



# Can scriptwriting be taught?

Can scriptwriting be taught effectively or are the real beneficiaries those who do the teaching? Do craft skills without talent explain why we fail to compete with Hollywood? Is it fair to say that the traditional ways of teaching scriptwriting are not working? How did successful writers, who had no training, become successful?

John Yorke, the Head of Continuing Drama at the BBC, explains in the interview in this issue why the BBC has set up their in-house Academy to provide specialised training to selected writers that involves them scripting an episode of four different BBC series. Also in this issue, Craig Batty and Zara Waldeback present the latest thinking in designing undergraduate and postgraduate degrees for scriptwriters.

So between us (some years ago I designed a postgraduate degree for television scriptwriting that runs at De Montfort University) we have all worked with writers in a training context. Because the debate over how our film and television industry can become more competitive - reach bigger and better audiences - is such an important one, I would like - once again (see Issue 12) - to raise questions.

Scriptwriting training can be bad for you. Individuals who have insufficient talent may take up places and spend large sums of money being trained with little hope of ever achieving even modest success as writers. Furthermore, many of those who achieve modest success will not actually be able to earn a living by their scriptwriting, though this may not necessarily be the fault of the training. If there are too many writers vying for too few slots, most will inevitably fall by the wayside.

I have asked the question before in this column: why do you want to be a writer (if that is what you are)? The answers range so widely that it is difficult to draw broad conclusions but few claim it is a sensible way of earning a reliable income.

George Orwell, in his book *Why I Write*, said that there were four main motivations. The first he identified as '*Sheer egoism. The desire to be clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood, etc.*'

There are other reasons, perhaps less self-interested, but we should never underestimate the subtext and unconscious motivation that drives someone to seek to make a living in an industry where it is difficult to guarantee a regular income.

Most of what I know about writers has come from working with them for about forty years and generally they do not learn in the classroom. One of my clients, a relatively new writer who has attended many short courses and has an MA in scriptwriting, said to me recently: 'I think that scriptwriting can be taught but trained scriptwriters do not necessarily produce good scripts. Ergo scriptwriting can be taught but good scriptwriting can't.' She went on to say that she had learned that on the job rather than in the classroom.

So who really decides what works in a script? Is it agents and script editors or producers and directors? Or in the hubs of global cinema - Hollywood and Bollywood - is it the stars? Or are the public - the audience out there - the most important judge of whether a script or

film works? And if you use the audience as the yardstick to measure success, is quantity more important than quality?

Can reaching that audience be taught? In other words, can scriptwriting be taught? And who should study it? Should it be open to anyone who wants to do it whether or not they have the requisite talent or ability? And who decides whether they do?

Who should teach it? And what and how should they teach? Where should the teaching start? At university level? Or are short courses enough? The learning we do when very young, at school, is of great importance to our later education and ability, so should it start at school? Film scripts should certainly be recognised as a literary form and studied at school.

These questions need to be fully addressed by the people who teach as well as by the students.

It is reasonable to ask, since many of those teaching are part-time writers, whether they would rather be making their living writing full-time?

So with little or no training to read scripts or write them, thousands of students enrol in classes and degree courses all over Europe, every year, hoping that they will discover some magic fairy dust that will take them on a flying carpet to join the great unemployed in the fantasy world of the movie business.

Our cottage industry would barely survive without subsidies. Skillset is making a concerted attempt - perhaps the first time this has happened in Britain by elevating certain Higher Education centres to Screen Academy status - to raise the bar and they should be applauded for doing so. But are the same people teaching in more or less the same way as they were previously?

Has there been a significant increase in really good scripts since the MEDIA Programme, the UK Film Council and Skillset started pumping money into the training of writers? Apparently not to any great extent, though it is clearly too soon to make a considered judgement.

I am not arguing that training is a bad thing. I am saying that the bad training of students who should not have been selected in the first place is not good for the students or for the industry. So many really great scripts were written by people who did not undergo any formal training to write them. Furthermore, we should not have unrealistic expectations of what training can achieve. By questioning the whole process we can keep the pressure on the trainers to ensure that their students really do benefit from the training and that those without talent are directed elsewhere.

It is in all our interests to have films based upon great scripts. I hope that the debate will clarify the mystery about why it is so difficult to achieve that.

Now for the good news! The second Cheltenham Screenwriters' Festival has announced its main programme and places for the festival in July (nearly a sell-out last year) will be limited. If you want to learn how successful writers do it, I would strongly recommend that you book early. [www.screenwritersfestival.com](http://www.screenwritersfestival.com)

Julian Friedmann