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A writing guru's very own 'Story'

Robert McKee on writing, 'Adaptation' and Hollywood

By Todd Leopold
CNN

Editor's Note: CNN.com Entertainment Producer Todd Leopold will be taking Robert McKee's Story Seminar this weekend in Atlanta. Tune in Monday for his full report.

(CNN) -- Robert McKee was perfectly happy as a writer. He didn't expect to become perhaps the most famous writing instructor in Hollywood, played by Brian Cox in "Adaptation," and known for his work with the likes of Peter Jackson, "Beautiful Mind" screenwriter Akiva Goldsman and John Cleese.

McKee is the author of "Story" (ReganBooks), one of the bibles of screenwriting construction, and runs the immensely popular Robert McKee's Story Seminar.

CNN's Todd Leopold -- who will be taking the Story Seminar beginning Friday -- talked with McKee about his career.

CNN: How did all this start?

ROBERT MCKEE: It was an accident, really. I was a busy TV writer and film screenwriter, but I also taught part time at [U]SC. Some people put together a private film school in Los Angeles years ago. It was called Sherwood Oaks. The premise of the school was that only those who do would teach. [It] was wildly successful for a few years because Dustin Hoffman was teaching acting, and Sydney Pollack was teaching directing, et cetera.

I got a phone call inviting me to put together a class on Saturday morning for writers, so I put together an eight-week, three hours-a-morning Saturday class. ... I taught it, it went fine, and ... then I got an invite to do it again for Sherwood Oaks, and when I did the population doubled. And every time I taught it, it just got bigger and bigger.

When [Sherwood Oaks] went out of business, I thought, what the hell, I like these Saturday mornings. So I put an ad in the Los Angeles Times, and the next thing you know, it just sort of took over my life.

CNN: Do you feel like this has taken you away from writing?

MCKEE: I don't miss writing fiction for myself. I've written two books now ... and now I'm writing a new book called "The Art of Darkness." ... And next year I'm going to be publishing a quarterly journal for writers with advanced lessons.

And so I'm busily writing, and it's a deep pleasure for me, to write about writing. ... I just made a transition in my life and found that writing nonfiction about the art of writing is, for me, more fascinating than anything.

CNN: A cliché in Hollywood is "She was so dumb she slept with the screenwriter" -- they're at the bottom of the totem pole. Do you think that's still true?

MCKEE: If I were a young actress trying to get ahead today, I would sleep with a television writer (laughs), because what's happened in Hollywood is that the very best writers have abandoned screenwriting and they've all gone over to TV. We're now in a golden age of television writing. ...

The truth is that TV has marvelous advantages for writers. First of all, the writers run television. ... [And] the freedom when you're good -- if you can produce an audience -- the freedom of subject matter and the treatment of it is wide open. ...

Screenwriting as an art form -- and movies in general -- are on the decline. There may be a renaissance in the future, I don't know when, but television in the meantime is just taking over.

CNN: You feature "Adaptation" on your Web site. Do you have mixed feelings about the film?

MCKEE: Noooo, naw.

CNN: Because the Robert McKee character --

MCKEE: -- the Robert McKee character what?

CNN: -- It didn't seem all that laudatory at times.

MCKEE: Oh, you think so? I thought it was wonderful. Why not (chuckles) -- because I go down a guy's throat for taking the point of view that nothing happens in life?

CNN: But one of the images I got out of the movie was that the Charlie Kaufman twin was coming back with Hollywood formula, with pap. That's not what you teach, is it?

MCKEE: Not at all. But [here's how it happened] ...

I'm sitting in my office one day a few years ago, and the phone rings, and I take the call, and it's a producer ... calling from New York and he said, "This is the most embarrassing phone call I've ever had to make. There's a guy named Charlie Kaufman who's written a screenplay, he's written you in as a character, he's freely quoted from your book and your lecture without copyright permission, we don't know what to do."

I said, "Send me the screenplay."

So they did, and I read it, and I saw what -- I'd seen "Being John Malkovich" and Charlie Kaufman's a wonderful writer -- and I saw what Charlie wanted. He needed an adversary. He needed an antagonist. ... Charlie Kaufman is a writer who's caught in a dilemma in his own life. He wants to write the commercial art movie. ... And so he split himself into himself and his twin arguing commercial versus art. And he wanted to pick on me as if what I teach is commercial.

So I called him back. I said, "Look, I know I'm a controversial figure, but as long as we have fun, I can take the heat. ... But I want two things: one, I want my redeeming scene; two, I cannot be a character in a bad movie -- and you have serious third-act problems." ...

So we had a series of meetings. It wasn't a problem with the character -- I thought that was great fun.

But the third act ... at one point I pulled out. I said I'm sorry, this third act is not working at all, on any level, and you can't use my character. And so two weeks later I get an apologetic phone call saying, "Well, we can't make the film without your character."

So we had more meetings and eventually Charlie got the third act to work, but on the condition that the audience get the joke. And the joke is that Donald writes Act Three.

CNN: The Story Seminar is a pretty intense three days, 10-11 hours a day. Are you on stage the whole time?

MCKEE: I'm there talking for 12 hours. ... I don't know how I do it. I really don't. My only answer when people ask me that ... is "What choice do I have?" Once I set up this format, what am I going to do -- fall asleep? ...

I used to do it one day a week for eight weeks. I got a call from Women in Film [to do the course] and I said, I can't go to New York for two months and lecture one day a week, and they said, can we do it over a weekend? I thought, why not? I can try.

And I discovered that, yeah, I can pace a stage for 10, 11 hours a day. My feet get tired. I figure I walk about 10 miles each day. A 30-mile hike over that weekend. It's exercise.

But it's a lot of fun. They laugh. The course is very funny. And also, they tell me, very inspiring. So we go back and forth between some really deep and serious understandings of things and then there's some big explosion of laughter over something. So it's not boring.

CNN: You mentioned William Goldman earlier. Every time I think of him I think of his classic quote [about Hollywood], "Nobody knows anything," directed at executives -- they never know what's going to hit. But is that true in your class? Can almost anything work if it's structured well?

MCKEE: That's what Goldman is saying. In advance, there's no way to predict success or failure, and ... anything that's human is potentially fascinating or compelling. On the other hand, Hollywood bombs are made with the same careful commercial calculation as the successes. Ultimately there's a mystery there as to what will connect with audiences and what won't.

I remember I watched a dark film with James Spader and Rob Lowe, "Bad Influence," a very dark thriller. Curtis Hanson directed it, and it was excellent -- excellent! -- but nobody went.

On the other hand, "Seven" -- which is even darker by far -- makes \$300 million. And so when Hollywood says dark doesn't sell, there's "Seven," this huge success, one of the bleakest, darkest, most gritty, stomach-churning films, and I think one of the most important films of the 1990s. So they'll sit there and tell you people want happy endings until these dark-ending films make a fortune, "Mystic River," on and on.

But it is primarily executives. They want predictability. They want to turn the movies into the shoe business. They want to know if they come up with a good Reebok design that's going to sell. And you just can't. You just can't predict it.

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