



~~any more~~ Making money out of scriptwriting

What concerns me as the UK moves into 2006 is the fact that across the industry, both film and television, people are saying that 2005 has been one of the worst years for scriptwriters in recent memory.

Film production and development slowed down because of the Government's prevarication about tax relief for investors; in television, another Soap bit the dust (250 episodes taken out of circulation per annum), audiences dropped further as channels and internet usage increased, and those who commission drama relied more heavily than before on A-list writers.

We do now have a new tax regime but whether it will make a significant difference to scriptwriters when it trickles down to them, and whether a new agreement between the Writers' Guild and PACT - the producers' body - will emerge in 2006, are outside the control of any individual writer.

However, I would like to suggest that writers and those who work with them make a really innovative New Year's resolution: let's help producers make more money! They need it too!

We have published editorials and legal articles about defensive measures that writers need to take in adverse circumstances. Jürgen Wolff titled his lead article in issue 25 last November Self Defence for Writers. We work in a difficult industry with more writers than there are gigs, and uneven training and development strategies that are themselves poorly developed.

Larger companies benefit from economies of scale: they can afford to hire experienced and talented development executives (even then there are not as many as the industry needs) so that at least their shows are more thoroughly developed. Nevertheless, errors in judgement often reduce sure-fire hits to misses.

Smaller companies without access to adequate R&D wing it, hoping that the script will, *mirabile dictum*, turn out well. Chance would be a fine thing, however, and most underdeveloped scripts make bad films no matter how great the original idea was.

As an agent I have dealt with producers all over the world for two decades and very rarely have I seen them deliberately try to mislead or underpay the writer, fail to attempt to do the decent thing or at least respect the appropriate Writers' Guild minimums.

Often the producers work for longer than the writer and for far less cash to get a project off the ground. It might sound like heresy in a scriptwriting magazine to say that producers also need to earn a crust and pay their bills. The polarising of writers against producers in negotiations is an unfortunate distortion of the reality of the industry in which we are working.

Skillset, The UK Film Council and similar bodies handing out Government funds in other countries (with the ironic exception of the USA) will have some impact over time but structurally changing such a negative situation can take decades. So what can writers do in the meantime?

During 2006 *ScriptWriter* magazine will publish a series of articles about contractual negotiations, exploring how writers can sell their

work on better terms. There may be little that most writers can do on their own to bring about structural change, although a few box-office successes will help. No single sector of this essentially creative and collaborative industry can achieve this by itself. It has to be a co-operative effort.

That does not mean, though, accepting whatever deal is on the table; it does not mean accepting the way deals have been done for the last few decades. We all need to be creative not only on the script, but in the meeting room in order to find ways for all parties to survive development hell because it is not only writers who have to journey through the vale of darkness.

ScriptWriter will suggest a simple, easily-remembered formulation of a script deal, one that can be done on the back of a small envelope and one that will provide essential protection for both writers and producers.

We shall look at better ways of ensuring that if a writer writes an original script, they are not kicked off the project without an acceptable payment and credit safeguard.

What about writers as co-producers? There is far too little talked about this even though they frequently put their work into the pot for little or no pay, yet anyone who puts in cash is able to gain co-producer status.

Writers need to come together in any way that helps them get films or drama made so that their talent is shown to its best. A lousy film, badly directed and made for too little money does not embellish a CV or develop a career in the right way.

We are often in awe of the American system of team writing and their ability to create characters and shows that become iconic (see Patrick Spence's lead article in this issue). The truth is that our development budgets do not run to team writing but they could run to team development.

I have encouraged a small group of clients to team-develop ideas for six low-budget, commercial, genre movies (the writers are very experienced in those genres). They will jointly own all six treatments and each writer will hopefully write two scripts which will be owned by that writer. In this way the writers' combined development work will raise the projects to an enviable, cutting-edge level.

ScriptWriter magazine wants to empower writers so to kick off the new season of our low-cost masterclasses on 14 January at RADA, we shall start the series with the all-important subject of making money that will give the inside track on submission strategies, getting commissions and negotiating better development and script deals. If you have an agent you may be forgiven for thinking that he or she takes care of all this but unless you make the right choices about what to write in the first place, your agent may have an even harder time getting you more money.

There is much that writers can do to help producers make money so that they can pay writers properly. Let's all make 2006 a much better year!

Julian Friedmann