

The Emperor's New Clothes **by Julian Friedmann**

This article incorporates arguments put forward in the Editorials of Issues 12 and 16 of *ScriptWriter Magazine*.

You all know the story *The Emperor's New Clothes* by Hans Christian Andersen.

Once upon a time there lived a vain Emperor whose single passion in life was to dress in elegant clothes. He changed clothes almost every hour and loved to show them off to his people...Everyone said, loud enough for the others to hear: "Look at the Emperor's new clothes. They're beautiful!"

But then a little boy, noticing that the Emperor actually had no clothes on said, with the truthfulness and innocence of a child, "The Emperor is naked!" and all the people agreed. The story finishes: "But the Emperor, realizing that the people were right, could not admit it."

This may not be an accurate metaphor for the state of scriptwriting training, but it might be closer to the truth than many trainers would be prepared to admit.

We need to assess whether or not we are being successful as trainers in two different ways: firstly, are we individually as trainers, or institutions that provide training, being more successful than we were in previous years? If this research could be done, perhaps with the Audiovisual Observatory, it would be of considerable importance.

Secondly, if we look at how well or badly we in Europe are doing in the global audio-visual marketplace, using figures from the Observatory, the answer is rather badly. About five years ago the audiovisual balance of trade deficit between the EU and the USA was a little over \$3 billion a year. Last year it was over \$8 billion.

In other words we spend \$8 billion more on their audiovisual products than they spend on ours. By this statistic we are in pretty bad shape as far as competing in the global marketplace.

You might argue that there is a vital cultural remit we all must observe and encourage, such as the writing of films and television drama that are culturally specific but might not work internationally. However, the answer to this is that we can sometimes succeed globally (think of all the small films from Denmark that have performed so well worldwide), but we do not do so very often. The reason is

Article for TEST, Valencia June 2004

not the stories we try to tell, because culturally specific stories travel perfectly well if they are told in an accessible and engaging way. The problem I believe lies in our failure to distinguish between the story and the way it is told.

There is a major economic problem facing all of us – our industries are not profitable enough to invest adequately in the development of the stories for the films and dramas we wish to make. We tend therefore to be less demanding of and less ambitious for our scripts and stories than we perhaps should be.

Are we approaching scriptwriting training in the best way possible? To begin with I would like to look at the questions: can scriptwriting can be taught effectively? Are we selecting the right people and are we training them in the right ways? Then I would like to look at what I believe are some misconceptions of the role of the creative as opposed to the analytical process that much great writing demonstrates.

But first, where should we start? An old joke nicely illustrates this problem facing our film and television trainers. A couple of young European scriptwriters are driving across the USA from East to West, on their way to California and Hollywood, when they become lost in the desert in Arizona.

They stop at a rundown gas station – which looks as if it came from the 1946 version of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* – and ask the unshaven attendant sitting in the shade by the old pumps with a straw in his mouth, if he could tell them how to get to the road to Los Angeles. “Ah, yeah, well...” he says, “I wouldn’t start from here!”

There has not been a significant improvement in the quality of scripts over the last decade, so is there perhaps something wrong with the place from which the process of training the talent starts?

Whether the problem lies with the talent (those who want to be writers), or with the teachers (many of whom also want to be writers), is difficult to say. We keep hearing phrases like ‘training the trainers’ bandied about as if repetition will make it come true. In issue 10 of *ScriptWriter*, Bicat & Macnabb noted that, ‘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.’

I believe that we need to face the unpalatable truth that the effective teaching of scriptwriting is very difficult. Since scripts are stories about people, what should be taught to those wishing for careers as scriptwriters is psychology, in particular, the study of human behaviour and motivation. These are recognized academic subjects and can be taught accordingly. Scriptwriting is not an academic subject and should not be taught as one.

The dominance of structure as a central tenet in the teaching of scriptwriting has attracted those students with analytical skills rather than creative skills. (See Jürgen Wolff on the need for more right-brain writers in issue 1 of *ScriptWriter*.) What aspiring scriptwriters also need to be taught is the collaborative nature of the craft. (See Lucy Scher's article on key problems of development in issue 11.) Unlike other creative occupations, many of which tend to be solitary (writing of novels, painting, sculpture), scriptwriting is best done in collaboration with others on real projects. In order to collaborate effectively and successfully, student scriptwriters must learn the industries' requirements and *modus operandi*. By and large, such craft skills are not academic subjects and are best learned on the job, in the real world.

Equally important, and something that cannot be taught, is life experience. Most universities are like safe havens away from the real world, likely to prevent students from gaining the life experiences that come, for example, from a gap year in some remote place where new resources have to be found from deep within or even from a demanding job (including parenting).

If the quality of scripts (or the quantity of high-quality scripts) is not significantly increasing, it would appear that the academic teaching of scriptwriting is failing the industry because the number of students has increased tenfold in the last decade. No one can seriously argue that the British film industry is in good shape. If it is in better shape than it was five or even ten years ago, it could be because of strategic support systems for tax-benefit financing and the UK Film Council's *largesse*. But the great scripts are not there.

However, in the opinion of many, there is actually an increase in the number of badly written scripts that circle around industry desks. There are now a vast number of scripts that will never be made or even be considered for optioning.

What we are witnessing is the rapid growth of an unregulated training industry, made up of increasing numbers of courses offering to train virtually anyone who wants to learn to write scripts, and this has resulted in a huge script mountain. As more and more 'students' choose to be trained to write scripts, so new courses are made available, giving the academics and trainers a more secure living. Are we also failing to train the trainers in the right way?

Many people I know will not thank me for saying this, but I believe that the most important reason for the failure of the British film industry to achieve some kind of lift-off is the failure to train the right people in the first place in the right way. This is why there is a lack of good scripts and it is primarily this, not the acknowledged lack of access to screens for British movies, which is holding the industry back. And the same is largely true all over Europe.

There is an ever-increasing number of 'students' willing to part with substantial sums of money for both long and short courses. Could it be that the exponential

growth in numbers reflects refugees from the ubiquitous and bland media courses that are finally being derided?

It is obvious that if we could select more talented writers and train them in a more effective way, we would have a more profitable and globally successful film industry. Poor scripts do not mean that more training is necessary for more people. I believe that what we need is different but better training for fewer people, those who can demonstrate craft skills, knowledge of human behaviour and storytelling ability. Offering training to all-comers is not good for the health of our industries.

The standard must be raised so that only the best make it to the top. At present this is demonstrably not the case with hundreds of scriptwriting graduates coming on to a market that doesn't respond well to what they have to offer. Unless the standard is raised, we will not find and nurture the writers who have both the storytelling talent and the determination to master the craft skills. This may be elitist, but then the democratisation of access to training seems an unrealistic indulgence when dealing with a vocational skill like scriptwriting.

A successful feature film script is one of the most difficult forms to write, far more difficult in my view than a novel or even a stage play. Yet a lemming-like wave of people are encouraged to attempt it, as if giving encouragement is unquestionably desirable in a civilised, democratic and culturally sophisticated society. I believe it was Pauline Kael who said of Hollywood that it was the only place you could starve to death from encouragement. People need to be deterred from scriptwriting as a career by making it very clear how difficult it is to succeed, rather than opening new courses across the ever-growing E.U. in the hope of discovering a rare talent almost by chance.

Can an 18-year-old reflect or refract the subtleties of life as well as a 40 year old? The 18-year-old may have a sensibility about what youth say and do (something that can be researched by older writers), but my money is on the older writers who face ageism more now than ever before, not on the younger writers so proficient in structure and the formatting of Final Draft.

The industry has apparently failed to grasp the importance of demanding higher standards in the training of new writers. It has far too little interest and influence on what is taught to whom and how. The industry – not the academics – is to blame for this. The industry – not the academics – should be more involved in determining the validation and accreditation criteria of degree courses.

Do other industries allow the academic community such freedom to dictate what is taught and how? If you want to be a doctor, engineer, architect, etc. there is a close overlap between the appropriate industry organisations and academia. Is it because scriptwriting is essentially a freelance occupation that the film and television industries believe they cannot have more influence in what is taught and to whom?

Perhaps not enough of the trainers are sufficiently involved in the industry. A second-year scriptwriting undergraduate doing work experience in my office as part of her degree course looked blankly at me when I asked if she regularly read the trade papers. Did she imagine I meant *Builders' Weekly*? How aware are her teachers about the importance of industry knowledge? Some teachers of scriptwriting are themselves working writers, but freelance writers tend to have a modest range of industry experience (and there is no proof that writers make the best teachers of writing).

One university where I taught was upset when a couple of students gave up the course because they were offered so much commissioned work from television series that they couldn't do both. The university was concerned that it would lose the government subsidy for the students. I tried to reassure them that we should aspire to lose all the students this way because then the course would be the most successful in the country and the university would have the pick of applicants. Funny, they didn't seem to agree!

Does it matter that the great majority of those who want to write scripts are determined to become feature film writers, even though it is pitifully obvious that there is very little likelihood of them actually earning a living by doing so? There are not enough features made in Europe; our broadcasters don't do enough singles and most of the prized mini-series or two-parters are given to fairly experienced writers.

So, should public funds be spent training the wrong people in skills or for jobs that don't exist? How many of the courses utilizing government funding adequately recognize that – in career terms – it is television that is critically important. Television, soaps especially, are seen by most would-be script writers and the majority of academics teaching scriptwriting as a poor relation to the feature film, despite the ability of soaps to attract and communicate with millions of viewers night after night. Is it that a movie is so appealing because it is assumed to be the work of a single voice and is therefore far more self-aggrandising? Does the collaborative nature of team-writing and serial writing seem like a less fulfilling activity, so attracting fewer egos?

We should not ignore the importance of ego here. Writers need egos to face the glaring white page, to be prepared for the hobnailed boots of less literate mortals who misread and misunderstand their work. Older writers complain that the commissioning editors and producers seem to be younger with every passing year and it is well known that those who greenlight are sometimes afraid of writers who know so much more than they do.

Furthermore, we should not ignore the needs of academics, many without security of tenure, who must not only continuously publish, but must increase the numbers coming to their courses or they may be forced to make a living in the real world. But all the effort and subsidising of the training of scriptwriters is not producing that many notable scripts.

As I mentioned in Issue 11 of *ScriptWriter* magazine, Britain – Europe for that matter – has well-established audiovisual development industries, but since there is virtually no production industry, there is not much of a distribution industry. Our actors have few starring roles, so we don't have the stars to open movies across hundreds, never mind thousands of screens. This is the result of a lack of great scripts.

We frequently hear people in the media or on its fringes say that there is nothing good on television. Writers, in particular, like to say this, as though denigrating the work of others will enhance their own. No commissioning editor actually chooses to make a bad programme badly, so why do so many people, especially those wanting to write feature film scripts, speak of television in such a derogatory manner? Is it partly their way of justifying the dubious rationality of their desire to write feature scripts when they know in their heart of hearts that this is quixotic, that few succeed and that they won't earn a living?

Telling stories needs experience of living. Over thirty years of working with writers has proved to me beyond any doubt that there are as many talented writers who have never formally studied scriptwriting (or been to any place of higher education) as those who have. This is not to say that a degree in scriptwriting is not worth having. If it directs the students to the needs of the industry, if it provides them with responsive and informed script editing, and ensures that they graduate with a fat portfolio of scripts in various genres and formats, and a decent list of top industry business cards, then it is certainly worthwhile.

I am not arguing that training is a bad thing. I am saying that the bad training of students who should not have been selected in the first place is not good for the industry. Short courses tend to provide a facile understanding of jargon rather than the underlying nature of screen communication or of human behaviour. Unless a script says something about the human condition, the structure of its acts will not make it into a good story. As Lajos Egri so elegantly demonstrated in his book *The Art of Dramatic Writing* over sixty years ago, the story (plot) must come out of the characters, not the other way round. The subtitle of his wonderful book sums it up so brilliantly: *It's basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives*.

The best training for writers usually involves the process of writing and developing real treatments and scripts in real time with real industry personnel responding to their work. Rather than importing so many films because the audience clearly enjoys imported movies, the industry needs to find a more effective *modus operandi* with the trainers if writers are to play their part in reversing the hegemony of popular American films.

At the moment Europe has small film industries that require constant government subsidy, and training industries that produce thousands of graduates who see their hopes and dreams of having their names in lights dashed. These two industries must sing from the same song sheet because paid writing jobs are more difficult to

find than work as an out-of-the-way petrol pump attendant in a desert, but at least the petrol pump attendant knows how difficult it is to get from there to here.

In the second part of this article I would like to look more specifically at the creative process. Did Shakespeare or Chaucer or Jane Austen or Ibsen know much about the underlying structures which we are endlessly told are necessary to write a great story?

When a film or novel is analysed by critics, teachers (or students as part of their degree courses), and the hidden structures, the act breaks and scene breaks are revealed, what do we assume about the writer of the script? That they thought this through analytically, decided exactly where to put the scene and act breaks?

In other words do all writers need to be conscious of what they are doing when they write? Or are some writers – *pace* George Orwell – more equal than others?

There is clearly much great scriptwriting that precedes Joseph Campbell, Syd Field, Robert McKee *et al.* So if all the early writers didn't know that they should do what scriptwriters today are being exhorted to do, how did they manage to write to the blueprints much loved by the structuralists, the stories much-loved by the public?

When early myths are analysed and shown to be similar in structure – before Joseph Campbell, Chris Vogler, Syd Field, Robert McKee explained what the structure of storytelling is or should be – how did the early storytellers create such lasting stories without the training so prevalent today?

Had they read Vladimir Propp, or Aristotle? Or did they manage to write well because they had learned by absorbing the essence of storytelling from the stories they loved?

Stephen Cleary, the head of Arista, notes in an article in issue 17 of *ScriptWriter*. 'Currently the king of paradigms for the action movie is the 'Mythic Hero's Journey' as popularised by Christopher Vogler out of Joseph Campbell out of James Fraser out of Vladimir Propp and the Russian formalist ethnographers of the late nineteenth century. The idea that the Mythic Hero structure is a Hollywood construction is, ironically enough, a myth.'

Cleary goes on to say that '...the first problem with all these guys, from the Hollywood-friendly Vogler to the egghead-only Propp, is that the gurus use the Mythic Hero structure as an analytic rather than a creative tool. So a Mythic Hero structural paradigm might be a good way of analysing the story once it's written, but it's much less useful as a starting point.'

The process of deconstruction may not actually be of as much help in the creative process as some think, and we need to look at who is doing the writing and who is doing the deconstructing or the teaching to see the implications of this.

There are two significant differences between the cadres of those writing or trying to write for a living today, and those a hundred or even fifty years ago, and I am not including the advent of wall-to-wall television or video and DVD. I am talking about the fact that there are many many more people trying to make careers as writers and there are also many more people making a living teaching the former to try to make careers as writers.

From time to time writers' organizations reveal figures for how little the average writer earns. Literary agents, film and TV production companies and broadcasters can all attest to the growing number of submissions. Yet the State – in most EU countries – provides greater and greater support for those wishing to write. This is commendable in many respects but it needs a health warning.

Unless we encourage into our creative industries as wide a variety of people and points of view and interests as possible, there will never be a multi-cultural society that embraces all. In Britain the BBC, like the police, appears to have made great strides towards encouraging presenters from all ethnic backgrounds. However, the encouragement of a multi-cultural array of programmes and films (like the assumption that imposing some structuralist blueprint will ensure success) won't make people watch programmes that they do not find engaging.

There is an inherent conservatism in the art of programme scheduling that makes television – except where the minority groups have ghetto slots – inevitably a mass medium. The old Channel 4 was a breath of fresh air until it – like BBC1 – was seduced by the ratings game.

Here in Britain there is a widespread lack of courage among those with power in the industry. ITV has shareholders to please. The BBC has politicians to mollify: there is a natural tension between 'kicking arse' in Westminster and hoping to be given another piggy bank of taxpayers' money via the BBC licence fee. Channel 4 and FIVE are money-making machines so they hardly come into the equation despite attempts to be more distinctive.

Investment in feature films will always be dominated by profits for the investors. Such subsidies as do exist in the UK – the UK Film Council's Premiere and New Cinema Funds – are generally too little to make a big enough difference, although the growing list of films supported by the UKFC since its advent includes a respectable number of films that are either courageous, critically successful or commercially successful, even if they are not always all three at the same time.

So should Mrs Worthington have suggested that her daughter become a scriptwriter rather than actress? And if so, what are her career prospects?

The recent public and parliamentary row in Britain over the increase in tuition fees at universities might make both teachers and would-be students look carefully at the potential outcomes. Will the students be able to earn a living from a scriptwriting degree?

As a writers' agent I see many experienced and successful scriptwriters struggle to make a decent living. Too many of them don't respect television sufficiently to convince the producers and script editors on series and serials to hire them. Too many of them focus on their own authorial pieces, basing their choices of subject, tone and setting on what would appear to be the flavour of the month.

If we best learn to tell stories simply by hearing or seeing them, where do we practise the skills that great storytellers clearly demonstrate? I would be the first to argue that degree courses in scriptwriting are valuable in this respect, though vocational experience writing for television is – in my opinion – better training than most degree courses in scriptwriting.

But you don't need to know how the combustion engine works to be able to drive a car, which is to some extent what the emphasis on structuralism in film studies and film criticism is to creative writing.

If writers use structure as if it were a formula, or if they don't know their characters as if they were real people, and don't have the instinctive understanding of human behaviour which comes from experience, relationships, observation, reading scripts, novels, poetry, comics, plays as well as viewing films and television drama and theatre, and generally being nose about people, where will they get the raw material from?

If writers are not driven by an almost obsessional curiosity about why people do what they do, they will be limited in the richness they can draw from.

The fundamentalist problem with the analytical approach to teaching or studying scriptwriting is that it is like putting all the bits of a character together, plugging it – Frankenstein-like – into the electricity, and hoping it will come to life.

The emphasis must surely be on creative skills not analytical skills. Great storytelling requires both form and content: structure is form; characters and their relationships are content. Getting the balance right is not easy.

The longer I am in the business and the more writers I work with, the more convinced I am that unless the characters come alive no amount of structural finesse will breathe life into them. Whereas if the plot creaks and the act breaks are all over the place, that can be fixed as long as we believe in the characters. Which is why Shakespeare, Chaucer, Jane Austen and Ibsen (to name but a few) managed so well without the analytical tools so beloved today by so many.

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CV of Julian Friedmann

Joint Managing Director of Blake Friedmann Literary Agency in London which represents 200 book and script writers worldwide.

Created and was Head of Studies of PILOTS (Programme for the International Launch of Television Series), one of the first European Union MEDIA 1 projects, concerned with the writing and developing of long-running television series. He has also been an advisor to the European Film College at Ebeltoft, Denmark, and to the Northern Film School in Leeds. He also designed and set up the MA in Television Scriptwriting at De Montfort University, Leicester.

He was the first UK Coordinator of MEDIA 1's EAVE producer-training programme (1990), where he was responsible for the pitching training. He has been an expert at Euro Aim workshops and has been a visiting lecturer at the University of Brussels, the Munich Film School, the Masterschool Drehbuch and ScriptForum in Berlin, John Moore's University in Liverpool, the London College of Printing MA in scriptwriting, Oxford University Film Society, Movie Makars in Scotland, the Royal College of Art, the National Film & Television School, the Northern School of Film and Television in Leeds, and De Montfort University in Leicester. He has regularly lectured at SOURCES workshops around Europe and for Screen Training Ireland. He also teaches at Global Negotiations, a new MEDIA Programme training people in the skills of negotiating in the audio-visual industries. He has advised broadcaster BRTN Belgium and YLE Finland on long-running series.

He has been on both the European Jury for EMMY nominations and the jury for the Grierson Documentary Award, and was an expert at the Script Clinic and the Berlin Film Festival's Talent Campus in 2004. He lectures on the business of scriptwriting, on writing treatments and on pitching, and has published a book called HOW TO MAKE MONEY SCRIPTWRITING. He edited two volumes called WRITING LONG-RUNNING TELEVISION SERIES. He is the Editor of a new series of books on scriptwriting being published by Intellect Books.

In November 2001 he launched Britain's leading scriptwriting magazine, **ScriptWriter**. (Details from www.scriptwritermagazine.com). The magazine is now in its third year and has become Europe's most influential scriptwriting magazine.

He was born in South Africa in 1944 and came to live in London in 1961. He has degrees from the University of York (Philosophy/Politics BAs) and an MA from the School of Oriental & African Studies.

Reviews of his book HOW TO MAKE MONEY SCRIPTWRITING:

'This wonderful and accessible book fills in all the gaps. It's full of insights that help writers in the business of screenwriting - a great help to actually get a script sold.' Linda Seger (author of MAKING A GOOD SCRIPT GREAT).

'If you want to be a scriptwriter but aren't really sure what to do about it, then you could do a lot worse than reading Julian Friedmann's HOW TO MAKE MONEY SCRIPTWRITING. Friedmann knows what he's talking about, which he does in a witty and entertaining way, informing without patronising. Go and buy it.' *Film Review*

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