



A feast for scriptwriters

The word festival is defined as: 'a set of celebrations in honour of God'. It need not have religious significance, although the devotees of most religions, even fundamentalist religions, do seem to have a great deal in common with the driven individuals who are determined to write, direct and produce films, and those belonging to sects like lighting, costume and so on.

What they have in common is 'belief' and 'zeal'. Perhaps without these qualities they would find jobs in the real world and their lives would be infinitely duller even if more secure.

So when several hundred descend on the gracious grounds of The Manor at the Cheltenham Film Studios for the 2007 International Screenwriters' Festival (also see page 8) from 3rd to 6th July, there will be a buzz of excitement as walking on water is made to seem easy. We all know that film is not real but for those who work or want to work in the business, it has a reality far surpassing the mundane existence of working in an office, a shop or the factory floor.

What makes people want to write, to tell stories, to create a magical world that is every bit as real as the pavement beneath the feet of the millions of fans?

Professor Anthony Storr, in his book *The Dynamics of Creation*, makes the point that writing is an odd thing to do: '... the creative person could not simply' he says, 'be regarded as a disappointed man who turned to fantasy because he was so unsuccessful in satisfying his desires in reality. It also appeared improbable that a man would necessarily turn to creative activity because he happened to possess a particular skill. Moreover, although it was admitted that, in exceptional cases, becoming a writer, composer or painter might lead to fame, to sexual conquests, to the acquisition of wealth, and even occasionally to honour and power, it was thought likely that these conventional prizes ... could be attained by other means which were less laborious.'

In 1946 George Orwell wrote an essay called *Why I Write*. Orwell's analysis of why writers write is as valid now as it was over sixty years ago. His dry and economic prose is a delight:

'Putting aside the need to earn a living, I think there are four great motives for writing ... They exist in different degrees in every writer and in any one writer the

proportions will vary from time to time ... **Sheer egoism:** Desire to be clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood, etc. **Aesthetic enthusiasm:** Perception of beauty in the external world or, on the other hand, in words and their right arrangement ... Desire to share an experience which one feels is valuable and ought not to be missed. **Historical impulse:** Desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity. **Political purpose:** Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people's idea of the kind of society that they should strive for.'

If we begin to acquire an understanding of why writers write, we can begin to understand why we need to read books and watch movies. This, not 'how to write a script', is the real study and subject of writing.

So for four glorious days up to 500 people will seek answers in Cheltenham and will debate and argue and celebrate.

The 'god' of screenwriting is not some legendary scribe (even though there were no screens at the time, I would still go for Shakespeare) but the inspiration to communicate, whether egotistical, aesthetic, historic or political.

Being creative is its own reward, even though writing is a solitary occupation for many (see Paul Bassett Davies' opening article and weep). Gatherings like the Screenwriters' Festival in Cheltenham are an extraordinary revelation to many writers. The discovery that they share similar problems and ambitions takes weight off shoulders and lifts morale.

The writer in the apocryphal story, who was divorced by his wife because she did not believe that he was working when he sat for hours staring out of the window, might have saved his marriage had he had the chance to take part in the Screenwriters' Festival (the story is some 60 years old so he might be looking down on us with envy).

It is often said that 'writers write' but healthy writers also gather in crowds, laugh and share their war stories. That is why this festival is like few others this side of the Atlantic: it is an unashamed celebration of a great passion. My only complaint is that it didn't happen sooner.

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