



Small is beautiful

Every year about now, the Golden Globes are followed by the BAFTAs and then the Oscars and the Berlinale takes place with cineastes as well as sales people talking into the early hours about this film or that. Art house cinema seems to be alive and well, and the intense buzz at the Berlinale caused by the Talent Campus in which over 600 young film 'talents' from all over the world are brought to Berlin, makes one feel that the future of the film industry in Europe is safe.

What does this mean for scriptwriters? A recent item in the press said that there were more festivals for films around the world than there were films made. Are we really that self-congratulatory about our industry and, if so, perhaps this is not actually a sign of robust health?

Television has the Emmys and there are television BAFTAs too but the comparison between television and the film industry is instructive for writers not only because there is a considerable amount of work in one and very little in the other, but also because - PR and spin and ad budgets aside - television provides an outlet for some brilliant writing, directing, acting and producing on a far greater scale than the film industry, to far larger audiences and usually (*Our Friends in the North* notwithstanding) far faster.

Yet it is the feature film that receives massive publicity, the endless festivals and prizes. George Orwell wrote an essay (in a delightful little book, *Why I Write*, Penguin 2004) in which he claims there are four great motives for writing and cites the first as 'sheer egoism'. Is this partly why so many writers want to write movies and - relatively speaking - so few want to write for television?

Broadcast (the UK television trade paper) recently published some television awards and they listed the runners up and also the role of honour for the last eight years. This made me wonder. Four out of every five submissions I receive as an agent are feature films. In less than one month I could provide, from the slush pile, all the scripts for the entire British film industry for a year. Unfortunately most of them are no good at all, though some are better than a few of the films that are actually produced.

It is difficult to explain rationally why so many writers don't want to write for television. One reason could be that television is very conservative, with the tightest of deadlines and budgets, so it does not take too many risks on writers who have not learned the craft skills of working under pressure, never mind those of writing well.

Another reason why so many writers don't want to write for television is that they are in love with the movies. They should remember the old-wives' advice: while in love, don't make commitments. Yet committed to feature films is what most writers are.

Another reason is that that they admit to not enjoying watching the access television shows (shows where most writers have their first experience of the coalface) like Soaps. The BBC's brilliant initiative *Doctors* - a daytime serial with a self-contained medical story in each episode -

doesn't appeal to many writers because it is not even primetime. This smacks of the egoism Orwell talks about, of a lemming-like vanity and snobbishness, which results in the extinction of many would-be writers' careers.

Established writers have a different perspective. They have more choice because a track record proves they have at least been at the coalface, they know how hot it can become and yet they come back for more. That says something about commitment even if it doesn't prove the ability to write good material since clearly some of what is produced is not written very well. However, a writer's portfolio is there to be seen and producers can take comfort from the fact that other producers trusted you and you appear not to have let them down.

I suppose it must be that in screenwriting - for the majority of writers - size really does matter: the small screen doesn't do enough for the creative juices or the ego. I am not alone in having heard, time and time again, people in both the film and television industries declaring - as if they were the cultural lifeguards of our society - that there is nothing to watch on television.

Now, I cannot watch a whole episode of any reality television show but I do try to watch bits of them all so that I know what the public are watching, and I regularly tune in to the Soaps both because my clients work on them and because they are indicative of what the public like.

Judging by what is on the main channels and a selection of the digital channels and leaving out documentaries (even though narrative documentary has flowered so wonderfully in the last couple of years, especially on the big screen) to me there seems to be an incredible range of outstanding television drama at the moment. How can writers not want to be part of that? Could it be because many simply do not watch it?

To end my rant, let's look at some of the television drama that we have had the privilege to see in the UK in recent years as winners of the Best One-Off and Best Series or Serial Drama in the *Broadcast* Awards. It is difficult not to admire the BBC, ITV and Channel 4 drama departments when one looks at the list: *Sex Traffic*, *Dirty Filthy Love*, *The Second Coming*, *Out of Control*, *Tina Takes a Break*, *This is Personal: The Hunt for the Yorkshire Ripper*, *Doctor Who*, *Shameless*, *State of Play*, *Spooks*, *Never Never* and *Cold Feet 2*.

So let's hear it for television. Writing is writing; being a pro means doing it, for money and for credits. It can buy the writer the opportunity to say things that they passionately care about in an original voice. As far as I can see, television offers far better opportunities than film for writers to achieve the highest goals of writing, that is to say something important to the largest audience and to have the greatest and most profound effect on them. It can almost guarantee a shot at having a feature film made and then a chance of winning a Golden Bear, BAFTA or Oscar.

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