



Writers' Guild of Great Britain

Report on activities 2012-13 For the Federation des Scenaristes d'Europe Brussels November 2013

According to our membership database we have exactly 2013 members. 2013 members in the year 2013! So, despite pessimistic prophesies more writers are joining the Guild. However, many members are also resigning; work in television has dried up for them and many are moving on to other ways to make a living.

Increasingly the work of the Guild is being done by volunteer members who sit on our Executive Council or on our Craft Committees and make decisions about what the Guild should be doing. Our regional branch structure was revived considerably during the presidency of David Edgar, and there are now Guild events taking place from Glasgow to Cornwall and from Cardiff to Liverpool to Birmingham. Members are being encouraged to get involved and take action.

Bernie Corbett remains the Guild's chief negotiator and in the past 12 months he has attended countless meetings in the areas of broadcasting and theatre production, along with members.

We have also lobbied Westminster, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Government, the European Parliament, the British Film Institute, Arts Council England, Creative Scotland, the Arts Council of Wales and more. Meetings and events have been staged across the UK. Campaigns have been run and initiatives jointly undertaken with our sister entertainment unions.

The Guild also held its annual awards ceremony to celebrate the craft of writing in the UK last November at a large venue in Notting Hill. This year we will be holding a smaller event, with only 100 guests, at the Free Word Centre, near the Guild office in Clerkenwell.

All this has taken place alongside restructuring the office, making preparations to bring our membership system back in house – this project went live on 1 November

2013 – and publishing our popular weekly E-bulletin. As if all this wasn't enough, our lease is about to expire and we will be moving to new offices after Christmas.

There's more work to do. Areas that need attention during the next twelve months include the rise of internet platforms using writers' work, and the book writer's rights in the ebook age. We absolutely need to think about how we can affect policy to stimulate the creative industries.

The Guild has set up the Writers' Foundation (UK), an autonomous body set up to support events which promote the craft of writing and/or advance education and training for writers. Led by former Guild Chair Robert Taylor, the Foundation has met regularly during the year, and the Guild directors have been joined by Alison Hindell, the BBC's head of audio drama. The first major event to be financed entirely by the foundation was a three-day playwrights' workshop titled Plays of Innocence and Experience, held at RADA last October and led by Richard Pinner. The Foundation has now received a healthy number of further applications.

Television negotiations

After nearly five years of negotiating, the Guild and the PMA (Personal Managers' Association i.e. agents) have finally implemented our new BBC Agreement. It protects not only writers' work on BBC 1, 2, 3, 4, CBBC and CBeebies but also online.

All writers who have written for the BBC since 1928 will soon be asked to sign a General Permissions Agreement (GPA) so the BBC can use and pay for use of their work without constantly having to contact them to renew licences. By cutting down a large amount of BBC admin costs we intend that writers will benefit from those savings. A writer will have the option of opting out of the GPA for individual works; also once signed, a writer will always have the right to withdraw permission for specific shows.

With the new BBC agreement also comes Writers' Digital Payments (WDP), through which writers will be paid for use of their work on the BBC iPlayer, various catch-up services and more. The WDP is run by the Guild and PMA, and money will go straight to the writer, without the deduction of any commission.

Now that the BBC children's programmes have moved from BBC1 and 2 to the dedicated children's channels, CBBC and CBeebies, the Guild and PMA have started talks with the BBC to protect writers' rights and livelihoods. We are also in talks with ITV and have also started to negotiate a long overdue new PACT TV Agreement.

BAFTA Television Craft Awards

After discussions with BAFTA it has been agreed to introduce a Television Comedy Writing Award to sit alongside their Drama one at their Craft Awards; creating two separate and distinct writing categories. We've also cleared up a misconception about the way BAFTA honours writers. Guild members expressed fears that writers weren't being represented at the main Awards, but were shunted to the Craft ones instead. Not true. At the main BAFTA TV Awards, there are eight awards for comedy

and drama series, and when the series wins an award, the series' writer wins one too. In addition to the above two new awards, that's ten writers' awards in all.

There's been a lot in the press recently about bullying in the BBC. Along with our sister trade unions, the Guild takes this very seriously. We have conducted a survey to our TV members (which can be answered anonymously) in order to get a clearer picture about how, if and when it affects our members. A conference will be held in November this year to look in depth at the problem.

Film

The British Film Institute, now the lead body for the industry, carried out a comprehensive Film Policy Review, which our Film Committee was pleased to have steered towards a positive set of recommendations for screenwriters, as part of the Creative Alliance with directors and producers. The most important outcome – if it ever happens – will be that successful subsidised films will no longer have to repay the subsidies immediately, but will instead pass them to producers, director and writers as seed money for future projects.

Along with the BFI the other key player for us is PACT (the producers' trade organisation) and we are yet to get them to the negotiating table for film, though we have had proposals on the table to them for a considerable time. The PACT negotiations, which we hope to get under way as soon as possible, are key to the future of screenwriters in the UK.

Another long-term project came to fruition with the publication of our report for the FSE/LAWG (Federation of European Screenwriters/International Affiliation of Writers' Guilds), *Written into the Picture*. This excellent and wide-ranging research, steered primarily by Andrea Gibb and carried out for us by Cathy John, canvassed opinion and data from over 50 leading Film Festivals and put together the findings about their attitudes to and treatment of screenwriters at Film Festivals. As expected the picture is generally less than rosy, with screenwriters frequently not invited to screenings of their films and often not even credited in the festival literature. However the research did find some examples of inclusion and celebration and it is fitting that Edinburgh IFF is to be the venue for a full discussion of the research and the implications for writers and festivals, since Edinburgh displays one of the most positive and active engagements with screenwriters of all the Festivals.

The WG Awards were again a great event and we were delighted to give the best screenplay award to Lynne Ramsay & Rory Stewart Kinnear and for their adaptation of Lionel Shriver's chilling novel, *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, especially since Lionel herself was present. The best first screenplay award went to Danny King & Dexter Fletcher for the hugely entertaining *Wild Bill*.

The British Film Institute

The BFI was appointed to replace the UK Film Council. One tradition they are keeping up is the annual statistical yearbook, an increasingly interesting document.

This year some figures were extremely positive. UK cinema admissions were the third highest of the last 40 years, up at 647 releases. Revenues were at an all time high with 'Skyfall' setting a new Box Office record at £103 million, followed by independent films 'The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel' and 'The Woman in Black', all in a market worth £4billion.

UK writers also proved a draw to audiences; only 5% of films released during the year were adapted from UK story material but accounted for 23% of the total box office. These films were based on characters first written in 1937 (The Hobbit), 1958 (Bond) and 1983 (Woman in Black), a clear reminder of the enduring economic value of British cultural excellence.

We also discovered that the cinema-going audience is ageing and there was a rise of the over 45's buying tickets, up from 14% in 1977 to 36% in 2012, with Simon Beaufoy's 'Salmon Fishing in the Yemen' topping the viewing chart.

Other notable numbers were that out of 5000 film production companies in the UK, 95% employ less than 10 people and two thirds of the films produced get released in only 50 cinemas (out of 3,817 possible screens).

Sadly with no specific statistics for Screenplays written by British writers, just films created from British Story Material, it was hard to unpick exactly where British screenwriters stand within the industry. We did know that out of the top 200 Box Office successes of 2001-2013, 31 films were based on stories and characters from UK authors and 10 of the top 20 based on novels by UK writers. Adaptation accounted for 48% of Box Office receipts and Action was the highest earning genre at 28% whilst 50% of films shot in the UK were made for £250,000 or less.

As the waterfall of graphs and stats built into a clear picture of the Film Industry today, it was clear there were still, after several previous schemes and action plans such as the Bigger Future scheme ten years ago, there are still two serious areas of concern for the screenwriter today.

The first; sustainability.

Over a nine-year period, 943 writers of Independent films wrote only one film. 87 wrote 2, 39 wrote 3 and at the top of the tree only 5 hard-working and prolific writers wrote four. During the Q&A around this area of sustainability, the BFI Film Fund said they recognized the problem and know that the first film is a passion project, the second is a film putting right the problems of the first film and only at the third film does the writer (or director) find their original voice. If we're only ever allowed to write one film, writers don't have that chance to find their voice.

The second; gender.

Depressingly, statistics for female writers have dropped even further than previous years. Only 13% of female writers get a film made, down from 19% in 2011, with directors fairing little better down from 15% to 7.8%. One ray of hope was that the BFI are aware of this and have made sure that on their emerging film-makers (not just young filmmakers) scheme, 80% are women and 60% of the films they're developing are written by women. Their Vision awards have also been allocated with this disparity in mind and one third of the awards have been allocated to women led companies.

Now armed with the figures, we're able to develop an action plan ensuring the film industry stays as buoyant as it currently is, whilst developing opportunities for second and third time film makers, women writers, producers and directors. (thanks to Tracy Brabin, for this report).

In conclusion

Despite the pessimistic prophesies things are not as bad as predicted last year. The Guild is lucky to have so many energetic and hardworking members willing to put in time and talent to not just keeping the Guild afloat, but buoyant in these testing times. And more writers are joining all the time. Did I mention we now have 2013 members?

Bernie Corbett
General Secretary
Writers' Guild of Great Britain

November 2013