



Know your audience

I am sometimes asked if we have an editorial policy. The short answer is that any article that helps me understand how and why writers write, and that might help writers, script editors and producers to develop a script more effectively, is what we wish to publish.

ScriptWriter magazine has often been critical of the more formulaic approaches to the teaching of scriptwriting. Alexander Mackendrick is quoted in the previous issue as saying that scriptwriting can't be taught, only learned, and it is increasingly said that bad teaching can destroy the creativity of writers. But few of the how-to books or courses make the point that since all fiction or drama is about people, the study of human behaviour is probably more important to a writer than the study of how to write.

Unless a writer or producer (who often decides what writers should write) has something interesting to say and finds a somewhat original way to say it, it doesn't really matter whether the script is prettily formatted and in three acts or not. Any half-decent script editor can fix wonky structure but how many people in script development can really help a writer have a better, deeper, more perceptive understanding of why people behave the way they do?

Behaviour can be studied just like scriptwriting. A degree in psychology - or at least some study of psychology in a writing degree - might repay itself more than some other degrees. If such a course of study cannot be organised, then perhaps the next best thing are the books by Lajos Egri and a new book, *Psychology for Screenwriters*, by William Indick.

Egri's first book, *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, has the subtitle: *Its Basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives*. Indick's book, whose subtitle is *Building Conflict into Your Script*, is a fascinating look at the theories of Freud, Erikson, Jung, Campbell, Adler and May. (See the extract on page 10 of this issue for the way May's theories interpret films.)

Why do so many films and television dramas (this also applies to scripts that are never filmed) seem to follow patterns we know so well? One reason is that audiences identify what they want to watch by their perception of the genre. Joel Jenkins' article on attempts to write genre scripts (see page 45 of this issue) reveals that despite the fact that almost everyone knows about genre, most writers (and probably producers, too) don't really have the pragmatic understanding of genre necessary to produce high-concept scripts that will work in the global market. Phil Parker and Lucy Scher in their regular genre articles for *ScriptWriter* make the same point.

There is another reason why so many dramas and films seem

familiar: they are derivative. As Chris Vogler said in issues 18 and 19, young writers today are very film literate but they are not script literate. What they know has largely been learned from film and television, not from life itself, having had few significant life experiences of real intensity upon which to draw.

Furthermore, the younger a writer, the less they are likely to know about the motivation of people (or characters) who are very different from themselves. So apart from an understanding of what differentiates a cinema film from television drama - something which many scriptwriters and producers don't seem to understand - writers need to know what makes their characters tick and, perhaps most important of all, what makes the audience tick.

Many writers I have spoken to seem to think that they can understand audiences by looking at their own feelings, fears and reactions. While this is part of the picture, there is far more to understanding audiences than looking at oneself.

To make things more difficult, even those who study audience behaviour are not in agreement about the best ways to do so: some favour focus groups, others argue that making someone part of a focus group immediately distorts the validity of their reactions, perhaps on the basis that if someone is asked their opinion, they become 'opinionated' and not true to themselves.

Analysis of audiences for television can be very revealing, and not just in the sense of a simplistic generalisation that women like serial storylines and men prefer self-contained stories in each episode, or that women attach more value to relationships and characters in a story. Knowing who watches what does not confer an immediate understanding of why they prefer what they watch but it is the first step in gaining an understanding of the mechanics of manipulation, which some writers seem to understand subconsciously while others have to work hard at it.

John Peek in his article about changing patterns of television drama viewing (page 60) goes some way to enabling us to understand who watches what. Mark McIlrath, in his article about planting and paying-off (page 27), looks at the mechanics of the manipulation of audiences.

The mystery of why some writers choose what they do to write about frequently puzzles me, particularly in view of the fact that their choice of story and how it is told is so important in determining whether the work is sold and, if produced, whether it is successful.

The old adage 'Know thyself,' may not be as useful to writers as 'Know thy reader (or audience).'

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