

Producer

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Everyone wants
to see the perfect
script. Robert
McKee reveals
all in weekend.
Bill Stokes is
there to witness
the unveiling.



Scriptease

"Can I tell you a story, Rick?"

"Has it got a wow finish?"

"I don't know the finish yet."

"Well go on, tell it. Maybe one'll come to you as you go on."

"The ending is the ultimate thing. Save the best till last". These are the words of Santa Monica script guru, Robert McKee. Two UK appearances earlier this year teaching Story Structure had people talking incessantly about his course. In all their talk no one mentioned the climax. At the end of three days sitting in the ceramic grandeur of the National Liberal Club and a five hour shot by shot analysis of *Casablanca*, "the ultimate example of perfection in screenwriting", Bob treated his audience to the ultimate meaning of the film. "It's in the song", he said. And then he sang it.

Robert McKee has been hailed by some as the L. Ron Hubbard of scriptwriting. As time goes by, no development executive will be able to avoid his alumni applying those fundamental things. Some of them are alumni themselves.

McKee and Lampo Calenda of International Forum, the Italian company organising the event have found a niche. Arriving at the venue in Whitehall were about 150 people who've paid £180 each. Even allowing for the £20 trade association discount this was a weekend that was worth at least £24,000.

"If you can write a good story it's a sellers market," says McKee to an audience of corporate video directors, writers, journalists, script development executives and four

BFI production staff. Amongst the three actors attending is a refugee from the hitchhikers guide to the galaxy

"Give your audience what they want but not in the way that they expect," says Bob. The desire is for the key to stories - the gift of Scherezade in three days. Of McKee's eight feature scripts, none has been made but he still is confident. "I sell everything I write." On offer is a hotline to Hollywood from the man who wrote some episodes of *Columbo*. Is this how they talk about scripts in the Hills? Someone said it was like going into a biology lesson thinking it was a history lesson.

Day one, centre stage, McKee's appearance is muted - countrified and slightly Harvard. Tweed jacket, fawn v neck and plain brown tie. On a dark night he might pass for Brando. Checking the schedule, he suggests that the breaks coincide with his need for cigarettes.

Mr McKee is a great performer. He intimidates as he glances around the room to see if his audience gets the jokes. He never smiles himself. His delivery is on the nose. Ranging from Lee Strasberg to Aristotle and Steve Martin, he refers more than once to his acting past. His voice was trained at the Old Vic.

"There are no monologues", he says. "Even this lecture is a dialogue," Bob confided at the end of the second day. It wasn't really a dialogue. He stopped for questions from the floor and tested his audience's ability to apply his terms. Vetoed questions included his opinions about particular films, about the audience's projects, questions that showed how impressive it was that they had read a relevant book.

His questions were more like invitations to guess his thoughts. "What films have this controlling idea? Love is an exquisite pain we never cure", he asks a twitching audience. "*Gone with the Wind*," says one. "*Love Story*," another. "No," he replies, "But virtually anything by Woody Allen."

Awakening all the resentments about sitting at the front or back of the school, the competitiveness of the classroom is almost tangible. No one wants to make a fool of themselves. Everyone wants to get the answer right.

Umberto Eco, in an ivory tower in Bologna, mulling over *Casablanca* asked himself what makes a cult film. His answer was that a cult film should supply a myriad of quizzes and trivia games for its devotees. *Casablanca* does and so do the teachings of Robert McKee. "What is the inciting incident of *Ordinary People*?" he asks. It's when Mary Tyler Moore stands over the waste disposal unit and says 'French toast doesn't keep.'

McKee doesn't pretend to help with initial ideas. Ideas turn into concepts. Concepts must go a long way before turning into a screenplay and that's a question of craft. "Having a concept is like humming on the steps of Carnegie Hall," he quips.

On the writers craft, McKee's comments come from all directions. The scriptwriter unlike novelists or poets come into contact

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with other disciplines. Observations ranged from dialogue writing ("If you can drop the first pronoun from each sentence", "use exposition as ammunition"), what to do about writers block ("Go to the library. You've got nothing to say") to observations about acting (Actors don't act the text, they act the subtext), to analysis of films (Did you know that *Raiders of the Lost Ark* has seven acts? *Chinatown*, four Image systems...).

A story of Classical Structure for McKee must have a protagonist who is the most complex character and with whom we empathise and sometimes sympathise. The protagonist's conscious or unconscious desires provide the spine of the story. The story is about their satisfaction. An inciting incident changes their world making a final choice inevitable. The audience thinks, "This guy is in deep shit," and is hooked by the leading question, "How will this turn out?". The protagonist is put under increasing pressure until they have to make a choice in an obligatory crisis scene where they come face to face with the forces of conflict.

"If you only take away one thing from this course, it is that people reveal themselves by their choices not by their actions," he says. In the climax the protagonist takes "the action beyond which there is no action" and the plot resolves. Success gives an up ending and failure a down ending. In an ironic ending, the protagonist gets both.

In McKee's formula audience response depends on value changes and reversals. Life to death, riches to poverty, justice and injustice, good and evil. Films divide into acts (mostly 3), each representing major value reversals in the life of the protagonist. Each film has a controlling idea, a one sentence statement of the meaning of the story which looks rather like a moral. "The purpose of story telling," says McKee, "is to wrap an idea in an emotion." He emphasises the burden of responsibility of the writer to their society.

Values and morals are all very well but if

you focus on them too hard, don't things get a bit slushy? Despite the macho, Bob has a soft centre. Like the nubile young things in the tropical island ad, the audience came in search of paradise only to find a box of melting bounty bars. Frequently cited examples included *Terms of Endearment*, *Ordinary People*, *Kramer versus Kramer* and *Casablanca*.

Why is McKee so obsessed with *Casablanca* particularly when talking about script writing? As everyone knows, *Casablanca* was shot in sequence written day by day with no one knowing how it was going to end. No one bothered to look for a structure. McKee doesn't agree. His story was that it was only Bergman who was ignorant of the plot to make her performance more complex. Exploding the improvisation theory gives McKee to reveal the structure of this NFT perennial.

Whether this theory is right or wrong, surely *Casablanca's* appeal lies elsewhere. Ingrid Bergman said in 1974, "Every dress I wear in *Casablanca*, I could wear today." Clothes aside perhaps we wouldn't remember the film so well if as originally planned, Ronald Reagan stood in Bogey's shoes.

McKee is adamant that he preaches principles not formulae or rules. In the presentation it was difficult not to be swept into the total cult. He named his central principles "McKee's Ten Commandments." Image systems, Back story, Value Reversal, the Negation of the Negation, beats, controlling ideas. Eager to apply these terms people found difficulty. They hardly ever got the right answers. Jargon and slogans are sometimes useful but they are also bewitching. People listened eagerly, nodding or shaking their heads in reply to the rhetorical questions. By the third day, people were struggling to get seats at the front.

His audience bristled on his dismissal of *Raging Bull*. Why, asks a mortified delegate. "Why? Because you can't empathise with the protagonist." *Apocalypse Now* was disposed of with venom. "Coppola must have kidded himself on a cocaine high."

Writing screenplays, stresses Bob, is difficult. As he says, you can't write a great symphony just because you like Beethoven's fifth. He doesn't advise sitting down and immediately writing dialogue. A script is a long and unwieldy document and it is exceptional for a writer to have a sense of the whole when concentrating on the tiny parts.

Post-McKee, are writers going to start working from structure to content? The teacher says, "Write in the genre that you love" (genre for him includes the 'art house' genre), advises all writers to begin with Classically Structured scripts before becoming more ambitious and "if the character of the protagonist does not fit the ending and it is a good ending, change the character."

Perhaps the worrying time is when development execs pen their letters of rejection in McKee talk. Maybe that's the wow finish. ■