

ON CAMPUS

TheFilmSchool's focus: Teaching the telling of story



Stewart Stern, John Jacobsen and Tom Skerritt at the Summer 2009 graduation ceremony

At TheFilmSchool in Seattle, story isn't just a part of the curriculum – it *is* the curriculum. "The screenplay is the springboard for what happens in the creative process that follows," says Tom Skerritt, a TheFilmSchool founder who speaks with the experience of an industry veteran – he's appeared on the big screen in seminal motion pictures such as "M*A*S*H" and "Alien" and in an Emmy-winning run on TV's "Picket Fences."

Skerritt and Warren Etheredge (founder of TV's "The Warren Report") and John Jacobsen (for 30-plus years a director and producer of stage, screen and TV) were concerned by what they saw as a decline in good storytelling coming out of Hollywood — in favor of sensationalism or technological-based film — and the negative effect of that influence even percolating into independent film.

Coincidental with their first steps to develop an answer to this problem, two of their fellow Seattle residents had become likewise engaged: Stewart Stern ("Rebel Without a Cause" screenwriter who also earned an Oscar nom for "Rachel, Rachel" and an Emmy for "Sybil") and Rick Stevenson (writer/director of festival award-winner "Expiration Date" with multiple decades' director and producer credits).

Meeting over a few congenial lunches, the five formulated a plan for a "school on the lines of a British academy," Stern explains. "It would focus entirely on the writing of film." Likening it to a nursery where plants are carefully nurtured, Stern says they wanted it to be a "sequestered place where there was no rush to success ... [but a focus] on serious writers with personal stories. We would be their mentor in teaching them the techniques to realize their passion."

Mentors indeed. The founding five, who launched the school

PHOTOS: THEFILMSCHOOL

B Y R A E A N N E M A R S H



Tom Skerritt's professional acting career spans more than four decades

in 2003 and still comprise its core instructional faculty, bring many years of teaching experience at such institutions as UCLA and the University of Washington to an enviable list of industry contacts that allows Stern to observe, "Between the five of us, we can contact just about anyone in the business." And they've built an advisory board of such notables as Ed Zwick, Chris McQuarrie and Robert Redford, a group Skerritt describes as "among the few of the good storytellers left in the business." Guest appearances from advisory board members combine a screening of one of their films with an exhaustive Q&A.

TheFilmSchool's cornerstone program is the "3-Week Intensive," which covers principles and mechanisms of structure and character along with the fundamentals of storytelling. "When you teach story, [you look at] what common attributes all great stories have. The same structure goes back as far as the beginning of history," says Jacobsen.

Through the course of time, people created tales that addressed a problem they faced; they always began with someone leaving the village to go into the world to seek a solution, discovering allies and enemies to teach him the solution, entering a fearsome place to either conquer or be killed and, if successful, rushing back to the village with the elixir. "Most myths are based on that, as are most of our movies," Jacobsen says. "What's changed is our special effects and how real it looks." Instruction is all day Monday through Saturday, with Sunday free to allow students to review and reflect on the week's learning.

There is some crossover in the courses, Stern says, "but each [of us] had developed a specialty in the way we taught and the material we did." Stern helps his students understand themselves and others "at an intensely deep level." Trust is key because they must enter an "emotional memory

and dream world" applied to experiences and objects. The students must feel they are in a safe place where they will not be embarrassed for being too personal, and Stern leads the way in being open about his life and pointing out where his autobiography lies in his films — and how this helps an audience find the ways in which they are akin to others.

Trust is also fundamental to Skerritt's five-minute-scene assignments that give students a feel for writing, acting and directing. "They get out on their feet and experience it, and then talk about it," he says, the point being to view their writing from the standpoint of what it gives the director and actors. "If they haven't acted, they don't know how their words fit in the spoken language."

New this year to TheFilmSchool's curriculum is Caught in the ACT. The school's alumni are invited to submit scripts, which are publicly presented by professional actors who perform a staged reading or simply sit in a half-moon and read to the audience.

Says Jacobsen, "When you're with an audience, you're always surprised by the reaction." The laugh may come not from the line the writer expected to produce it, but from the line after, for example. "We'll use our knowledge of story to hint at where we think the problems are and see how the audience responds. ... Where did it get slow? ... Why *didn't* you care about the hero?"

Invited audience includes producers, production companies and investors looking for material, Jacobsen continues, noting, "It's a good way to expose yourself, even if they're not interested in *this* script."

Movies are the most influential of all media, Skerritt observes. "So we have an obligation to do the best we can to make the two hours in the theater worth the time the audience spends there." Good storytelling, he adds, "affects everybody: the people who make it and the people who observe it." -MP

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