

# Film



## Q&A Robert McKee

The world's best known teacher of **screenwriting** brings his three-day seminar back to Sydney this month. He tells *Nick Dent* about inciting incidents, turning points and why *Australia* sucks

**According to you, one of the big no-nos in screenwriting is 'deus ex machina' – resolving a story through happenstance. So did you dislike the emphasis on blind luck in *Slumdog Millionaire*?** No, because they had set it up. There is a hand of destiny operating in this guy's life and so things worked out for him – it was in keeping with the whole world of the story. Sure, deus ex machina is annoying, but when you have a world that isn't operating by the strict rules of causality from the beginning then you can pull rabbits out of hats.

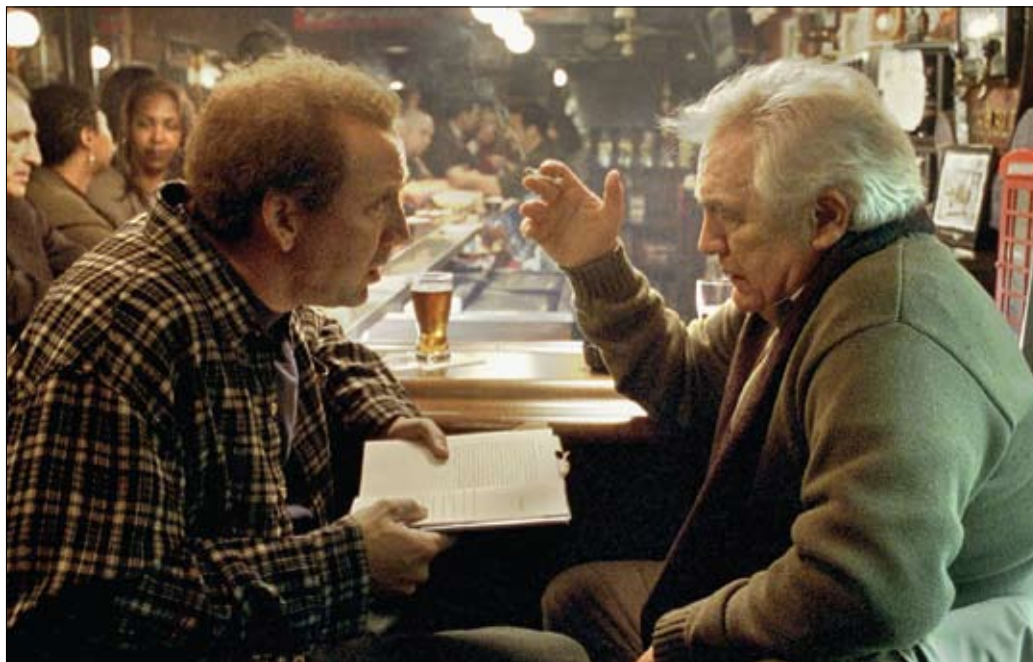
**If it was up to you, what film would have won the Oscar?** The film that I enjoyed the most last year was *Gran Torino*. I think it was really rich and sophisticated storytelling, working very well with the whole Clint Eastwood-Dirty Harry myth and setting [us] up to expect the opposite ending to what we got – a wonderful execution of true character being revealed by choice under pressure. When the master turning point comes, it's unexpected, but you realise that it was always there.

**Did you see *Australia*?** Yes, and I was disappointed with it. It was just a catalogue of clichés. It was self-consciously retro, trying to make a film of the kind that were made

**“Australia was a recycling of every cliché”**

in the period that that film was set. The difference of course is that the people who made films like *Gone with the Wind* were sincere and to go back and to do some sort of homage to films of that period with a sense of tongue-in-cheekiness – there was something insincere about it.

**At the other end of the scale, what makes *Casablanca* a great, enduring script?** I have a whole six and a half hour lecture on that! [laughs]. *Casablanca* taps into one of the



**Two Bob watch** Brian Cox (right) played Robert McKee (inset) in the movie *Adaptation*

central contradictions in life – this great dilemma that all human beings have between love and duty, which really is like the inner life and your outer life. *Casablanca* dramatises that conflict and resolves it beautifully and it's as true now as it was 70 years ago when the film was made.

**It's very, very funny as well.** That wit is funnier today than it has ever been. The film is just a classic in the true definition of the word, a work of art that's an endlessly re-experienceable pleasure. But the secret of it, I'm convinced, is that it captured this deep dilemma and expressed the resolution of that dilemma.

**Another of your bug-bears is voiceover narration. But there's a recent Australian film called *Mary and Max*: about 80 per cent of it features voiceover narration, and it's great.** I haven't seen that film but there's two kinds of voiceover. The kind I enjoy is 'counterpoint narration'. Woody Allen does this wonderfully. It's when the narrator adds wit to what is sad, or adds a touch of tragedy

to what is frivolous; somehow the narrator counterpoints what's on the screen. 'Telling narration', the other narration, if you stripped it out, it would leave the audience in the dark – they would not be able to follow the story. It's a dreadful substitute for dramatisation.

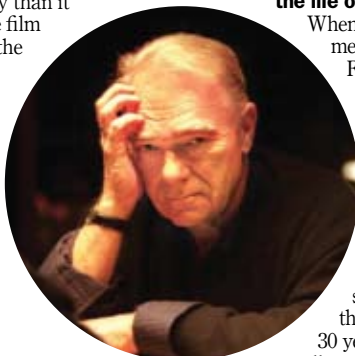
**What's the 'inciting incident' in the life of Robert McKee?**

When my father gave me a copy of Aesop's Fables to practice penmanship and then I had to explain to my father the moral of each story. I did that when I was eight years old and somehow that set a fuse burning that would pay off 30 years later. I can well remember telling my father, "this is what this fable really means..." and he gave me a look of 'Jesus, that wasn't half bad'. Anytime you impress your parents as a kid, you want to repeat it.

**Brian Cox played you in the Spike Jonze/Charlie Kaufman movie *Adaptation*. Did he catch the essence of your character?** Brian Cox is a friend, and he was a student of mine, and I knew that he wouldn't play me

with sentimentality. I took my son to a screening and said "What'd you think?" and he said "Dad, when the McKee character goes down the guy's throat, he nailed you." I turned to my son and asked, "Is that what it's like to be on the receiving end of me?" And he said "yeah".

**You certainly don't suffer fools gladly.** When I'm lecturing, I am though. **If there was just one mistake that you would want to urge aspiring screenwriters not to make, what would it be?** Don't lose the war on cliché. Young writers, before they find their voice, fall into one of two camps: either those that are trying very hard to be commercial and imitative [of popular movies], and those who are deliberately trying to be artists and anti-commercial and therefore imitative of art movies. I urge young writers to master the form that underlies everything in order to free themselves from copying either commercial successes or art movie successes. Until they have mastered the underlying form they will always be unconsciously copying somebody. The struggle to be original is huge. I mean, just to get back to *Australia*: that film was a recycling of every cliché. ▶ *Robert McKee's Story seminar takes place 26–28 Jun at the Chauvel Cinema. (02 9572 7222).*



film@timeoutsydney.com.au