



# Telling tales

Cannes has come and gone again with little impact from the British film industry. Notable is the fact that *The Power of Nightmares* was one of the very few British entries. This three-part documentary television series may have no more significance than our seemingly permanent exclusion from the top three of the Eurovision Song Contest. After 9/11 and the war in Iraq, Europe doesn't seem to like us much.

So is it that our film-makers and those who fund and subsidise them simply haven't had much from which to choose? Where are the big commercial successes that should be coming from the tax-break funded films?

I believe there to be two fundamental problems for our industry's failure. Firstly, we are not identifying the writers most likely to succeed and we are failing to understand that the story is not the same as the way one chooses to tell it; consequently we have very few great scripts. Secondly, it is the sources of finance that determine what films are made.

The rest of Europe has brilliant novelists and playwrights. Why is it that we don't have as many brilliant scriptwriters? Perhaps we should do what the tennis industry does when faced with the criticism that we do not produce good enough tennis players to compete on the world's circuit: we should go back to basics, these being:

1. We may not be training the appropriate people to write scripts (that is, the most talented individuals are not selected because they do not comply with the entry requirements of the educational institutions).

2. Although there is a reasonable national budget for training and even development, it is spread too thinly so scripts go into production far too early before they have been fully developed.

3. We have too little training for those who read and edit scripts. The Script Factory's new diploma may be leading the way but such training needs to be available throughout the country.

4. Finally, we still doggedly fail to realise that the analysis of films and the creation of scripts are very different processes, the former perhaps not benefitting the latter as much as is thought. Most of the talk and teaching of writing is based on dissecting movies. We should be talking about creating stories; there is a critical difference.

Back to basics means looking at what is involved in inventing and telling stories. Forget about the medium for a moment, whether film or television or prose or the stage. Why do stories work when they do? Why do we have such a compelling need for myths and stories? This is what is important, far more important than why someone wants to be a writer or from where they will receive funding, although that is important to them individually.

We need to shift the emphasis and concern away from satisfying the writers to satisfying the audiences because film (and to a lesser extent television) is very expensive. We succeed in the international novel market because we can publish 100,000 novels a year and a small proportion succeed, but we make so few films that a similar proportion will never provide industrial lift-off and the attempts to create a sustainable film industry are therefore failing.

Should we not fast-track selected writers in an elitist attempt to

compete better? Is that not part of our Olympic strategy for athletes? I suppose the difference in this case is that you can measure exactly whether X runs faster under competitive circumstances than Y. How do you compare two scripts or stories?

That, of course, is the whole point. There is so much subjectivity involved and so many trainers who want to encourage rather than discourage, that it is not surprising that the end result is an unsustainable film industry.

I believe that there are several things any writer can do to improve their chances of succeeding:

1. Recognise that becoming a successful writer takes years. As Alexander Mackendrick said, it can take a matter of weeks to learn the principles of scriptwriting but years before you will be able to use them well.

2. Know the market: whether film or television, there is market information out there, easily available through the web, the trade papers and common sense. It never ceases to amaze me how few writers subscribe to trade journals.

3. Know your strengths and weaknesses as a writer. Do not attempt to write genres or styles at which you are no good.

4. Choose your stories carefully: you need to be able to say something about the human predicament over and above the 'plot'.

5. Distinguish clearly between the idea or the story as it comes to you, and the many ways you can choose to tell that story. Your choices will reflect points 1 to 4 above. Is your approach going to 'fit' with your perception of the market? Is it playing to your strengths as a writer? Have you really explored which character is the right one for the central character; have you provided sufficient opposition to that character? Is the ending appropriate for the market?

There are dozens of questions like this, most of which depend on some understanding of the context in which scripts are sold. The majority of writers know too little about that context.

6. Finally, having found the best way to develop your ideas, characters and story, how do you present them to the market? This can make the difference between success and failure. Most writers use a muddled form of treatment in which backstory, character biographical information, plot and the world of the proposed film is jumbled up in a single prose document.

It is almost impossible in my opinion - unless the writer is well-established and one can judge their ability to deliver a sophisticated script by looking at what they have delivered before - to judge a proposal written in such a muddled way.

None of these six items is prescriptive in the sense of telling a writer how to write. There is much more to being a professional writer than simply sitting at the keyboard and letting the story emerge. When you have found the best way to tell your story and the best form of treatment to start selling the story, you will still depend on the - often questionable - ability of the reader to understand what you are proposing. That is another whole subject.

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Julian Friedmann will be giving a Masterclass on Inventing Stories and Writing Treatments on 30 July (see back cover for details).