Hollywood, Etc.: In the beginning ... was the word

by Lee Grant

Late morning, nestled in a spare San Diego State University classroom, 12 students are gingerly anticipating the next 2 1/2 hours.

They'll be sharing the first rough pages of their work-in-progress screenplays, personal words read before their teacher and classmates.

FOLLOWING THE SCRIPT - In a San Diego State University class of fledgling screenwriters, senior Duane Eues checks the work one more time before having the first portions of his script read by other students and critiqued. CNS Photo by Nancee E. Lewis. Honest feedback awaits.

In this Oscars year, three of the 10 screenwriting nominees were up for their first produced work and another was up for her second. There was the winner, Diablo Cody ("Juno"), and Nancy Oliver ("Lars and the Real Girl") in the original screenplay category, and Sarah Polley ("Away From Her") in adapted screenplay. Tamara Jenkins ("The Savages") was nominated for the follow-up to her first major film, "The Slums of Beverly Hills."

Stuart Voytilla, a scriptwriter, editor and author of books on film, has been teaching this class nearly a decade, and what he finds are young people not with ambitions for Hollywood glory but yearning simply to say something about their lives and the world in which they live.

There's Karima Salmi, 21, for instance, who grew up in California in Temecula and La Jolla and wants to be a producer and writer of social dramas. Her first work is set at a Quickie Mart and the repercussions there of a robbery.

There's Theresa Hoey, 23, from Lancaster, Calif., who'd like to produce and write short films for her own

San Diego-based production company. She's authored a thriller about a woman with an identity disorder and is working on a comedy set in the 1970s based on the misadventures of her dad and his best friend. Dream casting for the fatherly role: Will Ferrell.

There's Jonathan ("J.T.") Taylor, 23, from Stockton, Calif., whose heroes are Zach Braff and Matt Damon, "guys who are multitalented," he says. "I like stories that have truths, stories about the goodness in life even if you're bogged down, stories about things as adults we've lost from our childhoods."

There's Antonio Sanchez, 24, who came to San Diego as a teenager from Mexico and grew up in the shadow of downtown near Roosevelt Middle School. His work is based on his grandparents' relationship, together 65 years. Sanchez already considers himself "an independent filmmaker, writing and directing my own stories."

Voytilla, 48, understands this idealism and ambition. In the classroom, he's soft-spoken and supportive. In conversation, he's thoughtful. An hour before class, he's going over notes in the office shared in the communication building with other part-time lecturers.

He feeds off the exuberance of his students. "There's individual voices," Voytilla says, "independent spirits, and that's wonderful." Is there talent? "They all have the potential. Some things you can't teach, but there is craft to learn that will help them succeed."

In the classroom, each student takes a turn, assigning speaking roles to their classmates. Sometimes Voytilla joins in. And when they're done, there's a round of applause led by their teacher, who adds, "Thanks for sharing that."

Youthful writers, he knows, can be impatient, saddled sometimes with bad grammatical habits and balking at the extensive work that goes into coming up with even a first draft. They persist, though, taking criticism and suggestions, aching to get their work on paper, "the kinds of stories - sometimes nightmares - in the world as they see it and experience it," says Voytilla, "the potential of love, standing up against oppression, relationships - father-son, father-daughter - and dealing with parents and other loved ones (like Jenkins' 'The

Savages' and Polley's 'Away From Her')."

As for comedy, "you do see some based on fraternity and sorority life," says Voytilla, "but there are many students here who have jobs on the outside and struggle to go to school."

All told, he says, even at their tender age (Oscar nominees Cody and Polley are still in their 20s), "they can be good. I just love hearing the stories they want to tell."

Writing original screenplays that have depth "is a huge challenge for students," says Voytilla. "So many movies rely on flashbacks as a crutch instead of through character and action to reveal feelings."

There's discussion during the semester of movies like "Witness" (1985), starring Harrison Ford as a detective sent to protect a boy who witnessed a murder, and his mom, in Amish country. It won an original screenplay Oscar and has "great structure," says Voytilla, "wonderful characters, what they go through. It's a thriller and a romance and a fish-out-of-water story."

Voytilla grew up in Palo Alto, Calif., and attended UC San Diego and the University of the Pacific in Stockton, earning a degree in theater and economics. His career has taken him from acting (Santa Rosa's Summer Repertory Theatre) and directing to teaching at Maryland's Towson University (where he met his wife, Barbara Rinaldo, who owns San Diego Danceworks) to reading scripts for theatrical agencies in Los Angeles. He and his wife have a daughter, Elena, 10.

Voytilla is the author of "Myth and the Movies - Discovering the Mythic Structure of 50 Unforgettable Films" and "Writing the Comedy Film." His credits include the straight-to-DVD "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" (2002), which earned four stars from drive-in movie critic Joe Bob Briggs, and "The Death of Poe" (2006).

Voytilla doesn't disguise to his students the difficulties of breaking into Hollywood, but, as this year's fledgling Oscar nominees know, "they're always looking for great stories."

As examples, there are two of his all-time favorites - 1973's "The Sting" and 1980's "Ordinary People," both best picture Oscar winners. "The Sting," with Paul Newman and Robert Redford, "was a great event for me as a kid to see in the theater, a classic underdog story. Newman and Redford took me into their world."

As for "Ordinary People," "that was an important movie for me, because it related to what I was going through in my own life - finding love, and relationships with parents. It still stands out today, what one person goes through and how that transforms a family."

In the classroom, students cradle Cafe Moto coffee and Lipton's diet iced tea, shuffling their papers. Introduce yourselves, Voytilla asks them:

Theresa: "I'd like to write and direct. I'm not very savvy with technology and production. I hope to start my own production company and keep it in San Diego."

Dawn: "I'm a producer for PBS and really would like to have a feature."

Antonio: "I want someday to be a writer and director. I'd love to direct stories about my culture - I'm from Mexico - with a different point of view."

Duane: "I want to learn all the different filmmaking tasks, including music. I don't want to tie myself down to one thing. Now, when I write a script, I get about halfway done and I don't finish it."

Jonathan: "I've never been a good writer. I want to be more concise and get my thoughts on paper."

Karima: "I'm interested in documentaries and social issues. I want to be a producer."

Sergio: "It's always been a dream to make a film. I want a chance to show the world what I've got."

Rose: "My goal is to finish school and to finish a screenplay. I don't think of myself as a writer. It's tough. It's the toughest thing I've ever done. It's the toughest thing, but I enjoy it the most."

Voytilla tells them, "It's finding out within yourself what's the right story for you. Ultimately, it's looking at yourself.

"Ask, does it have conflict? It's easy to shy away from conflict, because we do that in real life. It's got to have drama, it's got to be visual."

This is not a soft class. There's challenge, and sweat. "It's hard, the writing process is hard," Voytilla lectures, young faces staring ahead. "Sitting in the chair, carving out the time, you've got to do that. I don't want to give you formulas. Here, we'll build a foundation.

"Bottom line, ask yourself: 'Can I write this? Is this the perfect story for me right now?' You're in a great

period. Most of you are in your 20s, a lot of life ahead of you."

So Karima Salmi, "a morning person," will be up at 5 a.m. "in my room, in my bed with my laptop, door shut." Maybe composing the next "Juno."

Jonathan ("J.T.") Taylor will be wide awake "in the dead of night," maybe at the Living Room coffeehouse, "watching people and writing." Maybe composing the next "Good Will Hunting," an Oscar winner in 1997 for a couple of guys in their mid-20s, Ben Affleck and Matt Damon, authors of their very first screenplay.

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