

I've come back from the World Conference of Screenwriters in Warsaw bursting to write and full of questions, mainly why did you become a writer? In my case I thought I had something to say which, luckily, people have wanted to hear. Thanks to all the multi-media platforms available, it has never been easier to connect with an audience. Writers can now reach every bit of the world but seldom have we had less power. Why?

From the dawn of British television (before *Dr Who* even could regenerate) until eight years ago, a writer's life was simpler. You either created a series or wrote episodes for someone else's. You worked directly to the producer or sometimes a script editor, who often was the creator of the series, today known as a showrunner. Writers were always an important part of the creative team.

You were expected to be at read-throughs and welcome on the odd day of filming. How else would you know what had or hadn't worked? It was also helpful to get to know your actors and, believe it or not, vice versa. You'd have met the producer. You could disagree with notes and explain why, and be heard respectfully. You'd have spoken to your director in pre-production. You'd go to some dubbing and editing sessions. You learned your craft, which made you a better writer, which made for a better show. The system worked, for the most part.

Then came the Age of the Bean Counter and, lo, more and more suits appeared. The Bean Counters liked continuing series. You could reuse the same sets, costumes and actors, which drove production costs down. They liked them so much that soaps went from twice a week to four or five times a week, plus the odd holiday special. Many experienced staff were made redundant to save more money. Less experienced personnel were brought in on short contracts, which made people constantly fearful for their jobs. To accommodate the increase in shows, production lines were started, hiring a multitude of writers, readers, script editors and sundry execs. Everyone was under pressure to feed the system, which became depersonalised and writers lost their place in the creative sun along the way.

I am not talking about some individual core writers of a series. Even highly experienced writers, even when they've already written for a series, are being made to parade in an eternal beauty contest of the script. Sometimes they've been pitching for non-existent slots. These writers seldom, if ever, see the producer or executive producer. Writers have found themselves on the bottom of the food chain and as disposable, as one producer put it, as teabags.

This has also led to a trickle-up effect in higher-end series. As staff get promoted, they take their working practices with them. It's not unusual for the writer to receive up to 11 sets of contradictory notes for a draft. Why are there so many people in the team anyway? What happened to the holy trinity of the producer, script editor and writer?

I have nothing but admiration for writers who work and often produce great television under these circumstances, but it's time to reclaim our rightful place in the creative team.

At a time when writer/showrunners are creating series such as *Sherlock*, *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men* and *The Bridge*, how can we justify not letting writers have their voices? No committee is capable of creating *The Sopranos* or *Marvellous*, shows that provide riches, culturally and economically. A writer should not only be the first talent on board but should also be seen as the first investor and treated accordingly. We can no longer be restricted by others' lack of vision.

At the Warsaw Conference, where 30 screenwriter guilds represented 56,000 writers, our resolution was to assert freshly the role of the creator and our singular vision in the production of quality television. We want the time and resources to develop our plots and characters without either being rushed to camera, relegated to the side lines, or our work interfered with by executives who often muddy the creative waters.

We want a globally recognised 'Created by' credit, guaranteeing us fair remuneration, acknowledgement and respect.

We want to have the right to discuss and defend our work before, during and after any production. We want to get back into the studio and on to the creative team where we belong.

Writers can't achieve these changes by themselves, which is why we have writers' guilds and why they are affiliated worldwide. We might write alone but we stand together as one, saying "let writers write".

**Gail Renard**