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# BROADCAST

## A rare talent for telling stories

by Nick Radlo

Robert McKee flies in to Britain this week to give a course on story structure for the second time in four months. No one who attended the first, held last November, has any doubt of its value.

An audience of writers and film and TV professionals were happy to spend three intensive days closeted with the American screenwriter at the National Liberal Club in London to experience a course that has received international recognition.

At the moment he presents it in Los Angeles, New York, Rome and Munich and will shortly go to New Zealand on a Fulbright travel grant to deliver it there, under the auspices of the New Zealand Film Commission.

He is not teaching writing skills, but passing on his ideas on the universal, underlying structures which all stories need if they are to hold audience attention on the screen. "The talent to tell stories is rare — it has nothing to do with writing," he says.

"There was a time in the Thirties, Forties and Fifties when people, trained primarily in the theatre, had a good schooling in the craft of storytelling. Now too many ex-film school graduates are concerned more with visual techniques and production values.

"We're losing insight into the knowledge of storytelling. Even



McKee: exploring avenues of better scriptwriting.

the worst B-movie used to have a good story that grabbed, held and moved its audience. The least of films had a well-told story. Now the least of films has wonderful production values, but the stories have sunk," he says.

McKee started out as an actor in New York and spent a great many years acting and directing stage plays. He later moved to Hollywood to make the transition to film but discovered he

would have to write his way in.

Two award-winning short films followed, and he wrote for TV, primarily on cop shows like *Kojak*, *Quincey* and *Columbo*. Then came screenplays for movies. He now has his own script development company with a team of writers in Los Angeles.

It was after he had worked as a story editor at NBC that he was invited to initiate the screenwriting element in a new

series of film courses to be run at the University of Southern California.

"I'd read enough scripts to realise what the course should be. Ninety-nine per cent of scripts submitted to NBC failed due to a lack of quality in the storytelling," he says.

McKee says that the sheer amount of material produced in the US has little relevance.

"The main reason for the success of many US productions

worldwide is that the themes, concepts or vision behind the storytelling are universal, not specifically American, although those universal human problems and values may be told in a typically American mode.

"A writer has to be able to draw out of his own culture that vision archetypal enough to be understood anywhere in the world."

His vote for the single best piece of television ever produced goes, in fact, to a British series — the BBC's *I Claudius*: "Simply brilliant, and it certainly captured universal themes — politics, sex and family squabbles. It was visually wonderful too!"

He castigates some European film makers as preferring to impress their peers rather than communicate with a general audience. "They're making films for themselves — and showing a disrespect for the common audience," he says.

Many of Hollywood's leading film makers have taken McKee's course — the president of Paramount Pictures even invited him to teach it to his entire staff!

"It's important for a writer to be able to stand back and ask the key questions of his own material — is it working? It's also important for film and television executives to ask the right questions of the script or writer to reach a common understanding of what they're trying to achieve."

GIANNI CAPALDI