

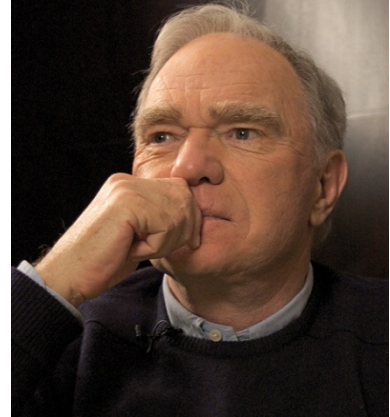
An Interview with Robert McKee

For The Great American Pitchfest

By Deb Havener

Interviewed March 22nd, 2011

Pulitzer Prize winners, Academy Award winners, Emmy Award winners, Spielberg, Pixar – what do they have in common? All are students of Robert McKee's screenwriting colloquiums. Find out why the industry flocks to this legendary instructor's seminars when you join us for the 2011 Great American Pitchfest in Los Angeles.



I was fortunate enough to speak with this world renowned lecturer and teacher about his upcoming session with the Pitchfest.

On the day of our interview, Robert was recovering from dysentery and a bout of the flu he picked up from his travels to South America, yet he remained just as dynamic, direct and refreshingly opinionated as ever on the state of screenwriting and pitching.

After brief introductions and ten minutes of troubleshooting SKYPE technicalities we get down to business.

Q. There are a lot of pitching venues out there -- and you have an exhausting schedule. What enticed you to speak at the Great American Pitchfest?

A. There are a lot of mistaken ideas and foolishness around the whole business of pitching. A lot of people are setting themselves up as experts in this business and there's a lot of information about that coming back to me from my students. There's a sense of fallacy circulating about pitching and the way one goes about it and what they're looking for. Look, if a company says they're seeking romantic comedies but they hear a great and compelling pitch for a smart thriller, they're not going to ignore that smart thriller. They want great material.

No matter what the genre, the key is to pitch well. But the hardest thing for a writer is to understand their own story. Don't underestimate the *essence* of the story. In my session for the Great American Pitchfest we'll discuss three important components for pitching.

1. You'll discover the *truth* of your story. If you can't find one you may be in a state of self-deception. You may not have a story.
2. How to judge whether you're ready to pitch or not.
3. I will dissuade you from the notion that a pitch is a song and dance. You can razzle dazzle and bullshit your way through a pitch, but these development execs know how to pick a story out of all that song and dance. So just tell your story. This all goes back to knowing what your story truly is. You need to know the essence of it.

Q. We've heard everything from the 30-second pitch to the 20-minute pitch. In your experience, is there a certain amount of time that you feel is just right for a pitch?

A. The 30-second pitch is Hollywood bullshit. You can't pitch in 30 seconds. In most cases you'll get 15 to 20 minutes to pitch your script. It's the first 1 to 3 minutes that are crucial. You don't want to bore them in the first 1 to 3 minutes. If you do – you have at least seventeen minutes to dig yourself out of the hole. And you can turn it around.

Let me go back to the 30-second pitch – which is absurd. This is one of those fallacies ... perhaps started by angry, untalented people who have been rejected before they could even get in the room. A pitch that is set up ahead of time takes around 15 to 20 minutes to be done properly. Again, the first three minutes are the most important.

Q. Do you have advice for those private or shy writers on how they might overcome the very social aspect of pitching their script?

A. Look, I've been pitched to hundreds upon hundreds of times. Some writers are so shy they stammer, they sweat, they shake ... they're terrified. But if they're able to get to the nugget that is their story, and if it's a great story – that's all that matters. You don't have to do the song and dance. You shouldn't do the song and dance. We just want to hear the story.

Q. In your experience with pitch festivals, do you think the majority of the companies who attend are looking for the next big tent-pole franchise? Or indie-flavored script? What's the feel out there?

A. Nobody knows what they're looking for specifically. But if one picture does well, let's say an animated Pixar movie – then all of a sudden everyone is looking for the next "Up" or "Toy Story." These things go in waves and a lot of times it doesn't pan out when you're just riding the wave. Look at "Mars needs Moms", which had a dismal opening.

You don't want to rush something out just because there are other things out that are trendy or popular. You have to write what is in your heart – the story that you are passionate about sharing. This is the only way to have a truly great and unique story. This is what will grab attention at a pitching festival.

Why? Not because it's a rip-off of the current or next trend, but because it's a script that was written with great passion. I guarantee that if a company sets out to find the next great romantic comedy but you pitch them an amazing thriller and they see that it's truly a great thriller – and one that you've worked passionately on, they're not going to let someone else have a chance at it. They're going to take it back to the office and run it by the rest of their company.

There's a fallacy of following trends. Hollywood is five years behind the trend. And everybody's trying to figure out the next trend and how long that trend will last. But if you try to write to trend, you're no writer at all. You can only write the kind of story you love. Rather than chasing trends there are those who are quietly writing the next "King's Speech," "Black Swan" ... stories that mean something to them and that they are passionate about telling. But where do those writers go if Hollywood is bent on following a trend? They go to the pitch festivals. They prepare their pitch and they try the independent companies.

I want to bring up Zachary Penn. He wrote "Last Action Hero" and a bunch of other high-concept action films – the stuff that you call tent-pole movies. But this is what he loves. He writes what he loves and he's

brilliant at it. There's another fallacy that writers can write anything and this is absurd. Write what you love. Don't write to be part of the current trend.

Q. What is your opinion on writers producing and/or directing their own scripts?

A. I'm all for it. Distribution is becoming more democratic. Production is becoming cheaper. It's really less a question of money and more a question of character. If you are tireless and relentless, have courage, persistence and talent, you can launch your career this way. You have to ask yourself – Are you tough enough? Are you talented enough? Persistence doesn't mean you have to be a bully. I look at people like Charlie Kaufman – a shy little guy – so shy he barely has a shadow. But what he does have is persistence. I mean that guy has persistence out the wazoo. I have never met another person with as much persistence as Charlie Kaufman. He knows what he wants and it doesn't matter how many times the door gets shut in his face. He stays on track. He never gives up – and thank God, because he has given us a taste of what he's passionate about and we're better for it.

The Cohen Brothers are another example. If they would have listened to Hollywood or tried to follow trends they wouldn't be who they are now or where they are now. They funded "Blood Simple" their own way, without Hollywood. They went to dentists in Minnesota. They made their own way and they told the stories they wanted to tell. And they're brilliant and memorable.

Q. We know a lot about your acclaimed seminars and conferences as an instructor, but we'd like to know a little something about the man, Robert McKee, on a personal level. Will you share with our readers ... the one thing in this world that will move you to tears?

A. Pain. Physical or otherwise. I cry when I'm in pain.

Q. Name one thing you miss about being a kid.

A. God, I don't think I miss anything about being a kid. No. Nothing. *(There is a long pause for reflection here and even though it's awkward I don't dare break his silence. Then it hits him.)* There is something I miss. I miss the wonder of going to the movies and seeing it all for the very first time. I miss the experience of seeing wonderful films the first time around.

Q. If you were to be successful in another profession what would it be?

A. All the professions I abandoned in the past. Stand-up comedy. Acting. Fictional writing. I'm now a non-fiction writer and lecturer.

We take a few minutes to discuss McKee's fondness for humor and his latest journey to Spain where he was commissioned to help train stand-up comics. Who knew this direct man who doesn't mince words has a funny bone? And now I'm really in awe because I'm not a funny person.

Q. What kind of music do you like?

A. Jazz. I've always loved it since I was a kid.

We have found common ground. When asked how jazz was introduced to him at such a young age he happily indulged.

Young Bob McKee often drove along the streets of Detroit with his family. On one such outing they were stuck at a red light on the seamier side of town – but it was just enough time for him to hear “this very cool sound” wafting out from a club on the corner. It was bebop. And he was hooked. After that day the fourteen-year old McKee tried to waltz into the jazz clubs by turning his school ring around so it looked like a wedding band. Eventually the management turned a wary eye -- They let the precocious teen into the bar, let him have a beer and listen to jazz. “I felt very grown up sitting in that bar with the rest of the adults. But they knew I was a kid.”

Q. What was high school like for you on a social level? Brutal, fabulous or do you consider them lost years?

A. High school was great. I was President of our Senior Class, a jock, in the top two or three academically. It was a great time for me.

Q. If you could change one thing about this world we live in, what might that be?

A. Just one? Well, I would eliminate one of the evils, wouldn't I? Poverty. Disease. Injustice. It's a long list to choose from.

Q. Finally, one of our more profound questions everyone wants to know; what is your favorite dessert?

A. I'm a vanilla ice cream kind of guy. I've just always loved it. And how many crème brulees can you really eat? No, I go for vanilla ice cream.

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Now you know that this acclaimed and legendary instructor is a lover of bebop and ice cream. Perhaps talking points for a little networking at an upcoming pitch festival?

Join us for a dynamic and inspirational day with Robert McKee at the Great American Pitchfest, Saturday, June 4th, 2011.

Deb Havener is a multiple Nicholl Fellowship semi-finalist who will be assisting Mr. McKee at the 2011 Great American Pitchfest. www.prettyegg.org