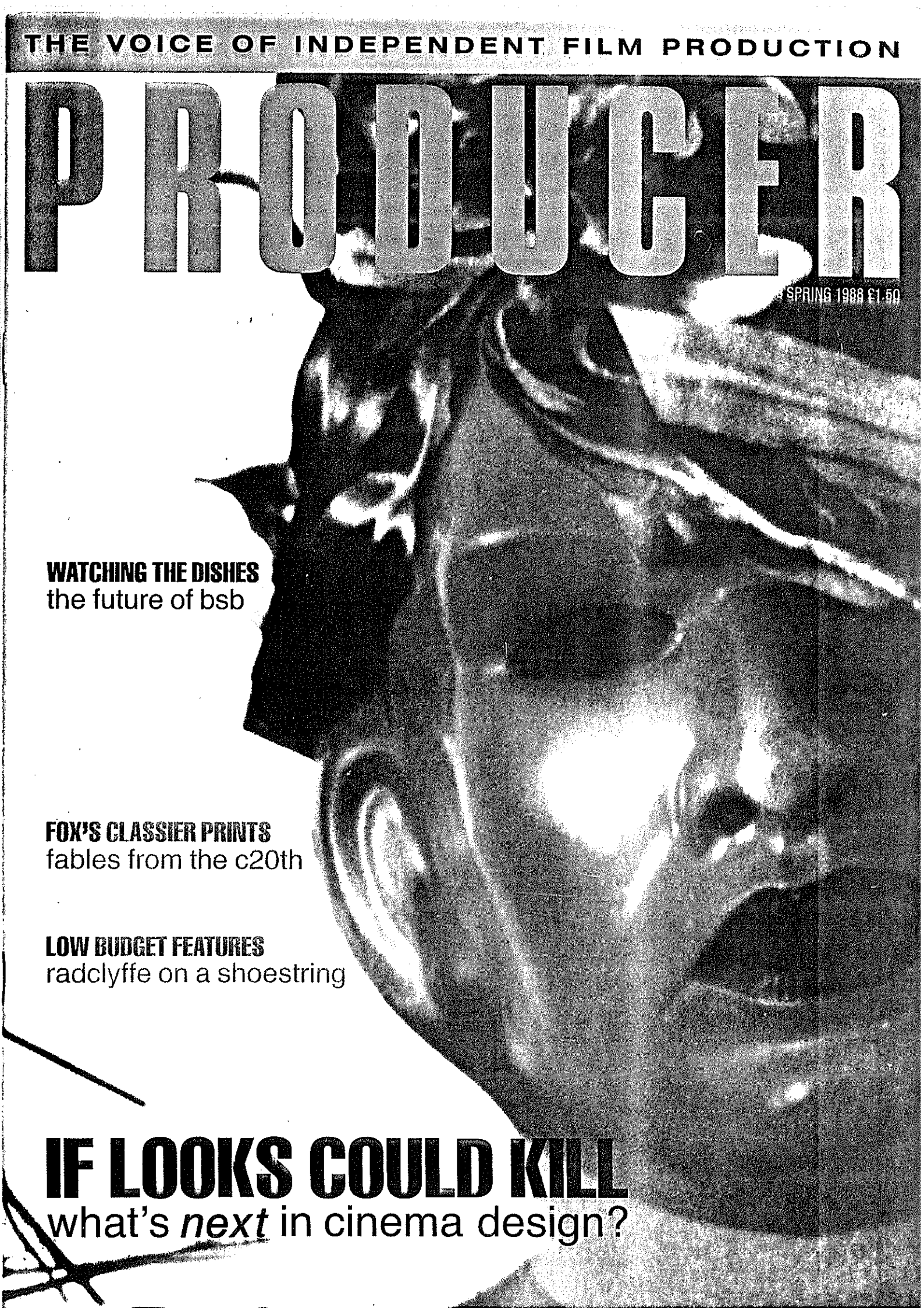


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ROUGH BUT NOT READY

**How can budding
British screenwriters
learn their craft?**

**Ian Emes argues
for the trading
of script secrets.**

RECENTLY A FRIEND OF MINE pitched his story to a producer and forgot what the ending was. Robert McKee, in his lecture on Story Structure which I attended in December of last year, argued that the ending of a story is its most important part. Indeed, he advised us that when writing a screenplay, we should try starting at the end then work our way back to the beginning. I've tried this with several of the projects I'm working on at the moment and it has proved invaluable. A small and simple tip but the kind of information that is very hard to find when you need it.

I've always been a structure freak but it's only recently that I'm fully beginning to realise the value of form in scriptwriting. When I was an art student - I'm not saying how long ago - there was a certain teacher who, apart from being obsessed with man-powered flight, was also a structure freak. I suppose you could say he indoctrinated me. But he was a crazy genius who managed to show us structure in everything, from a cabbage to a skull. He stated that all great works of art were symphonies of structure or anti-structure, but that the artist was always aware of this, either in his/her use or rejection of it.

When I attended Robert McKee's lecture, I was hearing again the same teachings but this time the conversation was about screenwriting. Like my art teacher McKee insisted that a knowledge of structure is essential if only to be rejected, changed, abused or ignored. I realised that the simplicity and clarity of this advice is rare. And there lies a problem which needs to be addressed. How can the budding British screenwriter learn his craft?

One answer might be to duplicate a number of Robert McKee clones and set them up in the back rooms of all the production offices in London where they could recite titbits of screenwriting knowledge from dawn till dusk. Since we don't exactly have the technology to do this we have to contend with tracking the man down on the rare occasion when he's in this country.

His lecture in December took place in the unlikely location of the Liberal Club in Westminster. In this austere environment about two hundred people from a wide variety of backgrounds gathered to further their knowledge of screenwriting. One elderly lady, an ex-researcher, had come to revive her

interest in films. Another fellow student had been working professionally for years and was writing a major series for television. Amongst the professionals and amateurs gathered at the lecture, there was only one producer. Draw your own conclusions.

From the moment McKee entered the room he was in control. His lecture was an assault, shooting from the hip an avalanche of information whilst giving us no time to stall him from irrelevant side issues such as local politics as a number of predictables tried to do.

Maybe I've been a slow learner until now or maybe there is something different about McKee - he doesn't hang on to his trade secrets. He throws them out to his listeners like sweets.

And of course his tirade is immaculately structured. Dealing firstly with broad issues such as the Back Story, Time and Place, Genre, Characters, Theme and Audience, he went on to discuss the understanding of structure itself. He focused on structure from the writer's point of view, working from the inside the scene from the characters' perspective. He described structure as a source of energy - a dynamic material shaped by the structure. We learned about the inciting incident, the climax, the crisis, the resolution. After two days of wrist-aching notes we learned about finer craft details of structure such as Turning Points, Tempo, Rhythm and Image Systems.

Finally he demonstrated how all these concepts had been put to work in *Casablanca*. As he peeled away the layers, we realised that this classic film was not just magic but also a superb example of cinematic engineering in which all the key participants understood the importance of structure. Did you know that the Image System in *Casablanca* was one of prison bars and confinement? Now there's a gem of information. And in McKee's lecture there were plenty more.

Rough Treatment, the AIP seminar on script development, however was uninformative by comparison. Designed to 'address the problems of screenwriting and to provide a greater insight into script improvement through the knowledge of experienced industry figures', it fell a hundred miles short of the McKee lecture.

For one, the seminar itself was not structured and through the usual question and

OPINION



Celebrating **THE GOLDEN SCRIPT**

answer format it quickly wandered away from the central issue into debates about procedure. How many scripts per week do you read? How many pages long is the average treatment? How many months do you keep a script before you reply? In fact the usual obsession with statistics bubbled to the surface, as if the right numbers or statistics might hold the key to success. Not once was the issue of screenwriting as a craft dealt with and when it was raised it was swiftly sidestepped in favour of more spicy subjects such as the morality of scan reading.

And the usual grievances were aired. The panel lamented the quantity of mediocre scripts that besieged them. They assured us that the good ones would not escape the attention of their readers and when **THE GOLDEN SCRIPT** arrived there would be cause for celebration.

In turn the audience became accusatory, claiming that their projects had been ignored or that their treatments had been rejected. It's true that getting started as a writer can be a daunting and seemingly impossible task. But I'd like to believe that quality can cut through the red tape. Unless fate were unusually cruel - and admittedly it can be - it's highly unlikely that a really good script would go unnoticed for long.

A much more serious problem exists than procedural irritations. There is a real need to create channels through which serious scriptwriters can learn their craft. One member of the audience proclaimed that seeing films and reading books alone had been sufficient for him to acquire a deep understanding of scriptwriting. He may have a deep understanding but can he write a script? Apart from first hand experience in the field, in my book you can't beat sitting at the feet of someone of greater experience and drinking

in the knowledge they have to offer. At its best, the direct exchange of information between people can be more nourishing and inspiring than the private learning process, necessary as it is.

There is no doubt that an upsurge in the standard of scriptwriting in the UK would have its impact upon the film industry. In the main, scripts are the very fount from which a film springs, the starting point and the make or break of a film. Frequently other values become more important, the star, the camerawork, the art direction, the soundtrack. But it's a good yarn that packs them in, whether it's an off-beat story told obtusely or a more conventionally structured piece of entertainment.

The problem is that most production companies benefit from keeping their experience and energy in-house. After all we're in a competitive business and no one wants to trade secrets. Or do we? Robert McKee handed over a lifetime's experience in a matter of three days. I seriously believe that he has had more impact on the standard of scriptwriting in this country than a dozen seminars staged by ourselves.

Isn't it a question of focus? Certainly communication between writers, directors and producers is always beneficial. In the end professional secrecy ceases to be constructive. I have to admit that I still feel a superstition about handing out the dodges I've learned through bitter experience. But if we don't start trading secrets, we'll be forever hunting the ones we don't know about.

Ian Emes is presently directing *How to be Cool* for Granada Television.