



# Industrial waste

**T**he more I read or hear about the demands and pressures on succeeding in Hollywood, the more I believe that we in Europe suffer from a near-terminal inability to recognise and accept the difficulties that have to be overcome in order to succeed on the global stage. The current emphasis on the development and production of commercially designed genre scripts in the UK is a belated attempt to redress this.

But the legacy of the Arts Council in the UK and the national and regional film funds in countries like Germany may mean that it will take far longer than was first thought to overcome the European reluctance to support the commercial script.

Some of the right moves are being made: there is a proliferation of short and long courses, workshops and university degrees in every aspect of scriptwriting. There is also a tangible awareness that the people teaching writers may not be the right people and, indeed, they may not be teaching the right things in the right way. Script editors and development executives are being offered endless courses and we even have the recycling of some of the trainers who are training the trainers.

The Film Council, guided in the choice of genres by the distributors who have to sell the films, have moved in the right direction with their '25 Words or Less' genre script competition. (See the genre article on Sci-Fi on page 31.)

But all this begs a large question: can British and other European writers write genre movies as well as the Americans? The Brits seem to be quite good at Romantic Comedies, if Richard Curtis is not taken out of the equation, but we still need to invent the wheel each time which would suggest that the UK does not actually have a sustainable film industry, a matter at present under House of Commons' scrutiny by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

Since this magazine was launched eighteen months ago, we have published a series of articles on aspects of development in an attempt to open up the debate by identifying what has not worked during the formative stages of a film. As Bicât and Macnabb note in the *Agent Provocateur* article in the current issue: 'The presumption is that if we keep training and retraining the writers endlessly to write and rewrite to some mystical blueprint, we'll somehow achieve a great artistic and/or box office smash.'

Writing for film is essentially a collaborative process and the process of developing scripts has therefore a collaborative responsibility. Notes pour in to the writer from all sides, sometimes negating each other unless there is a strong and confident script editor responsible for working with the writer to ensure the desired result. Collective responsibility and the 'committee-like' nature of decisions frequently have the effect of preventing any single person from taking the responsibility for the end-product which results in a general abdication of responsibility.

As an agent, my day job is to extract development money from producers and broadcasters for writers. Over more than fifteen years representing many writers, a reasonable amount of development money

has flowed through us to writers, but much of the development work that followed was not effective. Many of the causes of ineffective development were analysed by Phil Parker in Issue 2 of *ScriptWriter* and some of the successes in Issue 9.

Must a high failure rate be in the nature of development? Like the conventional wisdom about advertising which asserts that 50% of the money spent will be wasted but you can't know which 50%, development seems like a very high risk to producers in Europe who rarely have development budgets that they can afford to write off, unlike the larger American companies.

Development money should not be considered high risk; it is a sensible and necessary investment. Is it a waste of a scarce resource to keep development budgets low and eke out the money? Or is it in fact a waste of the much larger production budgets because not enough is invested in development, or not invested well enough?

Whereas the average development budget in the USA is estimated to be 6-8% of the total budget of the film, in Europe it is thought to be around 2-3%. An increase in development spending to 4-5% would enable producers to do a great deal more to protect the other 95% or 96% of the budget than they seem to be doing at present.

It is tragic that producers will not pay 50% of the total script fee for the treatment and step outline when at least 50% (sometimes significantly more) of the writing work should have been done before the first word of the script is written. This is not a matter of paying writers more or paying it sooner. It is about producers paying for and demanding the work that really needs to be done before the script is begun.

One can see why it is not done: independent producers are unable to build up a sufficient share of residuals or profits from sales, which results in their being unable to build up R&D funds to invest in new projects. Writers are therefore forced to develop treatments and scripts without enough time or finance to make sure that the blueprint for the film is good enough and, as a result, another film goes into production prematurely. Deals with broadcasters in which independent producers do not receive a sufficient share of the profits is also partly responsible for this situation; why should one care desperately about a film or programme if one has little investment in its success?

The strategic use of the Film Council's Development and Training funds are a start to the correction of this imbalance in the industry, though the money they spend on distribution may be premature since the distribution of badly written or directed films is likely to be largely wasted. To quote the advertising world again, money shouldn't be spent promoting a product unless it is selling.

Potential revenue from ticket, DVD and video sales and the benefits from exports are so great that to be parsimonious about development money and development expertise is commercially incompetent and has resulted in decades of waste and a non-industrialised British film sector. The state of British scripts is not the responsibility only of the writers. It is just as much the responsibility of those who read the scripts.

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