

I attended WCOS03 as a delegate and observer – a first for me. First time conference-goer and first-time delegate for anything.

Like many writers, I'm an outsider – it helps, but it also hinders. And that's really what I got most of all from this conference: the importance of having a union. Not just our union – the WGGB – but an international cooperation of unions. All of them, with all their national and cultural differences, representing writers and their rights, work and ideas.

Not a whisper here about film being a director's medium and how, therefore, we should surrender stories we have worked on for years, originated and nurtured, and feel lucky if we're invited within miles of the craft table. That's how 'collaboration' works, apparently – and if we don't like it, we should write a novel. No. None of that at this conference. Every person understood and valued what we do. Of approximately 150 delegates, almost every one was a writer – most very successful, recognised and, together, powerful. And representing, well, you and me. It was inspiring and hugely encouraging.

So, first night, a reception at Kino Kultura – conference venue – and screening of Andrzej Wajda's new film *Walesa: Man of Hope*, setting the theme of solidarity. A long discussion afterwards in which the great man talked about his life, inspiration, his life again and then we descended like wolves on the wine and canapés. A lot of useful networking until I fell over on my way to the drinks table.

Then a solid two days of sessions. Some, if I'm honest, were drier than others, but the impression overall was of mutual respect. There was curiosity about different ways of doing things, cultural differences – I didn't know, for example, that collective bargaining is illegal in New Zealand. Can you imagine running a union in that environment? We are very, very lucky, but, on the other hand, we're also behind. Too many of us are working for nothing (I hold up my hand here) and there is also the issue of gender discrimination – we're actually pathetic on this. In the UK, women writers are credited on only 16% of independent films and 24% of television output, which is just shocking.

I wish I was Danish or Swedish. At a session called 'The Scandinavian Phenomenon', we learned that writers' teams there are 50% male and 50% female. There's no arguing the success of female-led series such as *Borgen* and *The Killing*, so why aren't women here better represented? Aside from the issue of fairness, which should be reason enough, it simply makes economic sense.

Another lesson learned from the Scandinavians was the importance of investment. Delegations were sent to learn from America, money was provided for training and development. The writers were allowed to create with minimal interference – even given the power to end a series if they felt it was right to do so. And this subject of

empowerment came up again and again through the conference. In the session on ‘Writing for international markets’, writers were urged to “wear producer hats” and take responsibility for their own work. In the ‘Negotiation primer’ session, WGGB’s Bill Armstrong spoke passionately about saying no to unpaid work. Find your truth and hold on to it, said the ‘Co-production’ session writers. Value yourself, value your work, get paid for it.

The conservatism of the traditional television networks was decried, but there were positive discussions about the possibilities of new technologies. We learned that writers for children and young audiences are actively making use, experimenting with storytelling. Netflix was mentioned in several sessions – as a new market, being less risk-averse, a reflection of changing viewing habits. In a session on the 60-minute episode, writers discussed water cooler episodes versus binge viewing. What’s clear is that when audiences are allowed to choose, they don’t give a stuff about the gender of writers and performers; they only care about quality and story.

One of my favourite quotes from the conference: “TV is a writer’s medium. TV is successful *because* it is a writer’s medium.” So why can’t we just be allowed to get on with it? Andrew Davies, in his hilarious session on ‘The Solitary Writer and the Writers in the Room’, suggested that comparisons between ways of working are probably redundant given the way that commissioners and execs overrule. This comes back to the issue of empowerment – another area where the UK seems to lag behind – and the final message of the conference: real empowerment means trusting the writer, the audience and the idea.

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