

FILM

Sue Summers reports

TECHNIQUE / Robert McKee wants to sell you a story.

BBRITISH screenwriters had better watch out for 10-year-old Daisy Campbell. With her father, actor, director and writer Ken Campbell, she has just spent a weekend learning skills that some of them will not master in their entire careers.

Daisy was attending Robert McKee's Story Structure, a three-day course held by Los Angeles screenwriter McKee at the National Liberal Club in London. She was there in order to learn how to polish her just-completed first novel, *School Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. Over 150 professional and aspiring screenwriters, playwrights and novelists, producers and directors from both film and TV were also present, for the same deceptively simple reason — to learn the art of telling a good story.

In the film industry, Robert McKee, 47, is fast becoming a cult figure. A former New York theatre actor and director, he has studied narrative structure since childhood, when his father made him analyse *Aesop's Fables* as a punishment. At university, he spent three years researching the literature about writing for a PhD. He realised then, he says, that whatever the medium, the underlying principles of story-telling are identical.

"Is it possible to follow slavishly all the principles I teach and still write a piece of shit? The answer is yes," he says. "You must always bear in mind that it's possible to be technically correct and emotionally empty. This is not a

guaranteed formula — there's no such thing." He himself has written eight film scripts in the past ten years, not one of which has been made — although all of them have been sold, some more than once.

McKee teaches classical structure and maintains that, in order to break the rules, you first have to use them successfully in your own work. Godard, Bergman, Fellini — or Picasso, for that matter — all worked within the conventions before going outside them, says McKee.

The course begins by looking at such key elements of the story as setting, genre and characters. All of these things limit the kind of story you can tell. Choosing a setting, for example, can be a straitjacket for a writer ("If you set your story in Beverly Hills, you can't have race riots"). But the aim is to create a small, knowable world. If your world is too large or you do not bother to know it, the result will be clichés. "Avoid clichés. Lovers should not meet in a singles bar."

Just as you must know your setting, so you must know your genre and its rules. But genres have to change with society. In *Falling in Love*, Meryl Streep and Robert De Niro felt they could not consummate their love because they

were both married to other people. "That was fine in *Brief Encounter*, but this is the 1980s — being married is no longer seen as a serious impediment to love. Watching that film, the audience just shrugged."

Each story, says McKee, has one simple central idea at its heart. Crime doesn't pay, or Love triumphs, or (chillingly, as in *Deathwish*) Good triumphs when we kill all the people who deserve killing. This is the Controlling Idea which the story acts out.

The first major event of the plot is the Inciting Incident. Its function must be to upset the balance of the protagonist's life and set the quest in motion. It could be an accident or a decision made by someone else (eg Mrs Kramer's decision to leave Mr Kramer with their child). But, from the audience's point of view, its effect is to pose the major dramatic question of the story. Will the shark eat the sheriff or the sheriff kill the shark? "The protagonist must be aware of the inciting incident when it happens," says McKee. "You can't have 'shark eats girl', followed by 'sheriff goes bowling'. He must react — it must propel him into action."

We then enter a world where nothing advances except through

conflict. The key, says McKee, is to create really powerful forces of antagonism. These need not be a villain, they could be your character's own internal conflicts. "But what you want to create in your protagonist is an underdog. The more powerful the forces he's up against, the more fascinating your hero is going to become."

Characters reveal themselves by the choices they make at moments of crisis, says McKee. The actions they take will always be the most conservative they can get away with — from their point of view. "For example, a normal person wanting to go inside a house will knock on the door. But Rambo might machine-gun that door into splinters. From his point of view, that is the minimum conservative action."

The challenge for the writer is to find ways of increasing the pressure on the protagonist, testing his willpower in a series of successively more difficult crises until the climax, when he comes face to face with the powers of antagonism. Says McKee: "If, at that climactic moment, you can open up a gap between expectation and result you too can have a home in Bel Air."

Among the most incisive lessons of the course are McKee's list of "Don'ts". Don't, he says,

write a line in which one character is telling another something he already knows. Don't write "Californian scenes", in which two people meeting casually immediately share their darkest secrets. ("Writers protest to me that people really do this. I say: 'Yes, but only in California.'")

Don't write "on the nose", putting characters' real thoughts and feelings into their dialogue and actions. Try to communicate these in the subtext. The breakfast scene in *Kramer v Kramer* where Dustin Hoffman sets out to make French toast for his son has a particularly rich subtext. It says that Kramer is a male chauvinist whose wife had justifiable complaints against him.

But McKee admits that you cannot explain everything with logic. The audience, for instance, may accept a story even if it has "holes" in it — gaps in logic. Try to close the gap, he says, but if you cannot do so, ask yourself: "Will the audience notice?" "If they will, show them the hole. They know life doesn't always make sense. Look at *Terminator*. *Terminator* doesn't have a hole, it's built over an abyss."

This was one piece of advice which Daisy Campbell took particularly to heart. "We have found the hole in *School Journey to the Centre of the Earth*", announced her father proudly at the end of the course. Daisy took prompt remedial action.

□ For information about future courses, ring Joan Harrison of International Forum on 0732-810561.

