

## **'Stuff' and the Problem of the Second Act**

Most have you have had, or will get, an email telling you that the second act is too short. It is by far the most common problem with student scripts. Interesting situations that make great first acts are a dime a dozen, and the climax is usually fairly obvious, but the second act seems to be the big problem for most people.

But it doesn't need to be.

What is the 'stuff' of your movie? That's what goes in the second act.

Perhaps I'd better define 'stuff'. 'Stuff' is a word I use to describe the sort of events that make up the body of your movie. For example, the 'stuff' of a war movie is guys in uniforms shooting at each other. The 'stuff' of *Die Hard* is Bruce Willis fighting terrorists in a high rise building. The 'stuff' of *Hotel Rwanda* is a bunch of refugees hiding in a hotel. The 'stuff' of *Memento* is a guy trying to find the guy who killed his wife (albeit backwards). The 'stuff' of *Enter the Dragon* is Bruce Lee beating people up. The 'stuff' of *Heavenly Creatures* is two young women becoming obsessed with each other in a fantasy world.

'Stuff' is what happens in a movie. As you can see from the above examples I've oversimplified them fairly radically.

If you can figure out what the main body of 'stuff' in your movie is - that's the second act. Figure out a way to get your characters to do that 'stuff' and that's your first act. Figure out where that 'stuff' will take your characters and that's the third act.

**Example:** Suppose I want to write movie about the Nanking Massacre of 1937. The main characters will be a group of western missionaries who defend a large number of Chinese women from Japanese soldiers. The 'stuff' will be the missionaries valiantly risking themselves by standing up to the Japanese, standing in front of the Japanese machine guns and hiding the Chinese when the Japanese search the buildings. That's the second act.

In the first act the Japanese arrive, in the last act I'll need to build up tension to one big showdown where the Japanese soldiers finally back down. It's an over simplification, but hopefully you should see the point.

If you can work out what the stuff of your movie is the second act is easy.