

Writers' Guild of Great Britain

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting

held on Friday 4 July 2014 from 10.00 a.m.

at the Bermondsey Square Hotel, Bermondsey Square, Tower Bridge Road, London, SE1 3UN

Quorum: the Chair of the Guild, Roger Williams, welcomed members to the meeting and confirmed it was quorate with at least 25 full members present at the start of the meeting.

Standing Orders Committee Report: Piers Beckley confirmed the committee had met and found no reason for the agenda not to go ahead as circulated.

Appointment of Standing Orders Committee for 2014-2015: A motion to appoint Bill Armstrong, Emma Reeves, Jamie Rhodes and Piers Beckley to the Committee was proposed by Katherine Way and seconded by Olivia Hetreed and was carried with all votes in favour and no abstentions.

Appointment of Tellers: William Gallagher and Jamie Rhodes were appointed unanimously.

Minutes: A motion to approve the Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on Friday 14 June 2013 was proposed by David James and seconded by Ming Ho and was carried with 27 votes in favour and two abstentions.

Chair's Report

RW referred members to his contribution in the Guild's Annual Report. He said Tom Green was leaving his post as editor of UK Writer and the Guild's website and proposed the meeting formally thanked him for all his work. The meeting gave a round of applause. The Chair added Anthony Pickthall would be stepping down as Deputy Chair of the Guild but would be taking over as Chair of the Editorial and Communications Committee. The Chair thanked Anthony Pickthall and Ming Ho, who would also be stepping down, as Deputy Chair and said he couldn't imagine an Executive Council meeting without them. The meeting gave a further round of applause. The Chair also thanked Darren Rapier for his time as Chair of the Editorial & Communications Committee.

The Chair thanked everyone who contributes to the work of the Guild whether on a national, branch or committee level. He thanked the volunteers and the small team of hardworking staff based at the Guild office.

The Chair asked if there were any questions regarding his report or more generally his role. There were none.

A motion to Approve the Chair's Report was proposed by John Wilsher and seconded by David James and was carried unanimously by 30 votes in favour and no abstentions.

Treasurer's Report

Andrew Walsh referred members to his contribution in the Guild's Annual Report and said he wanted to highlight a few points and make a few comments. He thanked the staff, officers, and

Finance Committee for all their efforts in supporting the Guild to deliver its objectives. AW commented on all the changes that have taken place in the last year, from the membership system being brought back in-house to new premises and new subscription bands.

Overall the increase in efficiencies around subscription collection has seen an increase in income that has balanced out a decrease in income from other sources. He expressed a desire for the Guild to build on this stability and turn it into a growth in income so the Guild can increase its areas of influence.

AW invited questions on the accounts and more generally on his role as Treasurer. The Chair thanked AW and the Finance Committee for all their hard work.

Olivia Hetreed asked AW to explain the difference between the Welfare Fund and the Foundation. AW explained the Welfare Fund is made up of donations that help individual writers who might be struggling financially. The Fund can assist a writer to purchase a computer for example. The Foundation on the other hand is a registered charity set up to fund events and support institutions connected with writers.

Piers Beckley asked what were the non-cancellable operating leases referred to on page 14 of the accounts and asked for clarification of what note number 7 relates to. AW said the lease related to the Guild's old offices and would not appear in future accounts, as it would be replaced by the lease costs for the new office.

A motion to approve the Treasurer's Report was proposed by Piers Beckley and seconded by James Skivington and was carried unanimously with 31 votes in favour and no abstentions.

Guest speaker: The official business of the meeting was paused as RW welcomed Ben Stephenson, Controller, Drama Commissioning at the BBC, who addressed the meeting and answered questions.

Matters arising from the minutes: The Chair reconvened the meeting and asked if there were any matters arising not covered elsewhere in this agenda. No matters were raised.

Adoption of Accounts: A motion to adopt the Audited Accounts for the year ended 31 December 2013 was proposed by David James and seconded from the floor and was carried unanimously with 30 votes in favour and no abstentions .

Re-appointment of Auditors: A motion to reappoint Gillespie Inverarity & Co. was proposed by Rosemary Anne Sisson and seconded by David James and was carried unanimously with 35 votes in favour and no abstentions.

Results of Elections

The General Secretary (Bernie Corbett) detailed the vacancies that had been listed. He said that no ballots were needed as the nominations received had not been contested. The following were elected unopposed:

Officers

Chair: Roger Williams

Treasurer: Andrew S. Walsh

Executive Council representatives

Videogames: Steve Ince

South West (Bristol-Bath): Chris Jury

West Midlands: William Gallagher

The General Secretary added that vacancies still existed for East Midlands and North West (Manchester); Radio; and the two Deputy Chair positions.

Katharine Way, as Chair of the Radio Committee questioned whether there was indeed a vacancy for Radio Committee as it was her understanding she had been re-elected in 2013. BC checked the records and confirmed that KW was correct.

President's remarks

Olivia Hetreed thanked everyone for attending the AGM and for the many contributions to the Guild's work. She reflected on the role of the Guild as a TUC-affiliated trade union looking after not only mundane matters such as writers' pensions but also its duty to represent writers on other important issues such as commissioning, development of work and intellectual property rights. OH emphasised how important it is for Guild members to engage in issues across the board not just in those that directly affect them. She commented that members often turn to the Guild when problems arise due to being "the weakest voice in the room". OH reflected on the decline in trade union membership from the 1970s to the present day. She commented that diversity is much wider than the male/female question. The Guild and industry need to think about ethnic and class diversity in relation to economic barriers and opportunities in terms of first projects and getting careers under way. Age, OH said, is also a consideration as it takes time for writers to become established and find their voices. Progress then needs to be sustained and career development considered. The events the Guild arranges can support these areas and OH encouraged Guild members saying the effort put into organising events is worthwhile as they are popular.

OH said she had been chairing the Guild's Awards Committee and it had been decided that the event would be held in January 2015 to bring it more in line with the calendar year, and it would be held at RIBA. She added that the awards are a great way to acknowledge writers' work and encouraged everyone to attend. OH gave her thanks to everyone who had supported the Guild over the past year.

The Chair thanked OH and asked Tracey Brabin to say a few words about the next Guild event co-ordinated by the Film Committee which would be a showing of the Film "What Richard Did" written by a former award winner.

The meeting broke for lunch at 12.45 p.m. and reconvened at 1.55 pm

National and Regional Reports

The Chair suggested that unless there was an objection he would propose the meeting take a vote after hearing all the reports, rather than pause after each report to take a vote. After some discussion it was agreed that a vote would be taken after all the reports had been heard.

Wales

The Chair passed on apologies from Manon Eames that she could not attend the meeting and suggested one of the writers from the Welsh language programme Pobol y Cum tell the meeting about recent events. William Gwyn explained that in March it was announced that S4C would stop broadcasting the omnibus edition of the soap from September of this year. 75% of the writers on the show were Guild members and they encouraged the other writers to become members so they could speak as a united voice behind the Guild's name. The writers successfully negotiated an enhanced package to make up for lost earnings as a result of the omnibus edition being stopped. The meeting applauded.

The Chair added that he had observed the events and they were a testament to what could be achieved if writers speak with one voice.

Bernie Corbett added that the negotiating team did not "pull any punches" with the BBC (which makes the show for S4C), who knew the writers were united. He said that clever tactics were used that ensured the writers gained in some other areas even though they lost income as a result of the Omnibus edition being stopped. He felt the Guild should be encouraged by the outcome of the talks and that it sets a good example for the future.

Scotland

The Chair passed on Julie Ann Thomason's apologies that she was unable to attend and thanked her for her report. The Chair asked Andrea Gibb to speak to the report. AG said the forthcoming referendum on Scottish independence had meant the creative industries were in limbo. She added that Julie Ann Thomason had been very active building the Guild's profile in Scotland.

London and South East

Piers Beckley said the regional committee was small but perfectly formed and was busy finalising the arrangements for the next social to be held the following Monday. He recapped the events held so far and what was being discussed for future events. Harry Duffin asked if there were plans to hold events outside London and PB said an event in Brighton was being discussed. The Chair thanked Piers for moving forward with events so successfully. The meeting applauded.

North West (Manchester)

The Chair said there was no representative for this region and no report was tabled.

North West (Merseyside)

Karen Brown addressed the meeting and said she had recently taken over this role and was keen to focus on networking opportunities between directors and writers. She added that in the absence of a representative for the Manchester region she was proposing extending these events to there too.

South West (Bristol and Bath)

The Chair said Jayne Kirkham had been elected last year but felt five or six months ago that she was unable to do it. Chris Jury had since been voted in to take her place but sent apologies that he was unable to attend the AGM.

South-West (Cornwall and Devon)

The Chair said Marie Macneill had sent her apologies, as she was unable to attend the meeting and was unable to send a report. However, the Chair added that Marie had attended recent EC meetings and had kept the EC up to date.

West Midlands

The Chair said Tim Stimpson had sent his apologies, but had submitted a report. William Gallagher, speaking to the report, said the Guild had successfully run a number of events in conjunction with other organisations. He echoed Olivia Hetreed's earlier comments about the value of events to the members of the Guild and in raising the Guild's profile. Lucy Hayward said she lived in the West Midlands region and since becoming a member of the Guild had no contact with the regional representatives. William Gallagher said he would contact her.

Yorkshire and North East

The Chair passed on Lisa Holdsworth's apologies but she had sent a report. The Chair thanked her for all her efforts in raising the Guild's profile in the area.

A motion to approve the national and regional reports was proposed by Sue Teddern and seconded by Katharine Way and was carried unanimously with 29 votes in favour and no abstentions.

Craft Committee reports

Books

James Skivington said he had taken over as chair of the committee last autumn. Membership of the committee had been depleted due to various reasons but it was now re-staffed. Work had started on revamping the Guild's guidelines on self-publishing with the intention of completing the work by the end of the year. He said the committee had been supportive of "Off the Shelf at Blacks", a series of presentations by writers, but these events would not be taking place in future because of a change of ownership of the venue. He hoped they would restart at a later date. James added that the committee had discussed revisiting the Guild's guidelines on authors' minimum.

The meeting then discussed the proposal to create a Guild award to remember Bill Ash, perhaps in the form of a number of free memberships to encourage support for the Guild. It was agreed that the Books Committee would refer the matter to the Executive Council when the proposal was fully developed.

A motion to approve the Books Committee Report was proposed by Katharine Way and seconded Harry Duffin and was carried unanimously with 30 votes in favour and two abstentions.

Children's

Emma Reeves said it had been decided not to continue with a Children's Committee. Instead the individual craft committees would deal with relevant issues. However, as her background was in children's writing she would be happy to act as a contact person for any questions.

A motion to approve the Children's Committee Report was proposed by Bill Armstrong and seconded by Andrea Gibb and was carried unanimously with 31 votes in favour and no abstentions.

Film

Andrea Gibb passed on apologies from Line Langebek who has taken over from the great work Olivia Hetreed did. AG explained that negotiations with PACT, Directors UK and BFI had resulted in agreement in principle that means the writer has the same status as the Producer and Director in terms of the "locked box status." The Film Committee has also worked to raise the Guild's presence at film festivals and increased its involvement with Creative Scotland, Creative England and the BFI to improve advocacy strength and profile of screenwriters.

Katharine Way asked about Microwave Film London. Tracy Brabin explained that the BFI and the BBC would each contribute £50,000 subject to the producers of the film also contributing £50,000 to the cost of the film. TB said it was a fantastic funding opportunity.

Piers Beckley asked for more information on the "Locked Box" scheme. Andrea Gibb and Bernie Corbett together explained it was a proportion of a film's revenue was retained in a "locked box" that could be drawn down by writers, producers and directors of a BFI funded film to support them in a subsequent film project.

Karen Brown thanked the Committee for all the wonderful work it has done and asked if there had been any discussion with the London Screenwriters' Festival to obtain reduced rates for Guild members. Andrea Gibb said there would be a meeting in September with the London Screenwriters' Festival and the Guild could raise it then.

Andrea Gibb advised that the Guild had entered a partnership with the Black List in the US so that Guild members could get a preferential rate for its script hosting services. Tracy Brabin added that the part that was free to Guild members was the inclusion of a logline on the website but that members would have to pay for the script hosting services.

A motion to approve the Film Committee report was proposed by James Skivington and seconded by Sue Teddern and was carried unanimously with 31 votes in favour and no abstentions.

Radio

Katharine Way said that a quiet year was made quieter when AudioGo collapsed. However what was more encouraging for radio writers was the amount of drama that was being commissioned. She talked about Homefront that would be 5 x 15 minutes episodes per week over a period of 4 years funded from other sources so it does not reduce drama budgets. BBC was also championing radio writing, commissioning 10 afternoon plays that were also being trailed and advertised more frequently. William Gallagher added that Homefront was being produced out of BBC Birmingham.

A motion to approve the Radio Committee report was proposed by Ming Ho and seconded by John Wilsher and was carried unanimously with 32 votes in favour and no abstentions.

Television

Bill Armstrong reported that much had been done over the past year to increase the Guild's membership but with limited success. However the work continues in the hope that it will draw people in eventually.

He said the "Free is NOT an Option" survey shows there is a problem of writers being expected to work for low or no pay and that, as a problem, it is growing. The prevalence of internships and writers being prepared to write for nothing has built an expectation that production companies can expect development work to be done for free. It is often heard that independent production companies do not have the budget for development, however it seems more accurate to say they choose not to budget for development rather than the funds not being available to enable them to do it. The Guild has set up a task force to look into this and propose ways to prevent this becoming endemic. He commented on an observation in an article in Broadcast magazine that people would be shocked at large supermarkets not paying the minimum hourly rate to their workers, so why should production companies be allowed to expect their writers to work for below the accepted rate or for nothing?

Susannah Saary commented that the onus is on the writers to put agreements in place before the work is agreed on. BA agreed and said there would be a letter to members in the Guild's weekly bulletin, but that it should be acknowledged that writers are swimming against a strong current.

Karen Brown drew members' attention to the Guild guidelines that state that members should not work for free and suggested the Guild emphasise this to its wider membership.

Andy Walsh said small companies still have to pay electricity for offices and for cleaners so why should writers work for free? BA agreed this was a valid point.

Andrea Gibb said there was a similar issue for screenwriters but the Guild now proposes a joint venture arrangement. Where no money is paid up front the writer has an interest in the value of the output.

A motion to approve the Television Committee Report was proposed by Sue Teddern and seconded by Tracy Brabin and was carried unanimously with 36 votes in favour and no abstentions.

Theatre

Nick Wood referred to the Guild's Theatre Encouragement Awards and asked for nominations to recognise anyone who has particularly encouraged playwrights.

He thanked Richard Pinner for his work in connection with "Playwrights' Progress" and thanked the Finance Committee for their support.

He updated the meeting on the progress made in negotiating agreements with theatres and thanked the core negotiating team of David Edgar and Ellie Peers.

The meeting discussed the issue of non-compliance by theatres with agreements made with the Guild. He said the Guild was committed to encouraging compliance and closing loopholes that some theatres were exploiting to avoid having to comply with minimum terms such as running shows for a short period. William Gallagher raised a concern about the leverage the Guild has if large theatres or theatre groups do not comply with the Guild's agreements then how will smaller theatres be encouraged to comply? Tracy Brabin suggested the Guild instigates a "kite mark" system awarded to those theatres that fulfil their obligations. Susannah Saary reflected that playwrights who pay to get their work performed are further examples of the "free is not an option" issue.

Sue Teddern asked, if the Guild could arrange something to honour Bill Ash, could there also be some recognition of Olwen Wymark's work by way of an award?

A motion to approve the Theatre Committee report was proposed by Katharine Way and seconded by William Gallagher and was carried unanimously with 31 votes in favour and no abstentions.

Videogames

The Chair said that to date the Videogames Committee has been headed by Andy Walsh as the de facto Chair and asked him to speak to the committee's year. AW explained how the craft and regional committees operate and encouraged people to engage in the Guild and its committees. He said Steve Ince would be taking over as chair of the Videogames Committee and thanked him for bringing his experience to the committee. He referred to the Guild's success in campaigning for beneficial tax treatment for videogames within the EU. He encouraged writers to be ambassadors for the Guild especially as part of the "Free is NOT an Option" campaign. Steve Ince then introduced himself to the meeting.

A motion to approve the Videogames Committee report was proposed by Jan Woolf and seconded by Andrea Gibb and was carried unanimously with 32 votes in favour and no abstentions.

Other Reports

Membership: Bernie Corbett said the Guild's membership had reached 2020 and thanked Ellie Peers and Kate Glasspool for their work to bring the membership system in house and administer it. He said one benefit of the move is that the Guild had been able to send 300 letters to overdue payers in two weeks and had received to date £7,000 in subscriptions as a result.

Member's Pension Scheme: While it is not a definitive figure, Bernie Corbett said about £650,000 had been paid into member's pension schemes in 2014. He said while pension agreements do not extend to theatre writers, other writers are now drawing pensions because of work done by the Guild's pioneers. BC said John Adams who has been the scheme's administrator since the early days has been ill over recent months and he sent him the Guild's best wishes.

Writers' Guild Welfare Fund: BC said this was detailed at page seven of the Guild's accounts. He said there has been a low level of activity with £64,000 available to assist writers in financial difficulty.

Editorial and Communications Committee: BC said there had been a large number of applications received for the new role of Editorial and Communications manager.

Writers' Foundation (UK): BC said this fund was set up by the Guild to channel money to projects to benefit writer focused projects and events. He referred to the recent "Playwrights' Progress" as an example of a successful project supported by the Fund.

The Chair established there were no other reports to be considered.

Rosemary Anne Sisson asked if the Guild had made any progress in asking members to leave the Guild a legacy. Bernie Corbett said the Guild has been giving this consideration but so far had not found a way to approach members about this that felt appropriate. Katharine Way said she gives to charity and she doesn't feel the Guild should be embarrassed about prompting people to make donations. The Chair said it was something the Executive Council is working on and BC added it could be a job for the new Communications Manager. AW added that the number of legacy donations, is small, he believes, because people believe contributions to the Guild are covered by their membership subscriptions.

A motion to approve the other reports was proposed by Katharine Way and seconded by John Wilsher and was carried unanimously with 25 votes in favour and no abstentions.

Guest speaker: The official business of the meeting was paused as the Chair welcomed Rufus Norris, incoming Artistic Director of the National Theatre, to address the meeting on the subject of "The NT and new writing", followed by a Q&A session.

General Secretary's report

Bernie Corbett said he believed it was a healthier and happier Guild than ever before. He felt the AGM had been positive and outward looking and the Guild had been successful against the odds as a trade union. He thanked the EC membership and the Guild's small in number but hardworking staff. He specifically thanked Anne Hogben for all the assistance she gave the membership to resolve the many and varied issues that arise. He thanked Ellie Peers for her work on the membership system and the negotiations and Kate Glasspool for her work on following up with outstanding membership subscriptions. BC thanked everyone for coming and for encouraging and inspiring the Guild for another year.

Any Other Business

Susanna Saary asked about the Guild's relationship with the Writers' Guild of America. RW said there was a strong relationship as the WGGB participates in the International Affiliation of Writers Guilds through which the Guilds meet and share issues that affect them collectively.

The meeting ended at 5.30 p.m.