

The McKee to success?

IT IS said that in Hollywood you would need to ask a lot of strangers "How's your screenplay going?" before you got the reply "What screenplay?" It's likely the same will be true at the Groucho Club next week if you ask "How was the McKee course?"

The McKee phenomenon hits London again this weekend. Robert McKee, the American screenwriting guru, will be teaching *Story Structure* to 180 aspirants at the Royal Society of Chemistry. And the eager students will not all be wannabe writers with terminal blocks.

John Cleese, who has done the course twice and tells me he could "bore for Britain on the subject of McKee", will be there again, as will Sheila Hancock, Susannah York, Nigel Planer, Molly Parkin, Herbert Lom and Paul Jackson.

Gloria Steinem, numerous Academy Award winners, Jack Valenti (president of the Motion Picture Association of America), producer Gene Reynolds (who created *M*A*S*H*), director Mark Rydell (*On Golden Pond*) have all heard the gospel according to McKee. Stories circulate of people leaving his seminars with an EST-like glint in their eyes to become, like Cleese, disciples of his charisma and teaching abilities.

McKee, 49, has been teaching *Story Structure* for eight years, shuttling between his native Los Angeles, New York, Auckland, Rome and Barcelona. Since 1986 he has included London on his circuit. This year he will instruct around 2000 people—which brings the total to more than 16,000.

An ex-actor who became a story analyst at United Artists and NBC, he brings drama to his performance at the microphone, delivering his Commandments like a stand-up comic. He allows little interaction with the audience and forbids tape-recording (he has signed a book deal with Warner).

That *A Fish Called Wanda* was a success without McKee's teaching, John Cleese puts down to a "huge slice of luck and sheer persistence that took 13 drafts and numerous re-edits". What he hoped to gain from the course was something to replace the trial and error.

"*Story Structure* is something that no one I have ever met in this country—and that includes me—has any understanding of. I wanted to study it in a more intellectual way and McKee has done it for me. He looked at an enormous number of films and plays and analysed what makes a plot work. The whole business of story is scandalously underrated. If you look at 20th century novelists, back to Forster, they denigrate narrative. But I know if you have a good story almost nothing can screw it up."

Deborah Moggach, who had written the TV scripts of *Stolen* and *To Have and To Hold* before she took the course, found it useful but has reservations about the value of writers turning out scripts in the McKee mould.

"I adapted the novel *The Stand In* and wrote a *Film on Four of Driving in the Dark* and while I applied what he says to the characters, I was aware that the same words were in everybody else's head and that we would all turn out the same shaped scripts as a result."

McKee's detractors worry about the sheer volume of screenwriting and movie-decision-making traffic that passes through his course. They worry about a time when the McKee way with a script might become the only way, stifling creativity and flair. When applied to someone with real talent, his strict observance of rules and formulas is likened to encouraging Picasso to paint by numbers.

As Deborah Moggach says: "On the course you desperately scribble down all the rules. But when you consider really wonderful movies you find that it's their breaking of those rules that makes them so good."

Alan Plater strongly disapproves of the dogmatic fundamentalism of the approach and when he teaches scriptwriting he opens with: "Unlike my American counterparts, I do not bring you Ten Commandments, but four-and-a-half Tentative Suggestions."

Snide comments also abound about why this self-promoting demigod of the screen trade seems to have difficulty getting his own features into production or on the screens.

"These snifty people who hang around making criticisms are totally unconvincing," says John Cleese. "I think it's an amazingly important course and almost everything he says is well thought out and on the ball. I'm delighted it is such a success."

Cleese argues that in his experience the ability to teach something well is totally unconnected with being able to do it well.

He is unswerving in his evangelism: "If we had 20 people in this country who understood film story we would have a British film industry." With 2000 people doing the course this year alone at £250 a shot it is not difficult to work out that McKee's accountant is a happy man.

Perhaps his script for the *Story Structure* course is his best—and most lucrative—and maybe that's enough.