



McWhinnie's World

Write On!

By Jill McWhinnie

After watching a seemingly interminable film, replete with forgettable characters, confusing plot and flat, uninteresting dialogue, many of us may think we could write a much better script. But it's a lot harder than you think.

This summer I enrolled in a one week, intensive screenwriting course at University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies' summer writing school. The school offers a tantalizing menu: comedy writing, mystery and suspense, children's writing, song writing, novels and memoirs, and the opportunity to workshop your creations in small groups with experts in the field.

My instructor was Norm Snider, writer of the upcoming film *Casino Jack*, starring Kevin Spacey, based on the life of corrupt American lobbyist Jack Abramoff. During the course, Norm shared his "knacks and tricks" for constructing drama, gleaned from 20 years experience in screenwriting. He pointed out typical beginners' mistakes and led discussions in which students presented their material to the class for critical input.

"You are creating the world of the movie, and you control everything that happens in that world," he said. "the motivations of the characters push the story forward. Characters in film are often based on occupations such as doctors, lawyers and cops, which have become stereotypes, so you need to find something fresh and interesting about (those characters) to breathe new life into them."

A common mistake is to write dialogue in which all the characters sound like the author. "Dialogue needs to reflect the idiom of the occupation, the social, ethnic and class origins of the characters," he said. "Pay attention to how people talk and behave. Where possible, base characters on people you know."

Norm advised students to draw on their own life experiences. "The protagonist can be based on yourself. Use different aspects of your personality to create your characters. Treasure your own disappointments and frustrations, they are usable in art."

The class was an eclectic mix and only one student had any direct involvement in the film business. Our assignment was to produce the opening 10 pages of a screenplay, identifying our main characters and plot.

As we read, Norm challenged us to examine every scene, character and line of dialogue. If they don't advance the plot, out they go. What is the initiating incident of our screenplay? Who is the protagonist and what does he or she want? Where are the reversal of fortune and escalating crises? Is the dialogue intriguing and stylish or do the characters simply state the obvious? It was a stimulating, challenging and sometimes humbling five days, but by the time we'd finished all our pieces had demonstrably improved from the first reading.

Norm's advice to aspiring screenwriters is to study scripts carefully. "Pick a movie you like and read the script over 10 times - learn by emulation. You can find all kinds of scripts on the internet at simplyscripts.com."

Although "many are called but few are chosen," he offered some practical advice to those seeking opportunities in the field. "Look for a job doing something in the movie business, analyze the markets and look for a niche, then write something that will make someone notice you."

For more information on writing programs, visit learn.utoronto.ca.

Tai Chi Grand Opening Aug. 15



Markham-Stouffville Taoist Tai Chi Society's grand opening takes place Aug. 15 from noon until 2 p.m. Tai Chi demonstrations, a dragon dance and a barbecue will be part of the fun and everyone is welcome to attend. The society is located at 124 Dickson Hill Road, north of Elgin Mills Road off Hwy 48. For more information call 905-640-0117 or visit www.taoist.org.



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Yes, there really was a Farmer Jack!

Back in 1968, Jack Burrows started Farmer Jack's Gardens as a roadside market where he sold produce grown on his farm located on the north side of Elgin Mills Rd. at Kennedy Rd.

With sons Ken, Scott and Kelly helping share the load, the business underwent several changes in location through the years. The product line evolved as well, and today Farmer Jack's Gardens is a major landscape supplier occupying six acres on the west side of Hwy. 48 just south of Hoover Pk. Rd.

While Jack is no longer with us, Ken and Scott continue to operate the family business, while Kelly continues to work in the industry.

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