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My Walk and Talk with Aaron Sorkin: A Month in Aaron Sorkin's Master Class

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By Jonathan Williams | June 21, 2017 | Main

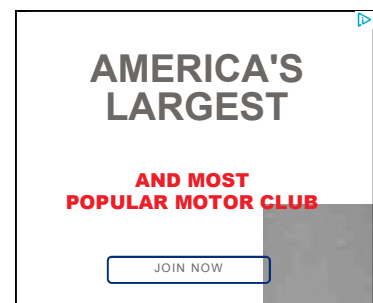
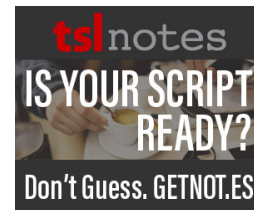


Film school is expensive. Let's face it. There is an entire market alone that takes advantage of wannabe filmmakers. Especially screenwriters. Guru's and contests all promising fame, fortune and big bucks. Thankfully, there seems to be a turning of the tide. With the Internet being what it is it's harder to stay under the radar if you're scamming people with script and film contests. Things like John August and Craig Mazin's *Scriptnotes* podcast provide writers with a low-cost alternative that is more in-depth and thorough than a four-year college or graduate class. I'm pleased to say that **Master Class** belongs firmly to this latter category. It does its part to turn the tides back in the aspiring screenwriters favor.

I rolled my eyes at first. I was intrigued at taking an online Master Class with none other than Sorkin himself, but the pitch seemed to good to be true. Dialogue has never been my greatest strength and a chance to learn from the master was intriguing; but, I didn't want to be duped by another screenwriting scam. But as more of these classes appeared with high-profile creative professionals of all sorts, my interest peaked. Surely they couldn't all be in on it and so I decided to take a chance. All of them are, for lack of a better term, a brand of their own and none appear to be the type that is out to make a quick cheap buck.

"The last writer's conference I saw with Sorkin in attendance had passes costing upwards of \$160. With **Master Class, you get a more in-depth, personal experience for nearly half that amount."**

I was lucky enough to receive a very expensive film education. That's not to brag, either. I've got the student loan receipts to show for it, after all. Instead, I bring it up only to emphasize what I'm about to



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say. At \$90 the Master Class is a worthwhile experience – even for a guy like me that's been through the film school ringer. I sometimes take for granted the fact that living in Los Angeles means I have the scriptlab in which I speak in person around town on a daily basis. Even so, Store sometimes those seminars and Q&A's can come with a costly price. The last writer's conference I saw with Sorkin in attendance had passes costing upwards of \$160. With Master Class, you get a more in-depth, personal experience for nearly half that amount.

There are a few downsides to this particular Master Class, but seeing as though it was among the first to be released, I wouldn't put it past them to have already worked out the bugs. Firstly, Sorkin's class, while interesting for all, is not for more advanced writers. Sorkin discusses much of his process from a very standard Screenwriting 101 perspective. Granted if you're Sorkin fan like me, you probably won't care. You're more likely to be enthralled by the mere opportunity to gain his perspective on the craft. It wasn't until the Week 4 selection of lessons where I really became involved. Sorkin begins to teach scene breakdowns from his episodes of *The West Wing*. For my own purposes, these were some of the more helpful and definitive lessons.

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"It should be said that Sorkin is a writer first and foremost."

There's another excellent section in which Sorkin runs a mock writer's room to break the opening of Season 5 of *The West Wing* (Sorkin left the series at the end of Season 4). This was helpful to watch as many writers like Vince Gilligan have discussed how they run their rooms but to actually watch one unfold was incredibly insightful. The downside is that this portion of the class takes about eight lessons and a huge chunk of the final portion of the Master Class which by about the fourth writer's room episode I was done and ready to move on.

It



Sorkin's Master Class is worth it.

should be said that Sorkin is a writer first and foremost. He's not a teacher. Through no fault of his own, you can see him struggling a bit to deliver a clear and concise lesson in several of the later classes. It almost feels like they ran out of the best (or at least the most *teachable*) lessons very early on in the planning.

That's not to say the later sections of the course aren't worth your time, but to hear Sorkin try and teach a class on pitching when we all know he's reached a point in his career where the art of the pitch is no longer a problem for him causes this particular lesson to fall flat. His upcoming scripts are treated with the reverence of an upcoming Harry Potter novel after all, which doesn't exactly make him an expert in pitching ideas as an emerging writer in 2017.

So what's to like? For me, it was just inspiring to listen to Sorkin's point of view. To listen to any writer talk about the craft they love without being chained to the dreary repetition of Q&A's is incredibly

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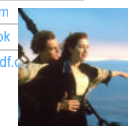


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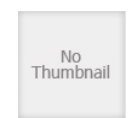
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refreshing. There is a strange intimacy about these classes. You almost feel as though you could walk up to Sorkin in public and say, "Hey teach, I loved last week's lesson can't wait for this week."

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Sorkin manages to reframe some of the most basic screenwriting lessons in such a fresh and different way — lessons I've heard a thousand times — which seemed fresh and sparked my creativity. Screenwriting aside, Sorkin's stories from the trenches of the business make it all worthwhile. He comes off so humble and relatable that it pulls you into each class. For a guy that gave up his acting aspirations to pursue writing, he has an incredible on-screen presence.

"Sorkin describes writing dialogue like writing music."

As for his lesson on dialogue, it did not disappoint. Sorkin mentions that writing great dialogue is simply not something you can teach, but even with that foreboding preface he seems to do a damn fine job of doing so. These are the lessons where he shines; his love of writing sends him into a passionate lecture on the beauty of writing dialogue. I've heard so many teachers ramble through a lesson plan that can be found in any screenwriting book, but the greatest lessons I've always learned are when writers simply provide me with a new way of looking at things.

Sorkin describes writing dialogue like writing music. How Sorkin works his scenes to have a precise rhythm so not only do they get the point across but they are pleasing to the ear. He describes how he composes a scene between two characters and it brings to mind a quote from his movie *Steve Jobs*. In Sorkin's scripts he quite literally, "plays the orchestra" and his characters are the instruments. I'm someone who loves writing to music and this offered a perspective that I cannot wait to try in my own work.

Master Class is an incredible tool for writers – especially those outside the entertainment bubble of Los Angeles. Or for those who cannot afford or do not have the time to go to film school, or attend expensive writing conferences. With the class forums and lessons, it provides writers with a community of other Master Class writers to connect with and share your work. This is incredibly important for any beginning writer because good constructive feedback can be hard to find especially in areas where the entertainment community is not uniquely present.

A workbook is provided for each episode that contains writing exercises and further reading on the lessons discussed in class. These are hit or miss. Writing is something that can only get better with practice and constructive feedback and while some of the writing exercises are great and the fellow Master Class users seem to be responsive and willing to trade notes for notes there are other lessons that fall flat on their exercises and don't seem to have anything to else offer than a reflection on the lesson and a reminder to keep writing.

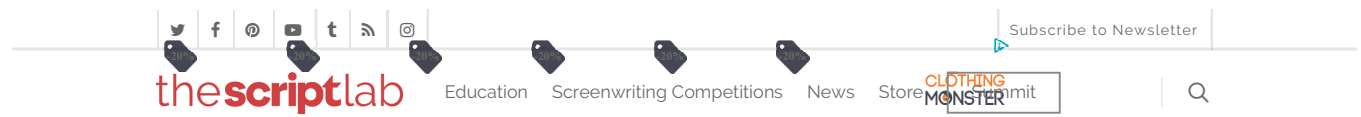
"Master Class is an incredible tool for writers – especially those outside the entertainment bubble of Los Angeles."

There are always ways that classes can improve no matter how good the school or teacher, and we all learn differently. What I liked about Sorkin's class may not be what others find helpful to their own writing. I will say that having glanced at the trailers for Shonda Rhimes TV Writing Class and David Mamet's Dramatic Writing Class it seems that at least with Sorkin you get a full packaged deal. He is a writer that in a league of his own and the class reflects that.

I don't recommend going in blind. The best way for a teacher to convey their knowledge is through experience and if you aren't familiar with Sorkin's work it will make the class more difficult to swallow. Even so by the third episode it's likely you will be inspired enough to want to revisit Sorkin's work again or even for the first time with a new perspective.

Click [here](#) for more information on Aaron Sorkin's Master Class.

Full Disclosure: While we stand by this review of Master Class wholeheartedly, the links to Master Class in this article are affiliate links and we make a few bucks when you sign up for a class through one of them. It helps us keep the lights on. Thank you for your support!



Jonathan Williams

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