



Challenging orthodoxy

There is no doubt that many who work in the film and television industry feel that over the last five years the creative fire has been largely extinguished. ITV and BBC1 have become as one. Populism rules even if the advent of digital channels and revamps for SKY and Channel 5 promise well. The Film Council, especially the New Cinema Fund (see interview with Paul Trijbits on page 21) has begun, only just, to stake a claim to be making a difference.

The UK didn't produce that many films last year; the sale and leaseback debacle from the Treasury didn't help even if it did put a stop to many loophole deals. So nothing much has really changed to suggest that this year – never mind next year – will be much better.

When talking to scriptwriters, the consensus is that things are relatively quiet and uninteresting, with the relentless steamroller of soaps and series moving inexorably along, pulling in enough viewers for the budgets to make it the safest game in town. 'Where are the risk-takers?' ask the writers, desperate to find producers or broadcasters willing to do something different.

Apart from *The Second Coming*, a brilliant script by Russell T Davies (see *ScriptWriter* Issue 3) on ITV, there have been several new and rather good legal, police and medical series, but nothing of the stature of *24*, *The Sopranos* or *The West Wing*.

Throughout the previous issues of this magazine different contributors have made the point that television audiences are fragmenting due to circumstances beyond the control of those running drama departments or independent production companies.

This fragmentation has led to the soaps delivering increasingly extreme storylines that are being compressed into progressively shorter time periods, so that one might be misled into thinking that one was watching on fast-forward. The conservatism of broadcasters trickles down to the independents and thence to the writers.

If you have a name and have had success, getting another commission is not that difficult. But the newer writers, not set in their ways or the ways of long-running serials or series, find it increasingly difficult to break in. The traditional career path for scriptwriters is still spec scripts winning a first gig on shows like *Family Affairs*, *Doctors* or *Hollyoaks*, on which they write for a year or two until the script editor moves to *EastEnders* or elsewhere and so does the writer. Then, in the fullness of time, having properly paid their dues, the writer will probably be offered a place on an hour-long series or serial. Eventually they may sell, or be commissioned to write, a single that is produced.

In many respects this is a healthy process given the paucity of much of the scriptwriting training in the country. For some, learning on the job is clearly more effective than learning about the practicalities of working as a writer on a show within the confines of an academic degree course.

In the case of films, because so few are made here, not many writers ever have the opportunity to learn from the experience of a movie being made from one of their scripts. The difference between scriptwriting and novel writing appears to be that the former requires

the learning of more technical skills and is a more collaborative process in which the writer is not the final arbiter of their own work. Novelists have the intercession of editors to a greater extent than those writing stage plays or poetry but the role, very often crucial and positive, of editors and directors on scripts is far, far greater. (Patrick Cattrysse on page 48 raises interesting questions about the role and function of teaching writing and working with or using scripts.)

However, the greatest influence on what is made both for cinema and for television is no longer the writer. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the creative team of writer, producer and director were protected within the BBC and other broadcasters from the controllers and schedulers, people who usually had ratings and empire building as their agenda, whereas the creative team had drama as theirs.

For single films, FilmFour, under the aegis of David Rose in the early days of Channel 4, did the same thing for 'the creative team'. The real added-value of this patronage – in the old-fashioned sense – was the experience it gave the writers who participated. Such hands-on experience is now largely confined to writing for soaps and series, which is excellent for teaching discipline and deadlines but rarely allows for the testing of writers' imaginative and creative powers.

Learning to write stories with real closure and a thumping climax isn't necessarily helped by spending a year or two learning other skills on series or serial television. Yet even in television drama the audience is beginning to show a preference for stories with strong closure. (See John Peek's article on page 8.)

So where do writers learn to write stories with closure? Where do they stretch their imaginations – and those of the audience – within the rather rigid confines of the BBC1/ITV scramble for the middle-ground? Will the other channels take more risks now that smaller audiences are both inevitable and more acceptable by the mandarins? Will the New Cinema Fund be able to keep up its momentum and elevate more raw talent into successful low budget movies?

There are so few opportunities for writers to write their own stories – those that burn passionately within them, that inspire the writer to enable us see the world differently – that every initiative must be applauded. The BBC's recent *Afternoon Plays* (see *Behind the Scenes* page 7) is a start.

The ever-decreasing number of gatekeepers who determine what arrives on our screens – big and small – must be enlarged or eventually we shall become *The Stepford Audiences*.

There are quiet discussions taking place between the Writers' Guild and some of the other 'creative' unions, many of whose members would like more say in what is made. We can vote out a government (eventually) if we don't like what they do, but we don't have the same ability to rid ourselves of those who control access to what we see.

It is time for writers, directors, actors, independent producers and others to take more of a stand for their belief in the creative process. Watch this space.

Julian Friedmann