

DallasNews.com
The Dallas Morning News

Recapturing the magic

Hollywood writer leads artists back to their creative roots

04/25/2001

By DOROTHY McCONACHIE / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

"I wandered into his office terrified," Rex McGee says of his first meeting with his idol, movie legend Billy Wilder, director of such notable films as *The Apartment*, *Sunset Boulevard* and *Some Like It Hot*. "I had written him an ordinary fan letter and he called me up and invited me to come over and have a chat."

The young film student at the University of Southern California ultimately became a protégé of the famed Mr. Wilder, working with him on the 1974 film *The Front Page* starring Jack Lemmon, Walter Matthau and Carol Burnett.

"I got to spend 12 weeks on a sound stage at Universal Studios with all these wonderful people. It was like a party every day," he says about the experience.

A few years later, Mr. Wilder went to Europe to make *Fedora* with William Holden. He asked Mr. McGee to accompany him.

"I still don't know how I got to be so lucky. It was graduate school from heaven," Mr. McGee says.

American Film magazine published his account of the making of the movie. From there, his career as a feature writer for such magazines as *Playboy*, *TV Guide* and *LA Magazine* blossomed. At the same time, he began writing screenplays.

After a number of years of successful writing and working in the film industry in Los Angeles, Mr. McGee hit the proverbial creative wall.

He experienced a resurgence of his own creativity after attending a workshop based on Julia Cameron's book, *The Artist's Way*. The book is a 12-step program designed to help all types of artists unblock their creativity. Mr. McGee realized that helping others was another gift he could share. He teaches a workshop at Southern Methodist University based on the program.

At the same time as his creative dry spell, Mr. McGee lost several close relatives and inherited a 100-year-old home in Cleburne that held great childhood memories. He

decided to take a temporary break from the West Coast and move back to Texas. Ultimately, the move became permanent, though he still maintains an office in Los Angeles to use during his frequent visits.

After the move, he wrote the 1992 movie *Pure Country* for George Strait. He recently completed writing an IMAX film for the new Texas State History Museum in Austin.

In addition to working on several new projects, Mr. McGee teaches his SMU workshop. With such self-help programs, results are more dramatic when guided by a knowledgeable mentor.

"I loved his class," says Lorraine Gachelin. After living abroad for eight years, she realized she needed a creative boost once she returned to the United States.

The classically trained artist says the six-week workshop with Mr. McGee made a remarkable difference.

"From his class, I was able to do a lot of soul-searching. Then I was able to take everything a step further and create a new, more symbolic form of art," she adds. She credits Mr. McGee with helping her rediscover her creativity.

Jackie Adams signed up for the class on the advice of her therapist and says it was a life-changing experience.

"I liked to call myself a writer," she says. "One day my husband said, 'Why don't you ever write anything?' Rex helped me get the discipline I needed. He was so gentle; he led us in just the right way."

In his Artist's Way classes, Mr. McGee guides the students through a number of thought-provoking exercises. He gives daily and weekly homework assignments to his students, who then share their discoveries with the others in the class. The result is that by the end of the six weeks, members of the class have formed some deep friendships.

Sally Dix was impressed that Mr. McGee was able to keep a class of highly creative people on time and on topic.

"So often, [groups of artistic people] tend to ramble. But he was well organized. I like that in a teacher," she says.

Though Mr. McGee enjoys teaching in an intimate setting such as the back room of La Madeleine on Lemmon Avenue, where he is about to begin a new session, he has found that even in traditional classrooms at SMU people leave the class with a renewed enthusiasm for life and their art.

"I grew up in the projection room of my father's movie theaters," Mr. McGee says to explain how a boy born in Cleburne could grow up to become a successful screenwriter.

Now, he changes lives in his classes as well as on-screen.

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