

TRANSCRIPT OF SPEECH PRESENTED BY COURSE FACILITATOR, MARILYN TOFLER, AT THE 2007 CONCEPT TO SCRIPT GRADUATION NIGHT, 21 JANUARY 2008.

It has been such a privilege to teach OPEN CHANNEL's inaugural Concept to Script Course.

It is so important for us as a culture to develop great Australian stories that entertain as well as enlighten.

Congratulations must go to OPEN CHANNEL for having the foresight to run such a course which I think is the only one of its kind running in Australia.

For a long time many of our film schools have been teaching the auteur theory of filmmaking, whereby a director writes his/her script. Filmmaking is a collaborative art and however good a director may be, it is unlikely the script will be as good as it would be if written by a screenwriter.

Our course puts screenwriting back in the screenwriters hands. We have a very collaborative method of writing whereby students are encouraged to comment on others work, from the initial idea which is then developed into a two page synopsis, to character breakdowns, step outlines and the final first act of the screenplay. In this way, the 8 members of the class become like an audience who are able to constructively comment on others work – hopefully without leading to too many tears.

The course is called Concept to Script and students spent several weeks developing their screenplay ideas. They came

up with three different ideas which they pitched to the class who then voted for the best idea. Idea is the most important thing, structure second and ironically the script is the least important. It may take the most time but a story and script can be “fixed” - the idea can't.

A word on structure – In Australia, we have an aversion to the American “formulaic” way of writing, but one thing we can learn from Hollywood is the three act structure. The classic beginning, middle, end structure was theorized by Aristotle 2000 years ago. A story must be driven by major conflicts, problems and turning points occurring at regular intervals throughout the three acts. These turning points will move the protagonist's story forward and keep the audience interested from beginning to end. If structure is looked upon in this way, screenwriters will avoid writing a one act idea stretched over 90 minutes.

So apart from learning basic structure, what else sets our students apart?

Right from week one, students have been encouraged to be able to express what their screenplay is about and not just “what happens next.” How to hook in an audience, be they producers, funding bodies, critics or the general public.

A full day was spent with Ian Dixon looking at pitching techniques. Two weeks later our students spent 30 minutes each pitching to Ben and Antony Zeccola of Palace Films. The feedback to OPEN CHANNEL was that these guys pitches

were on par with the professional producers they regularly meet with. Far from getting a big head, one of our students commented that “that’s just sad, that the standard of the Australian film industry is so low” but I think it actually reflects how hard our students have worked.

Students have also had a special Directors and Actors workshop with Alkinos Tsilimidos where they each had one of their scenes performed by professional actors. There’s nothing like having your characters brought to life off the page and our writers were often amazed at what these talented actors brought to their scripts.

In particular thanks must go to Daniel Schultheis for his tireless work coordinating the class. Daniel has been responsible for arranging an impressive range of sessional tutors, including screenwriters Colin Mowbray, John Ruane, Ben Michaels, Kevin Carlin and Kris Mrksa as well as setting up the pitching sessions with Palace Films.

I also want to thank Film Victoria for a session on Development Funding and AWG for their session on writing business and Palace Films for being so generous with their time and expertise.