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Photo by Bruce Wo



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Robert A. Guthrie starring in
Expiration Date, a film by TFS
faculty member Rick Stevenson.
Photo by Bruce Worrall

THE SECRETS OF OTHERS

What Students of TheFilmSchool Need to Help Put Seattle's Film Scene on the Map

by Mark Waldstein

Are you eager to write the next great Northwest screenplay? If so, there's an all-star lineup of Hollywood professionals here in Seattle, ready to teach you everything they know.

TheFilmSchool's flagship program is the "Three Week Intensive"—also known as "Screenwriting Boot Camp." Thirty handpicked students put in a twelve-hour day, six days a week, for three weeks. Isn't that a heavy schedule? As co-founder John Jacobsen puts it, "It works, because it's a big break out of your life. It becomes a journey that the students say they never forget."

Asked about the beginnings of TheFilmSchool, Jacobsen recalls a breakfast meeting from 2003. The Seattle Mayor's Office of Arts and Cultural Affairs gathered several area film professionals to discuss how more Hollywood productions could be shot in the Northwest—commercial activity that can bring millions of dollars to the local economy. Although several features put Seattle on the movie map in the early 1990s—notably *Sleepless in Seattle* and *Singles*—that river had run dry, the result of expensive tax laws in the state of Washington (which have since been improved).

"I brought a picture up here for HBO in 1991, and the city was not friendly to work in," Jacobsen pointed out. "My line producer basically said, 'I'm never coming back'. So at that meeting I asked, 'Why don't we just try to make better films here, *local* films?' It's really just a dollar issue. But all we'd need is to get one good film shot here in Seattle, and everybody would turn their eyes here. Like the grunge movement did for music."

Before this meeting, TheFilmSchool's principals had, in various combinations, already been discussing taking matters into their own hands. Skerritt called Jacobsen. Jacobsen brought in friends Warren Etheredge and Rick Stevenson—who coincidentally had been chatting with local screenwriting guru Stewart Stern about new venues for teaching.



**“IT WORKS, BECAUSE IT’S
A BIG BREAK OUT OF
YOUR LIFE. IT BECOMES
A JOURNEY THAT THE
STUDENTS SAY THEY
NEVER FORGET.”**




Stewart Stern would seem to be the top candidate for Hollywood royalty in Seattle. He wrote the screenplays for *Rebel Without a Cause*, with James Dean; *Rachel, Rachel*, the film with which Paul Newman reinvented himself as an *auteur*; and the acclaimed TV miniseries *Sybil*.

Stevenson has worked as a writer, director and producer in film and television for more than twenty years. His film, *Expiration Date* (shot around Seattle), has won awards at festivals from Ashland to Australia to Beijing. He also holds degrees in history and economics and a Ph.D. from Oxford. Etheredge is a writer and movie expert whose “Warren Report” series is like a “Film 101” course for general audiences. He’s a local media dynamo whose website is packed with reviews, video clips and podcasts of his popular interviews.

Jacobsen’s own credentials include steady work as a writer, director and producer, in both film and theater; he’s even on the board of directors at Seattle’s ACT. And Tom Skerritt, the “visible” member of the faculty, needs little introduction – especially to local patrons of the arts. They revere Skerritt for his work in such films as *M*A*S*H*, *Alien*, and *A River Runs Through It*, as well as the TV series *Picket Fences*.

Together, the five aficionados visualized a program that would combine their talents and connections. “We each have different strengths, which is the richness of the school,” says Jacobsen. “It’s the sort of mix that none of us could have predicted.”

(Top): Dan Waters (left) chats with Warren Etheredge (right) on The Warren Report. (Below): Rick Stevenson directing *Expiration Date*.



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Carol Roscoe (left and below) and Mark Dias starring in *Dark Horse*, a film by TFS grad Cornelia Duryée Moore.



from an Italian village coming to America as a war bride, I arranged to board a Coast Guard cutter in the middle of New York harbor at dawn. I sailed in with a shipload of refugees from the concentration camps – to see what it was like, to hear what they said as they saw the Statue of Liberty. It turned into a really rousing sequence...and I wouldn't have known about it unless I had gone to see it myself."

Stern is much revered for his ability to get inside a character's psyche. As he describes his class, he sounds more like a counselor than a screenwriter.

"I write from my own constant theme, which has to do with internalizing from others the courage you feel you lack. That's what Plato did with Jimmy Dean's character in *Rebel*. Finding the courage to confront the fear that stands between ourselves and our goals for the first time, to go through it – I call that 'going through splat'."

“CALLING IT ‘THEFILMSCHOOL’ MAY BE MISLEADING FOR YOUNG FILMMAKERS; BEFORE YOU PICK UP A CAMERA, YOU NEED GOOD MATERIAL.”

Skerritt considers the program to be without precedent. “Calling it ‘TheFilmSchool’ may be misleading for young filmmakers; before you pick up a camera, you need good material.”

Days during “boot camp” are divvied up among the five instructors, immersing the students in screenwriting basics: story, structure, character development, acting/directing and a generous dose of film history. It's a lot to soak up in just three weeks, but all of the teachers agree this is one of the things that make their school unique.

“A ‘boot camp’ provides constant, consistent messaging,” says Jacobsen. “We’re creatures of habit, and those habits are really hard to break. I can say something once, and everyone will nod; but they’re not going to do it. After hearing it every day for three weeks, they start to apply it.”

In his course, “The Personal Connection,” Stern encourages picking up realistic details through a technique he learned at the foot of his own mentor, iconic director Fred Zinnemann (*High Noon*, *From Here to Eternity*, *A Man for All Seasons*). “He taught me to go to the physical locations where the story takes place. While writing my first film, *Teresa*, about a girl

Stewart leads students through a series of exercises in order to get to their “splat” – like therapy on your feet. The theory is: by confronting personal flaws or traumatic experiences and working through them, students’ emotions become more accessible to them, helping them to go forward in their writing.

This can be tougher than many students expect. “There are people who withdraw from the kind of confrontation this requires,” Stern admits. “It takes the telling of secrets. But what I try to demonstrate is that secrets – the secrets of others – are the things that people go to the theater to hear. People go to find a *companion* who understands them. When they see the problems of their own lives acted out in public, it reassures them they are not alone.”

Former student Cornelia Duryée Moore, who was in the school's very first session, describes “splat” as “the time when life hits you like an oncoming train.” Was it hard to find that moment in your own past, and relive it in the classroom? “Yes,” says Moore, but “you trust him. Stewart's just a big hug – one of the warmest and most caring people.”

“They go as far as they can, and it's okay,” says Stern. “I push, but I never reprimand. Whatever you are able to do is

wonderful, especially if it's even one thing that you've never been able to do before."

Alternating with Stern's sessions are John Jacobsen's classes on structure. "Learning to translate life experience in a truthful manner – that's a masterful craft," he allows. "And yet, without structure, it means nothing."

Jacobsen revs up into his core speech. It's well-honed, but passionate. "At the last movie that made you cry, the theatre was filled with strangers – truck drivers, lawyers, teachers, children. None of you knew each other. Yet, at the very moment you felt your eyes welling up, you could look around and see five hundred people reaching for their eyes, too. What did that? A common, universal structural device."

Too many would-be screenwriters, he laments, aren't interested in putting in the time and effort to write, rewrite, and shape a solid script. "Everyone who comes to our school has written something. They have a voice; that's what we're looking for when they apply. But as I say on the first day of class: 'Just because you can hum, it doesn't mean you're qualified to play Carnegie Hall.'"

Rick Stevenson's class, "Storyteller's Conservatory," helps writers explore their own distinctive voices; this too requires a lot of soul-searching. "We had to tell our most transformational experience," says alumna Staci Bernstein, "in order to identify the traditional aspects of storytelling in our own stories." And in "Such a Character," Etheredge uses his encyclopedic knowledge of classic movies to show scenes – and then analyzes the inner workings of these well-drawn characters. "Conflict is the heart of all drama, yet few writers are able to tell you what the conflict is in their scenes," he points out. To his lectures, Etheredge adds a battery of movie screenings, complete with his trademark interviews of the writers and directors.

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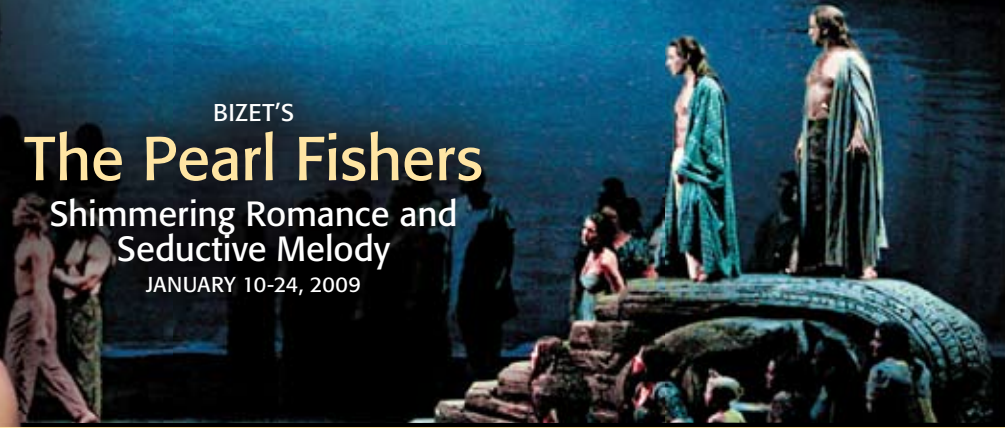
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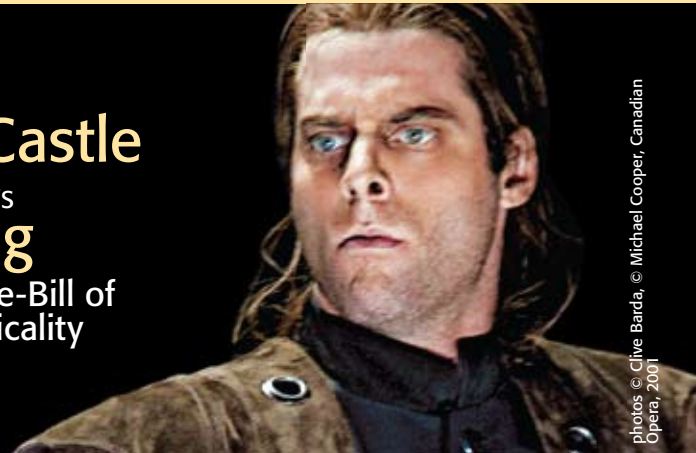


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(Top) John Jacobsen (standing) asks local actors Michael Patton and Susanne Bouchard to participate in a scene exercise. (Below): TFS students attend class at Seattle Center.



WHAT I TRY TO DEMONSTRATE IS THAT SECRETS – THE SECRETS OF OTHERS – ARE THE THINGS THAT PEOPLE GO TO THE THEATER TO HEAR.

Skerritt’s acting/directing workshop, “On Your Feet,” rounds out the curriculum. “My workshop tells writers how to get out of their heads; to say the words they’ve written, and then, how to direct those words.” Students bring in a few pages of fresh dialogue, which classmates stage and rehearse under Skerritt’s guidance.

To make up the difference between a three-week program and the months it can take to write a good screenplay, TheFilmSchool adds mentoring to its arsenal. Once students have finished boot camp, they have ongoing access to all of the instructors at reduced rates from their standard consulting fees.

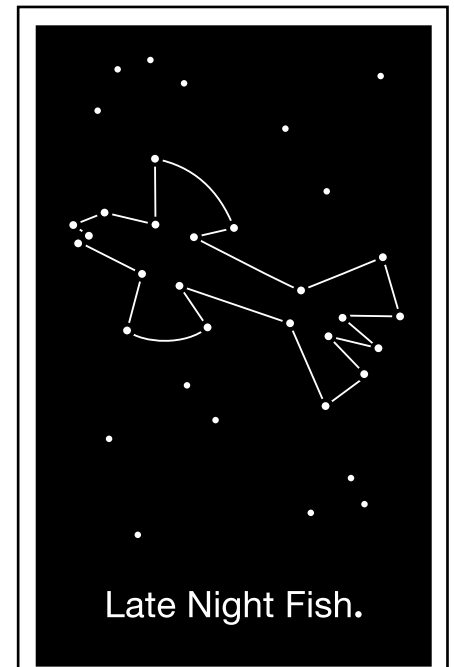
“Stewart helped me during the editing process, and gave me lots of insight,” says Moore, who went on to complete the first feature by a TFS graduate, *The Dark Horse*. “He has seen everything I’ve written since I took the class.” Moore’s dedication made such an impression on Stevenson that he brought her onto his *Expiration Date* crew

as script supervisor. “I had the privilege of sitting right next to him during filming for five weeks,” she says, the thrill still in her voice. “That was my real-life education.”

The question remains, what kind of a life is there in Seattle for a serious filmmaker? If you’re trained and ready to work, does that mean you have to move to Los Angeles and join the thousands of baristas armed with scripts, just waiting for the day when one of the Coen Brothers strolls in for a latté?

Jacobsen, who does plenty of commuting between the two cities, thinks a writer does have to put in some time in the land of palm trees and smog. “Los Angeles will always be the film center. What you see in L.A. are more writers who know what the game is, because they’re surrounded by it. They’ve been through the maze.

“I make my living from the film industry, and I do live in Seattle; but I work outside of Seattle all the time. The advantage of being



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a writer is that you don't have to live in Hollywood to work there; but you have to know what they're buying."

The Hollywood connections among the TFS teachers certainly don't hurt. Robert Redford was recently added to the school's advisory board, which also includes such industry VIPs as Liz Glotzer, president of Castle Rock Entertainment, and Chris McQuarrie, who wrote the screenplays for *Valkyrie* and *The Usual Suspects*.

At the same time, it remains a goal of TheFilmSchool to make better films *here*. "We want to teach people not only how to take films down to Hollywood and find the financing there, but also to stay here and find the financing." That will require new courses to be added to TheFilmSchool's curriculum; and they are in the works.

The school is also strengthening its ties with the Seattle International Film Festival (SIFF). Later this year, both organizations will move in to a renovated space in the Alki Room at Seattle Center. The new facility will allow them to share a screening room, office space, classrooms and a library. SIFF Managing Director Deborah Person, also on the TFS board, is pleased about the deal. "We have supported TheFilmSchool since its inception, and it made all the sense in the world to include them in our plans for the Film Center, as our missions are quite complimentary."

The association will certainly raise TheFilmSchool's profile even further. "We've already done programs together, like our Great American Short Screenplay contest last year," says Jacobsen. "Now we're thinking about creating a series where short films made by our graduates are shown at the festival."

It's the first draft of a renaissance for filmmaking in the Northwest, just as TFS founders envisioned. "It would be so nice if we could influence the social conscience by making movies that are uplifting, rather than just scaring the daylights out of people," Skerritt concludes. "Those films sell a lot of tickets, but they aren't the kinds of stories we want to tell." By working so closely with their students – literally showing them how they made it in the business, and sharing their professional connections – he and his colleagues are making it happen, one story at a time. **e**

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