

# Teaching the pros is Calenda's cup of tea

PHOTO: GRAEME COOKSON

At the root of all good films and television drama is a good story. That's the message Robert McKee has been putting over to film and TV professionals in the UK for the past four years.

His three-day seminars on story structure are now legendary. *The Late Show* recently devoted an entire programme to McKee and his theories, and his course has brought shining testimonials from the likes of John Cleese.

But what is little known is who's behind the McKee seminars. They are organised by the International Forum in Rome, whose key figure is Dr Lampo Calenda. He is a film maker who has made it his life's work to get experts in film and TV production to pass on their knowledge and expertise to others.

Calenda began his career as a photographer in the 1980s in Italy, moving on to experimental film-making in the early 1970s, and then to the production of anthropological and political documentaries.

He sees himself as a social observer and had been approaching his work in an anthropological way, collecting what he calls "micro events", the small incidents in everyday life that often form the climax of anyone's day, for example families parting or meeting at airports — the times when emotions are at their most intense.

He took time out to try and formulate some of these "micro events" into a full length screenplay. "At the time I was getting lots of story ideas, but I couldn't get the storylines to work as films. I had all the scenes on different pieces of paper and it was driving me crazy. It was then I realised there had to be a structure to the story — a thematic line — and there also has

to be the one thing I'd been avoiding — character. You can't tell a story without characters," he says.

More experimental films followed and more documentaries, but Calenda was finding it hard to make a living out of the work, "so I cut out and left for the US to get some formal training."

He visited film schools at New York University, UCLA and USC, but felt they were all too academic. "There were films with lots of special effects, but not one had a story to tell. I couldn't see myself going into this void where only technicalities existed."

He had heard about an informal group of Hollywood professionals who had got together to plan classes to teach their colleagues some of the deeper truths of the profession. "It was professionals teaching other professionals," he said. "I thought this must be lacking in Italy."

McKee was one of the people lecturing but his lectures took place one evening a week over eight weeks. Calenda persuaded him to condense them to three, intense evenings — and brought him to Italy in 1986.

"It was enormously successful — even RAI wanted special seminars held for their people," says Calenda. More seminars followed — with US writer/producer Martin Zarcoff, who was head of the TV department at USC. *Saturday Night Live* writer Tom Davis also came to Rome.

The first seminar in the UK was on writing for TV, held by Alan Plater. A seminar in production management was taken by Ralph Singleton, who had worked on *Three Days Of The Condor* and *Taxi Driver* and was later producer of *Cagney And Lacey*.

Calenda's idea was to trawl the film

and television skills of the world to find experts who not only knew their subject well, but knew it well enough to teach it to others.

He spends a lot of time searching out people who can really pass their knowledge on. "They have to have a good reputation in their field, but also a talent for teaching. If you've done the work in your own head to identify and organise the elements of your craft, you can't communicate to others. If you haven't, you can be the best writer or director in the world, but what you'll teach will be fragmented elements of technique, often just a series of anecdotes."

Calenda is constantly looking for new areas of film and TV production in which to apply this theory of teaching, but he does not want to start a training college.

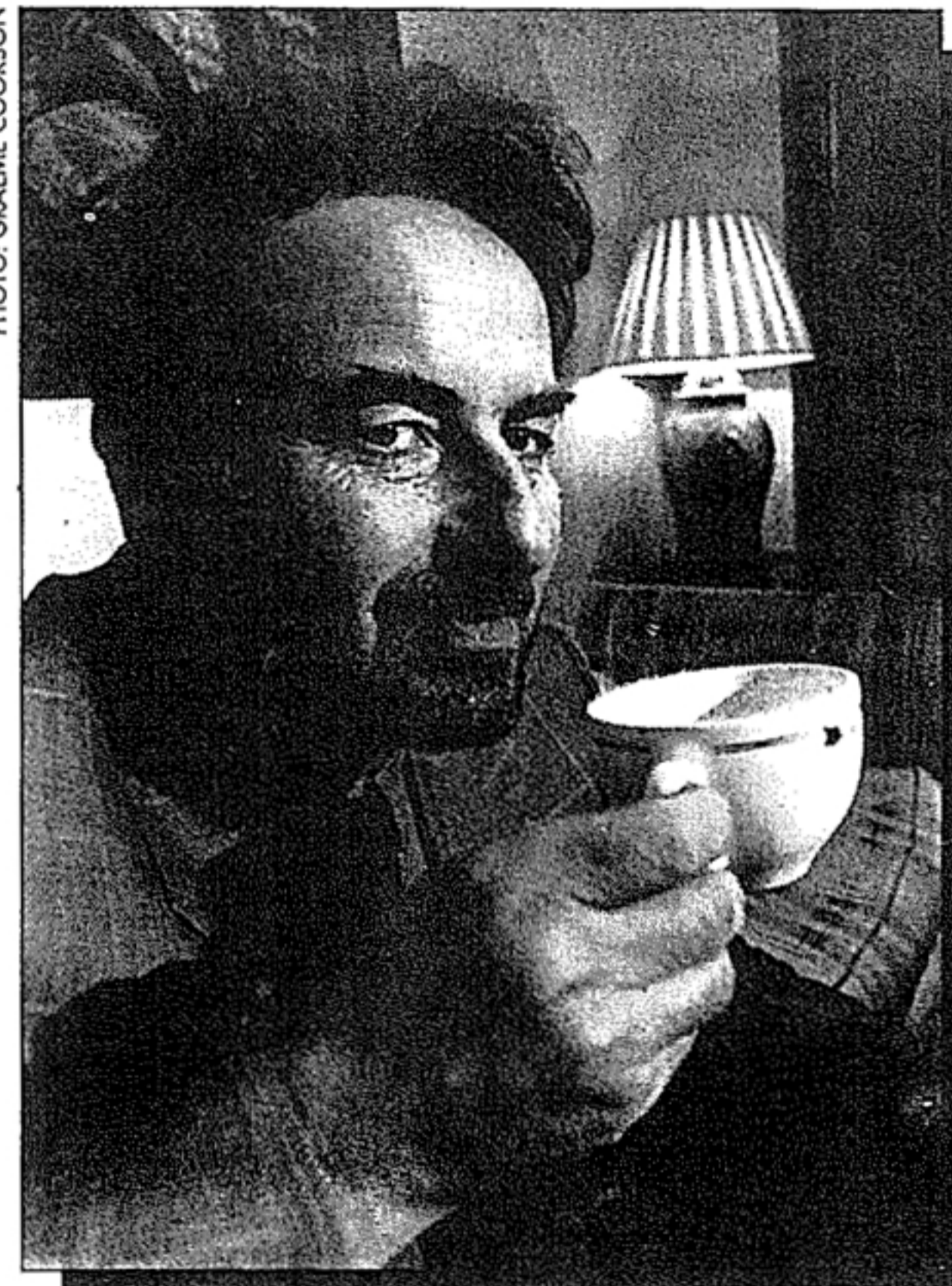
"We're not telling people what to do, but they might spend less time developing projects that aren't likely to work," he says.

The first of the sessions planned for the next few months is by writer/director Ron Richards. It takes place on April 6 to 8 and covers the director's craft for film and television. It is a course he first held at the US Directors' Guild.

On May 5 and 6, one of the most respected make-up artists in the film business, Christopher Tucker, will be taking a seminar on special effects and make-up. He worked on *Elephant Man*, *Star Wars* and *Company of Wolves*.

On May 24 TV director Will McKenzie starts a four-day session held in a TV studio designed to help directors on the art of working with actors.

Script analyst Linda Seger will also be back this year with a series of



Calenda: king of the seminars wants to do more.

seminars on writing beginning on June 7. The first looks at re-writing, using the example of the film *Witness*, on which she worked.

On June 9 she holds a session on creating characters for the screen, while on June 10 her subject is adopting novels for the screen.

The producer of *Star Wars* and *American Graffiti*, Gary Kurtz, is planning a seminar on what a producer should know when finance is in place, helping them make the right choices of actors, locations and facilities. The date has yet to be fixed.

Calenda believes that in the hey-day of Hollywood these courses would not

have been needed. Then, he says, people were more familiar with what their colleagues in other disciplines did. His aim is to restore that common understanding.

But Calenda still firmly believes that whatever your knowledge of others work, you are lost without a good story. "While you can find ways of telling a story better and cheaper, the story is king. Everything starts from there. That is really my motto." **Nick Radlo**

For more information on the courses mentioned, contact International Forum's UK representative Joan Harrison on 0732 810925.