



Déjà vu?

New tax breaks will [not] help British film-makers take on Hollywood.' This headline in *The Guardian* (18 September 2004) - without the word 'not' of course - raises big questions about the future of the industry in which so many of us work or want to work.

In *The Guardian* report we learn that qualifying, that is, home-grown, British films will now be able to claim back 20% of their budgets. According to Estelle Morris, the Films Minister, the previous tax break system cost the Treasury an estimated £850m in loss of income. It is unlikely that there were more than 50 purely British films made in 2003. That £850m lost to the Treasury under the previous tax deal could have financed 100 purely British films with the not-insubstantial budget of £8.5 million each. From the point of view of scriptwriters and development executives, I know how I would prefer the Treasury to spend their money.

Does it matter that we have been here before, when the results were not a victory against Hollywood? Is it cynical to think that film-makers have simply found a different accommodation with the Treasury by which to use more taxpayers' money to make what will probably be largely unremarkable films, in economic terms at least?

I realise that film is a cultural as well as economic 'business', though the two are often conflated or just confused. As this is a magazine about scriptwriting and script development, from the producers' as well as the writers' point of view, I think it is reasonable that we ask the question: will the new tax breaks result in better scripts and better films? By that I mean films that both please the critics and reach bigger audiences or at least cover their costs within a reasonable period of time.

To 'take on Hollywood' is clearly about box office. Producers' intentions are not usually to lose money with their films, except for the delightful Bialystock and Bloom in Mel Brooks' *The Producers*. So the fact that UK producers - I might even say European producers - do lose money, even if their tax investors don't, needs to be looked at.

We are repeatedly told that most Hollywood movies lose money as if this in some way justifies our films losing money. Yet Hollywood makes staggering profits. So where are we going wrong? I am reminded of the lethal words, usually misused, of William Goldman: 'Nobody knows anything.' What he meant is that it is difficult to predict in the film business and given the number of variables, this is undoubtedly true.

For example, an excellent script can be spoiled by egotistical actors ad-libbing and a weak director; or just by an egotistical director who thinks he or she knows how to write better than the writer; or indeed by a writer whose ego had led to them directing the film when in reality they cannot direct well at all. In other words, an excellent script can sometimes result in an unsuccessful or bad film.

However, a bad script very rarely results in a good film unless it is true to a popular genre in which case it might be successful. There are many films that I personally think are pretty dreadful - from some American teen comedies to grosser than life, big-bicep action movies. All you can glean from the last sentence is something about my taste. The movies in question pleased large enough audiences for there to be sequels, clones, money in the bank and even bigger egos for some of the people involved.

'Nobody knows anything' must not be used to justify spending large sums of money (especially when it is taxpayers' money) on the basis that any fool's opinion or judgement is as valid as a really experienced and properly trained industry specialist.

When it comes to scripts, Europe, by and large, does not have properly

trained or authoritative enough script analysts or script editors in the film business. They do exist in television drama and sitcom, where over years and hundreds of episodes they have gained an understanding of what affects audiences and therefore how to reach them.

Then the experts become too sure of themselves or they try to squeeze out four episodes with only a three-episode staff and everything goes a bit pear-shaped. In the European film industry, which includes the UK, there isn't the time or the number of films for many script editors to learn their craft very well. Consequently the advice given to producers about the script is often ignored or is not authoritative enough and the directors usually influence aspects of the script, which does not always make the film more successful.

I even wonder if the Treasury knows why so much money was lost? Do the film-makers? The Films Minister says that because '... one third of their (British producers') films are being financed by the taxpayer ... that carries huge accountability and responsibility'. In reality there is no accountability and no responsibility.

It will be interesting to see if there is anything at all in the Treasury measures that will make it obligatory for the script to be really well developed. There is going to be a carrot in that if a film is a box-office hit, it will receive further tax relief. However, this will rarely be received if the films are developed in the same haphazard way that has usually been the case up till now.

I am, naturally, delighted that there is a tax life-line for British films and that efforts are being made to engage more cinema screens with art-house movies. But I see little evidence that the bar is being raised in the world of training, making it harder for the untalented. Democratisation of access to learning is a fine thing in many subject areas but where is the evidence that it is good for the film or television industries?

Most of the great writers of the last fifty years had little formal training to write. Offering overly structured courses, sometimes given by those not really qualified, encourages people to believe that they have a real chance of making it. Is there no accountability and responsibility for misleading students because places need to be filled on increasing numbers of courses?

It is not only the industry but the government that needs to be accountable. Their records are not great. Five or so years ago the audiovisual balance of trade deficit between the EU and the USA was over \$3 billion; last year it had grown to over \$8 billion. We are losing the war against Hollywood and the sooner we understand that 90% of that war lies in the battle of the scripts and take measures that will result in better scripts, the sooner we will reverse the deficit.

Hollywood's dominance of our cinema screens is only partly true: when we make movies like *The Full Monty*, *Trainspotting*, *Bend It Like Beckham*, *Billy Elliot* and *East is East*, there are plenty of cinema screens and audiences for the films.

Why don't we do it more often? Because most people in the industry don't know how to. A fuller answer to this lies in *ScriptWriter* magazine issue 9 (March 2003), in Phil Parker's analysis of a little-known genre called Personal Drama.

It is not tax breaks that will take on Hollywood. It is a better understanding of genre (that is what audiences actually want) which will lead to better scripts.

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