted in the world. Once I knew this about my fictional Sonny, I knew how to write him. I knew what he would do or say in any situation I could put him into.

I knew he would be considerate and worried about the needs of his hostages, down to getting them food and medicine and allowing them to go to the bathroom. I knew he would even try to see into the needs of the cops and intuit their actions from their needs as he understood them. A character like this would grow sly and very smart about reading people's real intentions and subconscious attitudes. I knew that at times the strain of trying to handle everyone else's problems and manage his own would tell; he would break out and accuse them all of ingratitude for his prodigious efforts. He would at times be bitter and sad and feel unappreciated. But he would also feel proud and in control, almost arrogant in his feeling that he understood everything and that everybody else understood nothing.

I now had a well driving the story that went far beyond the mere stipulation that a man robbed a bank to raise money for a sex-change operation for his lover. I understood why he would do it; and the schizoid disintegration of his personality from repeated failure in the past explained why he was so out of touch with reality.

From that moment, I could write the screenplay almost without effort. Until that understanding, I couldn't write a word.

Consider the following plot development ideas

- Developing your work from a character and his motives.
- Work with a basic conflict between two characters.
- Form your story as a memoir, or give it some other similar container to be held by.
- Consider moving your story forward expressionistically rather than causally.
- Develop parallel plot lines.
- Explore a basic human conflict: pleasure vs. practicality.
- Relate a single event from several viewpoints. How we interpret events and the comparison between the varying viewpoints can be interesting.
- Consider reordering the events of the story you have now written, try several orderings and see what happens.
- Consider merging historical events into your story.