

## Icelandic Dramatists' Union (FLH)

– Annual report 2014

### New Leadership

This past year has been somewhat marked by the fact that the Icelandic Dramatists' Union (FLH) now has a more or less new board, with only one member remaining from the previous leadership. New chairman is screenwriter, children's writer and playwright Margrét Örnólfsdóttir.

### A Growing Membership

The guild currently numbers almost 90 members and we have recently seen a marked increase in applications for membership. This year only we have received 12 new applications.

One of our future aims is to strengthen the union's inner work – we need to get our members more involved and boost their union spirit.

### The Work We Do

All our operations are conducted on a voluntary basis. We therefore try to minimize the pressure by delegating tasks to committee members and, when appropriate, the general membership. Due to limited revenues we are unable to host events and activities that require big expenses unless we receive special funding, and there are of course no certainties when it comes to this. But we try our best to be clever about this, seeking opportunities when we spot them in order to keep the organization alive and happening.

For the same reasons the service we provide is somewhat limited to what we can achieve in our own "free time". We reply to queries and messages from our members and do our best to assist, we are involved in all sorts of cultural politics, and furthermore, we have a mandate to conduct negotiations with theatres and the film industry on behalf of our profession.

### Workshops and Participation in Various Activities

In collaboration with The Film Directors Guild of Iceland and the Icelandic Film Fund we have hosted a series of **screenwriting workshops**. These workshops are of great importance, an invaluable opportunity for writers to get feedback and discussions around their projects and ideas in a concentrated way (one weekend out in the countryside), in a group of their peers; a process that might otherwise take weeks or months with people sending scripts out to various parties for reading.

Last year we were also involved in the **Collective Bargaining Workshop** hosted in Brussels by the FSE. Three members/screenwriters took part in these workshops with a great deal of benefit to us, a lot of preparation and discussions having already taken place in our ranks, with the aim of improving the culture around negotiations and the working conditions of screenwriters in Iceland.

A new international film festival, or rather the resurrected, **Reykjavík Film Festival** will be held early next year. We do have a representative on the festival board who has voiced ideas of placing a particular emphasis on the work and role of the screenwriter throughout the production process. There are hopes that an exciting writer or writers from abroad could be invited to the festival to conduct a master class or something of the sort.

The other international film festival in Iceland **RIFF** also seeks our assistance when it comes to giving

lectures about screenwriting at filmmaking workshops related to the festival and doing consultation for participants in pitch forums. So each and every year a few of our members parttake in this.

### **The Situation regarding IHM – The Icelandic Collecting Society**

Our guild does not have an independent membership of **IHM**, the Icelandic Collecting Society for copying of copyrighted material. There, we are completely reliant on the Writers' Union, which accepts payments on behalf of the authors of film, television and radio drama, and administers the fund. We have approached the collecting society and informed them that we want to apply for a full membership, since we are undisputably the organisation defending the interests of screenwriters in our country. Their response was a plain and simple **NO**, on the grounds that our interests were already being taken care of by the Writers' Union. We are now preparing a formal application and will pursue the matter all the way to the Nordic Arbitration Centre if necessary.

### **Negotiations for Screenwriters & War against Buy Out Contracts**

It has become a most pressing matter to improve the working conditions, fees and culture of negotiations within Icelandic screenwriting. There is a Wild West atmosphere where every single contract obeys its own laws. Many of these are very unfavourable for writers and their rights are constantly being violated.

For a long time (over 10 years!) we have tried to get the Producers' Union to the negotiating table to establish some kind of standard contract, without success. Since there seemed to be no will to negotiate, we decided to put together a unilateral contract for reference, based on comparable contracts in our neighbouring countries. This is still under construction but will hopefully be finished before the end of the year.

Total buy out contracts have been the general rule in Iceland up until very recently. Now there seems to be increasing awareness amongst screenwriters that they should not "give" their rights away or at least if they decide to do so they should put a fair prize-tag on it. This has not been the case and people have just waived their rights for nothing.

However we do see some indications that there is a slight shift in mentality regarding these things and more producers are willing to acknowledge the author's right to a fair share in any future profit. Let's hope this feeling of ours is a sign that the negotiation culture is moving in the right direction at last.

### **The State of Icelandic Filmmaking**

Really it is a miracle that there is any filmmaking activity taking place in Iceland at all, and what is even stranger is how vigorous it is. The conditions for filmmaking are, if truth be told, absolutely unacceptable, and when it comes to the authorities there is a pronounced lack of understanding of the importance of the industry, both financially and culturally speaking.

The unions and interest groups of people in the film industry, including our guild, are hard at working, lobbying for reform, and have repeatedly pointed out how profitable any investment in the film industry is for the state, quite apart from the cultural riches created by dynamic filmmaking and the arts in general.

**The Icelandic Film Fund** has been downsized time and time again over the past few years. Hopes were up that this would be somewhat rectified this year, since the authorities showed a slight interest in that direction. It was therefore a huge disappointment when the new budget, presented in early September offered only a very small increase to the Film Fund. When this is written the budget has not yet been approved by the parliament so it is still possible to hope for a miracle, although it will most likely only be a insignificant one. This continuing catastrophic situation is obviously of huge concern to the entire film-making society in Iceland.

It has long been the film industry's loud demand that the authorities shape a long-term policy for the industry, so that you can plan a few years ahead instead of the annual wait to see what the authorities have seen fit to throw the Film Fund's way for the year to come. It goes without saying that this uncertainty and lack of stability makes any forward planning very difficult. Some progress had been made with the last government, who had plans to considerably boost the fund, but all that work came to nothing just over a year ago when the current government, who are less kindly disposed towards the arts, took over.

### **Copyright Issues and Concerns about an Increasingly Digital World**

Of course we follow closely all the speculation, concerns and ideas regarding the state and development of copyright issues in an increasingly digital environment. In Iceland, new copyright laws are currently in the works, and all bodies defending the interests of authors are eagerly trying to ensure their rights are protected as much as possible. We are still far away from securing writers an income from the use of work that is increasingly available online. In our talks with the authorities we have pointed out that although it is necessary to find ways to counter illegal downloading, it is no less important, and possibly even more important, to look at how to ensure a lawful income from the legal use of copyrighted material – this is where any possible future income for authors will mostly be found.

It goes without saying that this is the hottest topic in our industry today, just like anywhere else in the Western world, and our own interests coincide with those of other rightholders in the audiovisual field.

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