



Freedom of the Press to get it wrong?

The *Sunday Telegraph* (4 August 2002) in an article headlined 'Film Council is a £40m box office flop' claimed that 'Four of 107 movies commissioned in a publicly funded scheme have been released. Seven are scheduled. What about the other 96?'

ScriptWriter Magazine decided to check the facts. Had the Film Council been fudging the accounts in our own Enron scandal? In fact the Film Council has invested directly in twelve finished feature films and a further eight in production. Of these, four have been released in the UK with six scheduled for release in the coming months.

The problem would appear to be not with the *Sunday Telegraph's* maths but their risible understanding of the film business. What is equally worrying are comments by a Shadow Culture Secretary that also show little understanding of the industry. Can neither press nor politician understand the difference between investing in the development of a script and investing in the production of a film?

This distinguished newspaper suggested to the unwary public that over 100 movies had been commissioned by the Film Council of which only four were released and a further seven had release dates, and that '...the latest attempt to revive the British film industry is beginning to look like a disaster movie.'

The public almost certainly does not understand how the film industry operates, how long the development period can be and how much time can elapse between shooting a film and its release. However, a newspaper and members of the Opposition should have an obligation to understand.

Those who work in the film business know that most Hollywood movies lose money, but the ones that succeed more than cover the total losses of the failures. It is also often the case that a movie fails at its domestic box office but makes a profit through video, DVD, overseas sales and television revenue. Alexander Walker in *The Evening Standard* sometimes judges the performance of films by citing their domestic box office take rather than all sources of revenue.

It is true that American movies travel all over the world; even the successful ones sometimes do not recoup their costs from their domestic box office. Their industry has an economy of scale because of the much larger number of films they produce, which is presumably why the Film Council talks so much about building a sustainable film industry, one that has a sufficient momentum to become self-financing.

The difference between the Film Council and the former Arts Council is that the Film Council recognises that theirs is a long-term plan that requires considerable time before it can be considered a success or failure. As this magazine pointed out in its first issue – nearly a year ago – the jury will be out for some time on the Film Council and we should continue to be vigilant about their accountability.

In her interview in this issue (pages 41–47), Jenny Borgars forcefully makes the point that there are no quick fixes. This is why the Film Council's Development Fund is investing in the development of people and companies, not only in treatments and scripts.

To condemn a film publicly because it has failed at the UK box office (and the politics and economics of a film obtaining a release is a serious problem that the Film Council apparently intends to address), will undoubtedly prejudice members of the public from choosing to see it. It is one thing to say that the script is badly written for these reasons or the acting and directing is bad for those reasons, but to use questionable statistics in a major newspaper is simply irresponsible. Or is there a political agenda behind the 'news'? But then, what's new, as they say?

Every time a newspaper declares that the industry is a failure – and the

Sunday Telegraph is not the only one – it raises doubts in City investors and the industry is forced to rely for finance on tax breaks. Such financing does not always lead to films being developed properly because the priority of these investors is in utilising a tax break not investing in the film industry as part of a coherent plan to develop it.

Until the British are able to make more films, under better conditions (including considerably more time for the development process), we will not build the momentum that will turn our film and television industries into major exporters like Hollywood and the US television industry.

What has this to do with writers? A great deal. While *ScriptWriter Magazine* will always try to identify and oppose activities that are against the interests of writers, we are all – writers, directors and producers – on the same team and the competition is the hugely successful American film industry. It is they who take the lion's share of the global box office so we need to learn from the way they play the game.

We need to understand why American films are more accessible than those produced in Europe. Future issues of *ScriptWriter* are going to explore in depth some of the critical differences between the way movies are written and developed here and the way they are written and developed in the USA.

Writers can't do much about what producers and directors do with their scripts but they must take responsibility for what they choose to write and how they write it. There is widespread acceptance of the view that if a producer likes a script then it must be alright. Writers should not make the mistake of uncritically accepting the *dictat* of producers and, for their part, producers should endeavour to encourage the best work from writers, which includes not beginning production before the script is ready.

This magazine supports any cogent attempt to rationalise investment in film. Gordon Brown's recent decision was understandable due to the abuse of the loopholes by large television companies, but the manner and speed of his doing it left much to be desired. Does he want the film and television industry to be a huge export earner like Hollywood or not? In the event, PACT (the Producers' Alliance for Cinema and Television) and other organisations had to spend considerable time persuading the Treasury to reconsider and partially retract, time they could well have spent more productively.

Writers need successful producers. We all need a buoyant and self-sustaining industry. The Treasury needs to do the right thing to stimulate such an industry (after all it is also in the Treasury's interests). Forcing producers to re-invent the wheel with every film is an appalling indictment of all concerned.

Scriptwriters (and the novelists whose books are adapted) should be deeply concerned about misleading and misguided publicity on the industry in which they are working or want to work. Traditionally writers have less power than the other 'above the line' players but they should be the most articulate. Perhaps it is time for scriptwriters and novelists to become more politicised in the furtherance of their profession and their careers. Changes at the Writers' Guild over the last year suggest that this is beginning to happen.

What writers need is a sustainable industry that will provide more work and more outlets, something that the *Sunday Telegraph* and the other 'usual suspects' appear less interested in than scoring points. I would cancel my subscription to the paper but I don't have one. On the sage advice that it is more enlightening to read opinions with which you do not agree, perhaps I should take out a subscription. It might provide more editorials!

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