

The festival for me started with a guided tour of Warsaw organised for delegates. About 10 of us piled into a minibus and were driven around the sights of Warsaw. We started with the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The museum was closed to the public that day and the Holocaust exhibition we went round was not due to officially open until late October, which made it feel even more special and moving. We then went 30 floors up the Soviet-built Palace of Culture and Science – surely an inspiration for *Ghostbusters*! The most surreal part of the tour though was when our guide took us to the Praga district, which was a rather run-down area, partly because of a dispute between private landlords and the council which has resulted in years of neglect to buildings. Although I think the idea was to show us a diverse range of cinematically interesting places, I couldn't help feeling that we were imposing on what was essentially an extremely poor, working-class bit of the city. Still, it was a tour of huge contrasts and left me with much food for thought.

That night we were treated to Andrzej Wajda's film *Walesa: Man of Hope*. It couldn't have been a more powerful introduction to Poland's struggle for freedom and the perfect city in which to see it.

Day 1

The conference itself featured some incredible talent from all over the world. The first session on 'Selling an Existing TV Format' included Hagai Levi, writer of *In Treatment* who talked very sensitively about adapting his series in 17 other countries and helping local writers develop their own take on his show. He rightly took umbrage with Tim O'Donnell from the US who was initially a little scathing about adapting US sitcoms in Russia. Interestingly there is a huge market there for the likes of *The Cosby Show*. To conclude, the panel thought that the more culturally specific a show was, the more universal it becomes.

'Co-production pros and cons' included Saket Chaudhary who talked about Indian television – they have 400 TV channels and make around 1,300 films a year so there is a huge market for drama. He said that Western writers tended to portray Indians as being desensitised to poverty, which was a stereotype he hoped might be broken. There was some discussion about how bilingual films worked in India and in Canada, where one recent production was shot firstly in French and then in English.

'Beyond Detectives and Doctors' established just how huge these shows are in countries like Germany, New Zealand and the UK obviously. Bulgarians apparently prefer gangster shows and Turkish period drama series (our equivalent to *Downton*) and interestingly was the only country given licence to develop *Big Brother* for families and children.

A session on 'Writers in Independent Cinema' talked about whether there was really any such thing as independent film, all films being 'dependent' in some way. It

featured some great anecdotes from the likes of Howard Rodman talking about the studio system. “You’ve just been given some money to make a film that is small and interesting. Can I give you some money to make a film that is neither?” He summed up the negative side of the studio system, where several writers are pulled in on a film – “a film only one person could have written becomes a screenplay that anyone could have written”.

Jeremy Pikser, writer of *Bulworth*, talked about how the Writers Guild of America East was working with young filmmakers, the ‘cool kids’ as he called them, who thought unions might hinder rather than help them. Instead, they invited them to come into their offices and eat pizza every two months, embracing the fact that the future of the medium might be very different in the future ie. films shot on phones! Anyway, it seemed to work and was a great way for the Guild to reach out. During the questions, one of the Danish writers pointed out that what would hugely help international films to sell is if the Americans started reading subtitles. A great point!

A session about the ‘Scandinavian Phenomenon’ was interesting because in Denmark most writers write for film and for television and there is no real distinction between them. They felt that this was part of their success.

Day 2

The first session was on ‘Gender, the lack of representation of women writers’, which amusingly featured two rather lengthy PowerPoint presentations by the two men on the panel. That said, David Kavanagh from the Writers Guild of Ireland, after lengthy discussions about the best way to go forward, at various forums, had come up with the idea of giving incentives to producers to work with women – the ‘follow the money’ technique seemed to be reaping dividends over there. Olivia Hatreed spoke eloquently about the UK and the depressing figures that only 16% of women write film, 24% TV. One problem outlined was the fact that Creative England prefer writer directors and less women feel confident or want to do both for various reasons. It was a powerful session and I think the reason why the conference’s first resolution came about ie. to look at this problem and find ways to resolve it.

‘Writing for Children and Young Audiences’ was an education for me as someone who hasn’t written for children. Points which came up included the fact that children watch with greater attention than adults, despite the stereotype that they are side-tracked with so many other things these days. Also, that children have to hear their own voice in a drama. Emma Reeves argued eloquently that children enjoy watching a series like *The Dumping Ground* with a proper arc and will tune in week after week, contrary to a belief that they only dip into dramas.

A session on ‘Your agents, your guild, your collecting society’ reminded me that in the US when you sign a contract you give up your copyright. Carl Gottlieb (aka co-

writer on *Jaws*, who I stalked for a photo, bless him) was once told by someone on set: "No one ever lost respect for you because they couldn't afford you."

Final sessions were on 'Showrunning' and the 'Solitary Writers and the Writers in the Room' and featured the likes of Tom Fontana, Andrew Davies and Howard Rodman. Peter Mohan from Canada said he wanted to work with writers who add something in the writers' room, amplify each other's thoughts rather than block them. I have to say that the Americans are great at anecdotes such as – "writing is like banging your head against the wall except the blood is coming out of your wrists" (Howard Rodman). Tom Fontana interestingly said that he would usually expect a freelance writer to do no more than two drafts, something I balked at as a writer on long-running series here in the UK. Tom said that he wants writers on the first draft to "teach me what I don't know about my show". On the second "I'll teach them what I know about it". He wanted one vision, not one voice – a show should be a cacophony of sound, of lives, of POV. Writers who are re-written on his shows also always keep the sole credit.

Denis McGrath talked about the blend needed in a writers' room, referred to one writer who was very quiet, who only spoke up to ask for the ham sandwich at lunch but then came out with something in 10 minutes that blew him away and was more powerful than anything else that had happened that day. Writing is "fiendishly solitary and brutally collaborative".

Chris Keyser ended with a powerful message to writers: "When I speak to writers of my own guild, I remind them that we write alone together. Scripted television as it has evolved is as excellent as it has ever been. Great television is the work of great writers... and great writers are at their best when they are unhindered. We ask those who fund our work to acknowledge the power of the singular vision. We and our singular vision are the best return on their investment."

So, overall, WCOS03 was a memorable and life-changing experience. It was incredible to be in the company of so many talented and inspiring people and to be made to feel so welcome by the Polish organisers of the conference. I made some lovely friends and developed a taste for Polish food... and of course, vodka (mint and lime being the best... after some research).

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