



Screenwriters who are helping themselves

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Writers need to be more entrepreneurial in the current climate — and that's good for the film industry, says David Pearson, director of the Screenwriters' Festival.

There won't be many screenwriters in Cannes this week. It is traditionally the preserve of producers and financiers, and they may find less free champagne to neck casually at parties as struggling companies stay away and others choose cocktails économique. Next year, though, I do expect more British writers on the Croisette, because British writers are becoming more entrepreneurial.

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As the digital revolution impacts on distribution and traditional production funding models break down, writers' true value could be recognised — both for a new-found spirit of enterprise and for their ability to be lightning rods for the audience's psyche. Producers and directors help bring to life writers' stories such as *Slumdog Millionaire* and *Brokeback Mountain* so they become successful films catching the spirit of their age.

As newspapers reduce their ranks of journalists and television shrinks its ambitions, films still provide special insight, as writer-director Armando Iannucci and his co-writers Jesse Armstrong, Simon Blackwell, Ian Martin and Tony Roche have just demonstrated with *In The Loop*. This comic stab at the flaws of politicians, with a minister quipping about whether he should put his porn film bill on his expenses, provided a striking echo of Westminster's scandals last month in a way newspapers and TV news couldn't manage.

Iannucci will be among the line-up at the Screenwriters' Festival (SWF) in the south of England this October, where exchanges on working approaches, best practice and projects will again take place between writers, directors and producers. How to make money from film will definitely be a topic.

As the development puddle in the UK dries up, writers are behaving like producers — if not actually being producers. They do this to protect their investment in scripts they have written but not yet been paid for. It follows a trend of TV writers setting up production companies. The reduction in paid gigs for writers may also embolden them to go forward with their pet project. Bill Nicholson, screenwriter and SWF regular, is optimistic: "It could be a period of creative development, maybe a new golden age for scripts."

Screenwriters need a passion for their story, tempered with awareness of the audience whose cinema visit is often a diversion from their own troubles. Bill Nicholson believes: "The writer must write the story that's buried inside them, and bring it to people. If it's good, something will make people realise it is special to the moment."

As the belt tightens around the industry at the Palais, everyone will be trying to work out what the new models are. It is not just development money that's gone, production funding in the UK has shrunk too. Technology may help reduce the entry-level cost of making micro-budget features, but it can't solve the problem of getting films funded on its own. The UK industry has to find a way to make more films that make more money, but that doesn't have to mean empty popcorn fare.

So what would we like from Cannes in 2009? I'd like a demonstration that original screenplays can be as successful as adapted work. They can.

Let's wish Cannes well and hope that enlightened courage and realism informs everyone lucky enough to raise a glass there. Champagne or Cava.

Screenwriters manifesto

- The European Screenwriters Manifesto was published two years ago by the Federation of Screenwriters in Europe. While it has failed to find much traction in terms of legislation, it does highlight the continuing concerns of screenwriters about how they are treated in the film production process.
- The manifesto asserted that: The screenwriter is an author of the film, a primary creator of the audiovisual work.
- The practice of crediting directors with "a film by..." was unacceptable.
- The moral rights of the screenwriter, especially the right to maintain the integrity of a work and to protect it from any distortion or misuse should be protected and respected.
- The screenwriter should be entitled to an involvement in the production process as well as in the promotion of the film and be compensated for such work.
- It also called for greater support from governments and funding agencies for screenwriters — with direct funding for writers. And for national and European law to acknowledge that the writer is an author of the film.

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