

The First Two Pages: “Tongor of the Elephants” By Buzz Dixon
From *Heartbreaks & Half-Truths*
Edited by Judy Penz Sheluk (Superior Shores Press)

An Essay by Buzz Dixon

*“Do I really look like a guy with a plan? ...I just **do** things.”*

— *The Joker* (Heath Ledger) in Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight*

You ask me what sort of strategy I had when writing “Tongor of the Elephants” for *Heartaches & Half-truths*.

Excellent question.

Damned if I know.

I read somewhere that the hallmark of an expert chess player is not anticipating all the next possible moves, but instantly *rejecting* all the non-viable ones.

Suddenly the problem shrinks to wholly manageable levels—six or eight possible routes to success instead of millions.

The germ of “Tongor” originated in my fondness for old movie serials; in the weeks before writing it, I binge watched at least a dozen, and I’ve read extensively on the form and its creators. (I’m a big fan of all sorts of movies but there’s a special place in my heart for 1930s-’40s B-movies.)

I belong to a writing group, and every week we try to offer something new to read, so somewhere the idea took root.

Once I figured out the broad strokes of the story, I just started writing, no firm plan in my head other than the milieu of B-movies.

I start my stories in a variety of ways, whatever works best for that particular tale.

So while I can't tell you *why* I made the choices I made, I can tell you *how* they work. Here's my opening line:

Here, lemme show you something you've never seen before.

Ooooh, a secret! Everybody loves to learn a secret, to be an insider, one of the cool kids.

And look at that "lemme." Getting a little low brow here, our narrator ain't the most polished of people.

I've only shown this to maybe six other people in the last thirty years, but I'll be honest, I must've watched it dozens of times whenever I find myself in a bad mood, an ugly mood.
A mean mood.

Wha—? This doesn't sound like good clean fun anymore—and our narrator is a bit of a creep.

Lemme thread it up on the ol' moviola.

Okay, intimation of time and place. Pre-digital movies, possibly Hollywood. The reader starts accessing that folder in their memory banks.

Now, I know you've seen all the footage in the Republic Studios archives if you're researching all the "lost" Republic serials.

Most of 'em aren't actually lost—*Tongor Of The Elephants* isn't, just abandoned. Studios announce projects all the time that get canceled without so much as a single frame of film getting exposed. Sometimes they get revived under different titles—the way Republic's *Superman* serial got reworked into *The Mysterious Dr. Satan* or Columbia's *Phantom* sequel became *Captain Africa*—but low budget studios never really abandoned anything they started production on.

They couldn't afford it...with this one exception.

More info: We realize the reader is seeing this through the eyes of an unseen character, the person researching old serials.

If the reader knows anything about old serials, great, but if they don't there's a brief info dump to cement the time (1930s or '40s) and place (Hollywood, specifically the cheap side of the street).

We learn a low budget studio would never abandon a production once started...

...but then we learn we're about to see the one exception.

You recognize him, of course: "J. Cecil Revell, the Million Dollar Profile."

"J. Cecil Revell, the thick slice of ham" is more like it."

Now we finally get a character with a name and a hint at a backstory.

This is the one place where I did do some conscious thinking, trying out a variety of names and initials until I found one that sounded like an actual 1930's film actor but wasn't.

That's Evalyn, Evalyn Baumann. Beautiful name for a gal who looks like a sack of potatoes, isn't it?

Another role in my *dramatis personae*. The reader sees the dichotomy between Revell and Evalyn and should be anticipating some sort of conflict involving them (the reader also sees the unnamed narrator still acting like a jerk).

There she is helping him up on Old Jezebel...

Knowing the title of the story is "Tongor of the Elephants," the reader probably assumes Old Jezebel is a pachyderm (and they would be right).

Getting nervous? Yeah, you guessed what this is. Think you can take it?

Okay, on with the show.

Uh-oh, fun and games have long since gone home and changed the lock on the door. The *reader* may not know what this combination of Revell + Evalyn + Old Jezebel portends, but the reader's *character* sure knows, and the narrator is sadistic enough to enjoy that discomfort.

Watch take one. Look at how Hambone—that's what the crew called Revell—look how he's kicking Old Jezebel behind the ears to get her to move forward.

Take one, no problem.

Take two, no problem—but look how he keeps kicking her.

Whatever the narrator's POV of Revell, it's clearly shared by many others.

And the narrator mentions Revell kicking Old Jezebel behind the ears *twice*.

I wouldn't hang a lantern on it if it wasn't important.

Brace yourself.

“Brace yourself” never means good news.

Take three—and *pow!*

The reader doesn't know what “pow” refers to but like “brace yourself” it's never a good thing to hear when there's an elephant involved.

No more J. Cecil Revell.

One and two-thirds pages into the story and we've not only introduced a character but killed him off in an implied gruesome manner—

OMG! That sadistic bastard is going to show it again—and *frame-by-frame!*

(I leave it up to the reader if said sadistic bastard refers to the narrator or the author...or both.)

Page two ends with:

I don't think Hambone ever fully realized what was happening. I think he had just barely enough time to realize *something* went wrong, but not what lay in store for him, and if you ask me, that's a pity.

Dang, that narrator is one unpleasant piece of work, isn't he?

Still, he's dragging the reader into the story.

This isn't a classic whodunnit where the reader wonders what's going to happen next (because let's be honest, anything following death-by-elephant is bound to be anti-climactic), but I'd like to think the reader wonders *why* it happened...

...and that "why" is what drives us through the rest of the story.

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A long-time writer in animation, film, and graphic novels, Buzz Dixon's most notable credits include writing for the original *Transformers* and *G.I. Joe* series as well as short fiction in *Mike Shayne's Mystery Magazine*, *National Lampoon*, the *Pan Book of Horror Stories*, *Analog*, and numerous original anthologies.