

TV Script for Walter Klein

In the picture business ...

Like other former “producers” at Cardinal Associates, I dreamed of doing real motion pictures, not just narrated film strips for schools and industry. I even doctored up the training unit that we did for Sun Electric, creating faux animation by programming the teaching machine to display a series of still shots in rapid succession. Later, when applying for other jobs, I would spin my Cardinal experience by saying that I wrote and produced “training films” – or, if I was feeling especially grand, “training documentaries”.

Claiming film experience might have been how I got Walter Klein to let me do the sponsored documentary. However, I doubt that he would have been fooled. At that time, in the mid-1970’s, Walter Klein Productions was the premier commercial film company in Charlotte. He certainly knew what we had been doing at Cardinal.

In any event, I found myself in a large office somewhere in South Charlotte, listening to Mr. Klein explain the script problems they were having with the sponsored documentary on home appliances that his company was doing for Whirlpool Corporation.

(At that time, a sponsored documentary was a 15 or 30 minute informational program funded by a company in a related field. Such programs were provided free to TV stations to fill in odd time – usually between 1:00 and 6:00 AM. Today these programs would be called infomercials although I don’t think that sponsored documentaries were as blatantly commercial.)

According to Klein, a fatherly man with a penetrating gaze, the previous script writer had two problems. She could not get past the complicated ethics of working on a program that needs to seem fair and still promote someone’s products. And, she could not write.

I don’t recall what I said, but I next found myself in the equally grand office of Richard Klein, Walter’s son. As fair as his father was dark, he explained to me the details of the project. He gave me reference materials from Whirlpool, a copy of the previous script, told me that the announcer would be somebody named Peter Hackes, and sent me on my way.

In the mid-1970’s, I was working out of an office that I rented from my friend Frank for 30 dollars a month. It was in his old family home place in a neighborhood newly gone to seed near downtown Shelby. No one had lived there for years. Until recently, a beauty shop had rented the back. Now I occupied the front room where I did free-lance work for Cardinal and wrote automotive textbooks, and Frank occupied the rest where he pursued a real-estate and roofing business. Frank’s quarters smelled of chemicals; mine smelled of mildew and dead birds.

I had never written a real film script with camera and sound directions. However, using the previous script as a guide, and drawing on my Cardinal background, I managed to come up with something that seemed good to me. Working on a little blue and white portable typewriter, which was called the “tiny toy typewriter” by other writers, I finished the script in a week and hand-delivered it for review.

This time I saw Robert Klein, the younger son. If the Klein family had been the Kennedys, Robert would have been Bobby. Dark and intense like his father, he was a hard-ass. He didn’t like my script and he told me so. However, he was a smart hard-ass because what he said, in his fast-paced, indifferent manner made sense. Looking at it through his eyes, I could see that my script was indeed awkward and confusing. I said I would fix it. Robert said he needed it in two days. There was no apology, no southern, “Well I hate to do this to you, Tom”, no pretense that he cared about any inconvenience this might cause me. Just a bland statement of the facts. Naturally, I said I would do it.

I spent the better part of the next two days writing. At first, I didn’t think it would come together. Always a sign that something is wrong, I found myself editing the same lines over and over. Then late the second night, it hit me with zen-like clarity. I would forsake any attempt to be artistic and basically do a Cardinal-style training program – structured, orderly, with an introduction, followed by segments for each type of home appliance, followed by a summary.

With this revelation at hand, I was able to write the opening line “Hi, my name is Peter Hackes, and I am here to talk about those good friends, your home appliances.” I left in the opening music “Thus Spake Zarathustra” (theme from 2001). Robert hadn’t said anything about that. The rest was just filling in the blanks.

I got the script back to Robert in two days. As it turned out, nobody looked at it for two weeks. Robert might have actually been a little apologetic.

There was one more edit, done this time by Walter himself. His principal complaint was about my hokey visuals, which I fixed, and about my typing. He told me I should “take my typewriter out and shoot it.” Because I was sensitive about my cheap typewriter, it was some time before I realized he wasn’t talking about my tiny toy machine.

Although I never saw the finished program, somebody at Walter Klein Productions told me Whirlpool liked it.