

Report of the Writers' Guild of Great Britain to the AGM of FSE 2010  
By Robert Taylor

### 50th Anniversary

The WGGB celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in May 2009. Although organisations representing writers' working in film, radio and TV had existed previously this was the first time that they had come together in a united form and committed to clear principles of trade unionism and dedicated to achieving acceptable minimum terms for all writers. To mark the event the Guild has published a history "The Write Stuff" written by Guild member Nick Yapp.

### The UK Writing Industry

The combined effects of a mediocre BBC licence fee, migration of ITV advertising to internet and the recession have led to a massive loss of work for writers in 2009. The BBC say 300 hours a year of scripted material have been lost (a third of the output) and budgets slashed, often in favour of cheap 'reality tv'. This has led to massive pressure in the market as more and more writers fight for fewer and fewer commissions. The rise of the reality shows brings further problems because the reality is that these shows *are* scripted; they *do* employ writers, yet on terms that do not recognise those writers rights.

In the run up to the General Election which will be held in May 2010 the mainstream political parties are dancing daintily around the subject of cuts in public spending. However, they are inevitable. We believe that with healthcare and education coming under pressure, whatever party forms the next Government they will not hesitate to slash support for theatre and film, meaning even more scriptwriters competing for even less work.

### Digital Copyright and Collective Licensing

Major changes are coming in copyright to adapt it to the digital world, in particular new systems for orphan works and extended collective licensing. Writers (along with publishers, producers, distributors, broadcasters) are beginning to lose their total control over the use of their works, and must ensure that at least they receive payment for all the uses that are made.

The WGGB is already heavily involved in negotiations with BBC, ITV and C4 over internet catch-up and archive services. Everything points towards a collective licensing solution. It is absolutely essential for the future preservation of writers' rights and the fair and equitable distribution of the potentially vast revenues that the licensing schemes may generate that these arrangements are negotiated and controlled by writers' guilds. In the UK a Digital Economy Bill that may well be enacted in the dying days of the current administration proposes the self licensing of collecting societies. This raises the spectre of broadcasters and publishers licensing themselves for digital use of works on terms of their own devising. This gross conflict of interest must be opposed at all costs. The Guild has established a Digital Payments subsidiary and we will use this to fight for the rights of our members and the wider writing community. We also believe that it is essential for us to lobby our nationally, in Europe and internationally and present a powerful case for the inclusion of writers organisations in collective licensing arrangements and the proper remuneration of writers wherever their work is used.

### Working Conditions for Screenwriters

Writers face problems of massive unpaid work to get commissions. The Guild has amassed evidence of abuses – such as experienced writers being asked to undertake lengthy research and write detailed treatments and step outlines without pay before being commissioned on long running series. Sometimes the commission has disappeared by the time the work is done. The Guild believes in ‘not a word without pay’. At the other end of the process, writers also face demands for numerous re-writes, often with conflicting notes, from a series of ambitious executives and inexperienced story editors. Writers’ should be treated as professionals and their creative vision respected. Another serious problem is that writers feel powerless to complain and fear being victimised if they cause trouble. Time and again a member tells us of a problem but says “Don’t use my name or I’ll never work again”. This fear is real and can only be broken down by the slow process of rebuilding trust. The Guild is engaged in practical measures to deal with these complaints, such as an independent ombudsman and greater presence in the studios.

### Membership and Finances

Year on year membership of the Guild grows, yet despite increasing our subscriptions income is static. This is because our members are earning less – a direct result of the reduction in commissions. Many, who are few years ago, could support themselves by writing and make a decent living are now struggling on a couple of commissions a year and having to take second jobs. At the Guild office, we are now employing just four members of staff. A few years ago we had seven. Finances are still unstable and long term planning extremely difficult.

### Activities in 2010

Faced with these problems the Writers’ Guild of Great Britain does not intend to withdraw from engagement or become insular. On the contrary we intend to take the fight to wherever we are needed and continually innovate new ways of serving our members. We have published new Guidelines on writers working with producers in joint ventures in low budget film projects. We hope that we will develop new film minimum terms agreements. We look forward to concluding our on-going negotiations with the BBC, ITV and Channel 4.

We have set up our Books co-op for writers of self-published books, to including ebooks, and intend this to grow into an on-line writing community, free from the constraints of moribund publishers, where writers’ can connect directly with their readers. We believe that this could become a template for other projects – including in the audiovisual field.

In difficult and fast changing times the need for Guilds to be strong and focussed has never been greater and we urge this AGM to grasp these issues.

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