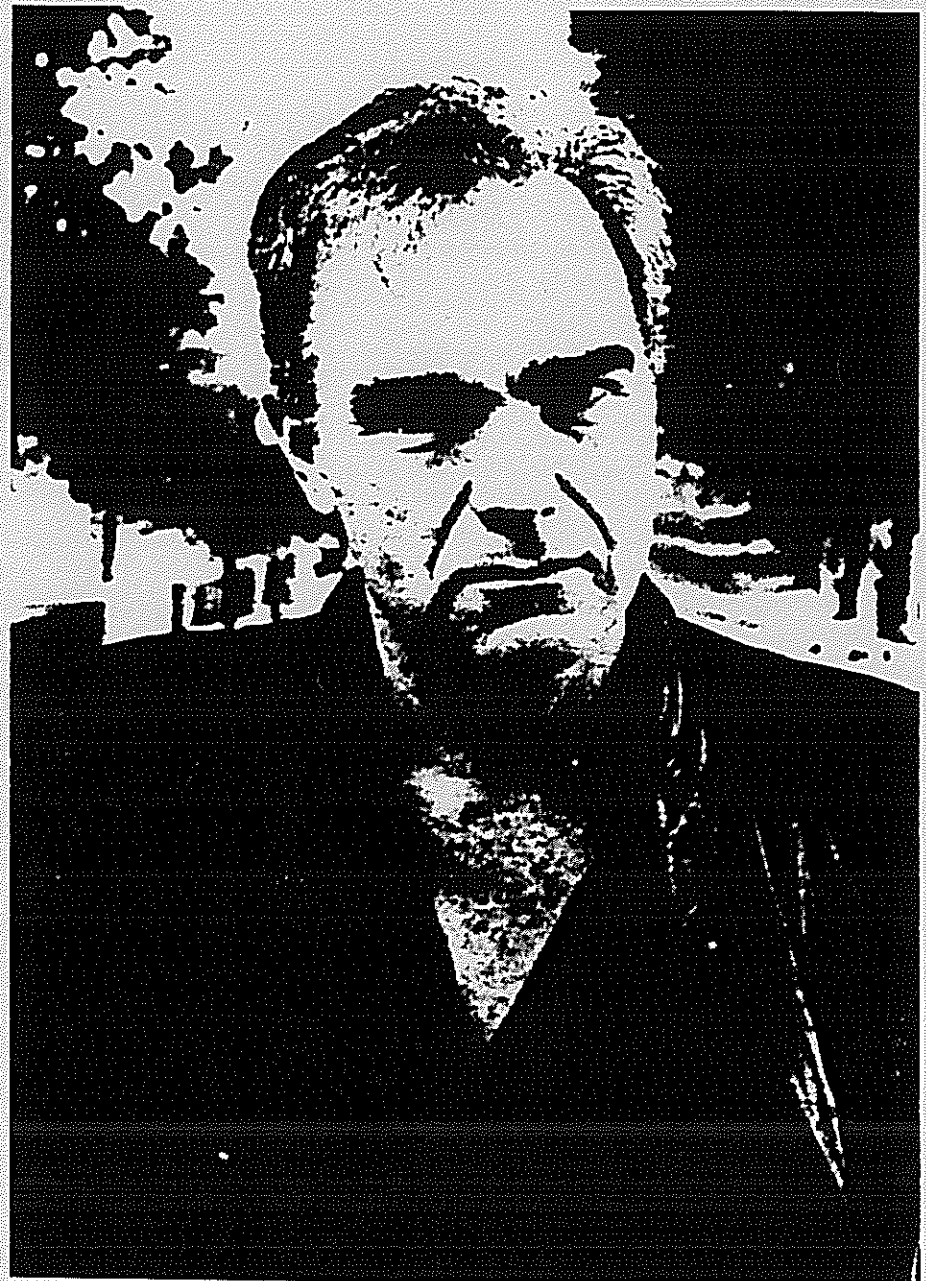


THE STORYTELLER

Screenwriter Robert McKee is returning the craft of story structure to the fore through his immensely popular short courses. Ian White discovers the attraction

As we sit down on 200 closely-arranged seats, which are later to prove extremely uncomfortable, many of us are surely wondering what we have let ourselves in for. A long weekend spent receiving the wisdom of an expert television writer is one thing; queuing 10 minutes for an early Saturday morning cup of coffee is another. But within minutes of taking the stage, Robert McKee has dispelled all doubts.

An American in his forties, McKee is both a master and a particularly gifted teacher of his craft. Whether it be through his screenplays (for TV shows such as *Kojak*, *Columbo* and *Quincy* as well as feature films) or his seemingly effortless lectures, he knows how to hold an audience's attention. In this case, he kept 200 people virtually spellbound for three days in February at the National Liberal Club in London's Whitehall Place. Most of them were professionals or would-be scriptwriters, though there were also quite a few novelists, as this course, presented by the International Forum, is specifically about story structure. ▶



◀ McKee's course is internationally recognised. Paramount has made it a must for its entire development staff and its praises have been sung by successful writers, producers and directors the world over. But McKee is quick to shatter any illusions: 'This course is not about a formula', he warns, 'but there's a form to every art'. To writers he says: 'Literary talents don't matter if you cannot tell a story'.

And to make sure that everyone embarking on this intensive course has their feet planted firmly on *terra firma* he declares, '30,000 screenplays were registered in the USA last year – my guess is that the number actually written is nearer 150,000'. Reduced to its basics, this course is about the art of spinning a good yarn rather than the specific skill of writing. As McKee points out, '75 per cent of creative effort goes into structuring a story; 25 per cent goes into dialogue and characterisation'.

He looks at his audience critically as he tells of the supreme arrogance of writers: 'They think that because they can write, they can sit down and write a screenplay. That's like someone who can play the piano thinking that they can compose a symphony'.

His message is that first they have to understand the craft of story structure. 'Talent without craft is like energy without an engine' . . . 'craft maximises talent' . . . McKee has a tendency to endorse his philosophy by distilling it into a variety of key phrases.

Day one begins with an in-depth look at

structure in relation to other key elements of a story such as time, geographical setting, *genre*, theme and, of course, the audience. McKee illustrates his points with references to mainstream films that most of his audience will have seen – *Star Wars*, *Alien*, *The Deer Hunter* etc. He is not necessarily against other types of films (the 'art movie' or whatever) but sees it as his duty to pass on his knowledge of what goes into a good, classically-structured box office success.

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By day two we are becoming familiar with structure as seen through the eyes of the main character(s). We learn that the story's protagonist(s) must have a conscious (and hopefully an unconscious) desire. This desire must be pursued to the end of the line – that point being a final action beyond which the audience cannot imagine any other. 'You don't want the audiences writing scenes beyond the ones they saw', says McKee making the point clearly.

We are told the importance of empathy for the protagonist and taken slowly through the 'classic five-part narrative structure'. As McKee describes each part in painstaking detail, this writer begins to realise the awesome task which faces the screenwriter. 'It takes six months to a year to write a good screenplay', he declared. By the end of the course we would believe him.

Day three sees the screening of that all-time classic, *Casablanca*. Great! A chance to sit back and enjoy a wonderful film. Not so. McKee takes his audience through it scene by scene, stop-framing it with alarming frequency to prove that all of the techniques he has mentioned (and a few others besides) have gone into this superbly-crafted movie. We marvel as he shows how dialogue is used to handle exposition and define character and how 'beats' build each scene, scenes create sequences, sequences construct acts and acts structure the whole story.

This feature has only provided a taste of McKee's teachings and it has deliberately omitted his more revelatory observations. It would not be fair to the International Forum (based in Rome) to describe the course in any more detail – besides which it would fill the entire magazine. The International Forum runs other courses covering writing, directing, producing and acting. More initiatives are in the pipeline. For details contact Joan Harrison on 0732 810925.

In the meantime: 'Here's looking at you, Bob'.

