



Do Inhale:
Mr. Chips Goes to Hell

How they make *Breaking Bad* hurt so good.

Written by Marsha Scarbrough

Two writers were commiserating about their stalled careers.

They'd met in NYU film school in the mid-'80s and subsequently worked on *The X-Files*. But that series ended in 2002, and work had been scarce ever since. Here it was 2005, and a spec script they'd co-written hadn't sold. On the phone, they explored career options other than writing—greeter at Wal-Mart seemed viable. Then Tom Schnauz mentioned an article in the *New York Times* about some guy who got busted for cooking meth in his apartment.

"Wham! This scenario came to life in my head and became very vivid," says Vince Gilligan. "It usually doesn't work like that. What was interesting initially and still interests me to this day is the idea of a very straight-arrow character who decides to make a radical change in his life and goes from being a protagonist to an antagonist. It's something of an experiment because TV is not designed to work that way, but I just figured after 50 years, let's try something a little different."

Fast-forward to a frigid February 2011 day in New Mexico. On a stage at Albuquerque Studios, executive producer Gilligan has made a quick visit to the set. He's flown in from Los Angeles, specifically to hold a "tone" meeting with a new director, but he greets the crew, chats with actors, and consults with the writer of this particular episode, supervising producer George Mastras.

It's a far cry from being a Wal-Mart greeter. A Nikon SLR camera with a long lens is slung around Gilligan's neck. Between and during conversations, he shoots random, candid photos. At one point, Gilligan picks up a Flip video camera from the script supervisor's portable desk and records a rehearsal. Any member of the production may shoot with the Flip; later, casual footage will be edited into "making of" features on series DVDs.

This scene's from Episode Two, Season Four. Special-effects smoke fills the stage. Jesse Pinkman's living room is crowded with stoned partygoers writhing to the primal beat of rap music. The camera, mounted on a Supertechno crane, follows a joint being passed from hand to hand, finally settling above Jesse (Aaron Paul). He gazes up from his dance, revealing stoner eyes filled with regret and pain. It's a signature *Breaking Bad* scene: little or no dialogue, where everything the camera sees is indicated on the page, where silences are written, where the drama is played out solely in the actor's face.

The shot requires several takes because camera, actors, and background action are staged to obscure anyone inhaling from the featured reefer. Network Standards and Practices will allow only exhaling and raising the joint to lips to be caught on camera. The action is precisely choreographed:



backs turn away as actors and extras drag and exhale. Mastras' many responsibilities include watching for any errant inhalation that the director might miss.

One more reason to have the writer on set.

Break Out Hit

"Every script is like drug-induced poetry," Aaron Paul, who plays Jesse, says. "Obviously, some of these sayings I would never say in real life, but as Jesse, it just makes sense. All of the *yo's* and all of the *bitches* are scripted, every single one of them. All the lingo is dead on. Every word has a purpose and makes sense."

How does such poetry emerge from a guy who grew up in the small town of Farmville, Virginia? After high school in a suburb of Richmond, Gilligan attended NYU film school as an undergraduate where, in 1988, he wrote a feature-length script, *Home Fries*. It won a state screenwriting competition. One of the judges of that competition was Mark Johnson, Barry Levinson's producing partner. Gilligan and Johnson became friends and have worked together for 20 years. He produced another Gilligan script, *Wilder Napalm*, released in 1993. Then Johnson produced *Home Fries*, released in 1998, and now is a producer on *Breaking Bad*.

In the mid-90s, while living in Virginia, Gilligan became a fan of a new TV show called *The X-Files*, created by Chris Carter.

They met, and Carter invited Gilligan to write a freelance script. "Cut to six or nine months later, I'm sitting around Virginia thinking to myself, *Gee, I'm not having much luck selling more movie scripts. If they'll take me, why don't I just move to California and write for TV?* Luckily, Chris Carter was amenable to that, so I moved lock, stock, and barrel out to L.A. where I've been ever since."

Gilligan was on *The X-Files* writing staff for seven seasons. After *X-Files*, Gilligan wrote spec scripts and attempted a couple of TV pilots that were aborted early. Then came the phone conversation with a flash of inspiration that grew into *Breaking Bad*.

When Sony executives read the pilot, they questioned the title's meaning. "To me, it's just an old expression that I thought everyone was familiar with when I put it on the title page. To 'break bad' is to raise hell, so you'd say, 'Man, I was down at the bar last night, and I got one too many in me, and I just really broke bad. I ended up in the drunk tank.'"

After Gilligan defined it for the Sony execs, "They said, 'Not the greatest title, maybe you need to come up with something different.' We all put our heads to it, and nothing better ever presented itself. It's got that gerund in it that gives it a little action. And *bad* as in 'bad ass.' It always worked for

me. I'm glad to bring it into wider usage."

In his initial pitch to Sony and AMC, Gilligan elaborated further: "I want to take Mr. Chips and turn him into Scarface over the life of the series."

Gilligan's Shutter Island

After that Albuquerque set visit, Gilligan returns to Los Angeles and meets with his writers in a Burbank office building. The names of the previous tenants are still on the office door. He chose this lower-rent location over Sony's Culver City lot in order to "put every penny possible on the screen." One of the staff describes the venue as "obviously former phone sex offices."

The writing team sits around a table cluttered with notepads, water bottles, Kleenex boxes, and plastic cups filled with pens and highlighters. Gilligan plays a child's sound-effect toy, punctuating the discussion with canned laughter, *bo-ings*, and belches. Large cork boards lean against the walls, one for each episode of season four, with index cards representing individual scenes push-pinned in order in the sections. Schnauz, now a supervising producer, says, "We like to look at *Breaking Bad* as a very intricate puzzle." Gilligan describes this process of breaking stories in the writers' room as "a sequestered jury that never ends."

On this sunny February day in Los Angeles, the writing team is searching for an ending to a scene between Walt and Walter Jr. Gilligan wants something "unexpected." The writers pitch various solutions. Although strong differences of opinion are evident, they respectfully acknowledge each other's point of view before politely disagreeing. When consensus is reached, Gilligan grabs a black marker pen and an index card. He writes the essence of the scene in block letters and pins it to the bulletin board with a sense of accomplishment. He writes all the cards himself so the handwriting will be legible and consistent.

Seated around his table for season four are Sam Catlin, co-executive producer; Peter Gould, supervising producer; George Mastras, supervising producer; Thomas Schnauz, supervising producer; Moira Walley-Beckett, producer; and Gennifer Hutchison, staff writer.

The team spends about 10 days in the room per corkboard (one episode). When a writer rotates out of the room to craft a script, he or she may work directly from the cards on the corkboard. The first step is to write a prose treatment of the episode that goes to the network and the studio for input.

Then the writer submits a full draft to Gilligan for notes. "Of course, there is a notes process as with any show," he says. "I give some notes here and there, but there's not major

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rewriting going on. All of our folks here now have been with us at least three seasons, some of them four. My writers all know the show inside and out. Everyone gets these [character] voices pretty clearly, luckily."

When two writers work together on a script, they typically divide the scenes and work separately, then come back together to assemble a draft. You might assume that the gritty authenticity of *Breaking Bad's* underworld of drug addiction means someone on the writing staff is a former meth head. But you would be wrong. Gilligan himself is as straight an arrow as Walter White. Nor is any writer a chemist or an oncologist. In fact, the writing team relies heavily on the Internet and consultants for its research.

Explains Gilligan, "First and foremost, the Drug Enforcement Administration has been so helpful. The writers and I have been able to visit the DEA district office in Los Angeles. We met with DEA agents who told us stories and shared their experiences. We have help from a DEA chemist in Dallas who ensures that we dot all our I's and cross all our T's."

An outside-the-box signature of the show is the nonlinear construction of individual episodes. The teaser might be a bit from the final scene of that show, an image from an upcoming show, or a flashback adding exposition to a previous episode. "The biggest challenge we've given ourselves story-wise up to this point was season two," Gilligan says. "The very opening images of the first episode [revealed] what was going to happen at the very end of the entire season. In other words, season two starts out with the image that ends season two, which meant that we had to have quite a lot figured out before we started shooting. That one just about killed us, so we haven't done it since. I tell people, 'Why should we repeat ourselves?' That is true, but I'm not eager to jump back into that. It was a tough one."

Catlin points out: "Writing is a challenge no matter what you're doing. There's verisimilitude, a rigorous naturalism. The characters are complex and contradictory. Vince likes to write a lot of stage direction, a lot of parenthetical thought process. There's a whole script within the script that's not the dialogue. It's not like a Pinter play where it's, 'He said. She said. He said. She said. He said. She said.' We've had scenes that are three or four pages of nothing but directions and no dialogue. We take a lot of time with visual transitions. We kind of direct as we write."

Contemporary social issues provide the inciting incidents that launch Walt on his journey, which Bryan Cranston (Walter White) describes as "a ride through hell." View-

ers can readily relate to a father dealing with the high cost of healthcare and the dilemma of trying to support a family on a teacher's salary. Mastras says, "Overeducated, underpaid, teacher's salary, healthcare problems, aspiring to be middle class but struggling—that's part of what I saw when I read the pilot. I felt it was about the plight of the middle class, the middle-class squeeze. When Walt acts out, you feel a catharsis through his character. It felt like he was a voice for so much that is going on in our society today."

Gilligan observes, "Walt feels like the deck has been stacked against him. It can feel topical, I suppose, with healthcare issues being what they are in America in the 21st century and teachers not getting paid as much as they should. These are real world issues that we incorporate into the telling of our story. At the end of the day, Walter White can have any excuse he wants for his behavior, but his choices are his own, and they are not always good. Even Hitler could [rationalize] all of his actions."

To fulfill Gilligan's original vision of evolving a protagonist into an antagonist, the "hero" becomes less likable with each new episode. Perhaps this aspect of the storytelling takes the viewers farthest outside the TV box. Mastras reveals, "One of our biggest debates was about Jesse's girlfriend, when Walt lets her aspirate. How far can we push this guy toward darkness and not lose the audience? He's still doing this for good reasons, but he's doing horrible things. We're able to play in these gray areas and not have characters that are either wholly good or wholly bad."

Gilligan's team does much more than break stories and write. They also actively produce the episodes by being present during preproduction, on the set during principal photography, and observing in the editing room. Gilligan explains why: "I learned from Chris Carter on seven years of *The X-Files* that the best way to employ your writers in a way that serves you and them, that makes everyone happy, is to invest them as much as possible in the work that they do. Whether a writer has the title of producer or not, writers should be employed from the earliest moments as producers. You want to cultivate enthusiasm from them whenever possible."

"To that end," Gilligan continues, "In the writers' room, we break each story as a group whenever possible. Sometimes individual folks are off writing or visiting the set, so not everyone is there every moment. But in a perfect world, all seven of us are sitting in the room breaking the stories. We're all invested. We all have a stake in each individual plot of each individual episode. When it is an individual writer's turn to write a particular episode, obviously I want them getting it as

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perfect as they can make it, then I want them involved in the casting decisions. I want them visiting the set and being an aide to the director and to the producers who are in Albuquerque to bring the script alive in the best possible terms, to get on film everything that we need plotwise. Then I want them in the editing room with me during the producer's cut to make that cut as good as it can be. You should take responsibility for your creation as much as you possibly can. You should get your voice heard."

DEA Travel Budget

When a writer's episode is going to be shot, he or she flies to Albuquerque several days before shooting begins to go on a tech scout with the director, look at the locations, sit in on casting sessions. On the last day of preproduction, Gilligan arrives for a tone meeting with the director and writer. They go through the script from page one to the last page, talking

through each scene as exhaustively as possible.

Gould sees his role on the set as "being Vince's eyes and ears. It is a very serialized show, so the crew might not know where we're going. There could be situations where it would seem logical that something should happen from reading the script, but that might mess us up for where we know we're actually going."

No matter how collaborative the creative process, the writers credit Gilligan's vision for *Breaking Bad's* distinctive aesthetic. Gould points out that "he's definitely using our creativity to the fullest, but it is really about achieving the goals he puts forth."

Walley-Beckett thinks the advantage Gilligan brings to the job is his "twisted dark psyche." She explains, "I've been working with Vince for three years now, and I'm in awe of his imagination, demented though it may be."

Breaking Bad breaks the rules that have defined episodic television drama for 50 years. It owes its bones as much to movie-making as to episodic TV. The fact that the main character is dying of lung cancer means that it can only go on for a finite number of seasons. "*Breaking Bad* is not engineered to last indefinitely," Gilligan acknowledges. "It is engineered to end at a certain time and place. Having said that, I'm not entirely sure what that time and place is. All I know for sure in that I don't want to overstay my welcome with the series."

Meanwhile, it's a high time. "To stand around on a set surrounded by 150 people and see that they are all there because of some half-baked idea I had five years ago," Gilligan marvels, "tickles me so I can't even tell you." **WB**