

Fourteen Go Mad in Warsaw!

Well, mad with excitement, that is. I had never been to Central Europe before, and was looking forward to learning a bit about the local culture and history, as well as meeting and debating with screenwriting colleagues from around the world.

In anticipation of the opening night reception – a screening of Andrzej Wajda’s latest film, *Walesa: Man of Hope* and Q&A with the director – I had watched his Oscar-nominated film, *Katyn*, about the 1940 massacre of approximately 22,000 Polish army officers and civilians. (This proved to have been perpetrated by the Soviet secret police, but was for nearly 50 years blamed by the Soviets on the Nazis.) Not perhaps the most cheerful introduction, nor the best of images on which to go to bed, but it did give me a sense of the turbulent past of a country that has not only been occupied, but invaded on two sides and betrayed at various times by former allies.

Warsaw today is a slick and bustling business hub, but it’s impossible to ignore the conspicuous newness of the buildings – even the apparently ‘old’ ones in the Old Town, painstakingly reconstructed in their former style. 85% of the city was razed as brutal revenge by the Nazis for the citizens’ uprising against occupation in 1944; and over 300,000 inhabitants of the Jewish ghetto were killed, either in extermination camps or in an earlier uprising of their own. A new Museum of the History of Polish Jews is due to open later this month on the site of the ghetto; some of us were able to visit the building and outdoor memorials.

What had this to do with my experience of the conference? As writers, we are inspired by conflict – and by our observations of human nature. The recent history of Warsaw – within the generation of our parents or grandparents – is a timely reflection of the perennial and universal instincts of tribalism, conquest, subjugation, and survival. Take a look at that film of *Katyn*, and you will see today’s conflicts in Syria, Gaza, Iraq, Rwanda...

Two themes emerge for me: trust and identity. Who are your allies? And how do you hold onto a sense of yourself in a sometimes hostile world? For the wartime citizens of Warsaw, these issues were of course matters of life and death; but in a smaller way, I began to see parallels in our creative lives.

One of the most memorable conference sessions was a debate on the under-representation of women in the film industry. We are often told that this may have been an historic issue, but it is improving: “look at all the high-profile women now in positions of commissioning authority or writing acclaimed series on TV”. But the stats tell a different story. Detailed reports were presented from the UK, Ireland, France and North America, which revealed that, despite improvements – and yes, some exceptional talents – women remain in the minority in most countries and areas of media work.

Guild President, Olivia Hetreed, explained that there is a significant drop-off rate between training (50/50) and employment, with fewer women managing to sustain a career beyond the first commission. Funding for first features tends to favour writer/directors, of whom fewer are women, which may have some bearing. What might be the other reasons for women falling by the wayside? Confidence, family responsibility and financial pressures of freelance status, (unconscious) cultural bias toward male-orientated stories, assumptions about female storytelling, institutional prejudice...?

Sadly, the session proved all too brief to discuss these theories fully, but Olivia raised an interesting question: if more women are commissioning, why do they still commission mostly men? Is it because we all still see 'male' projects as more prestigious, more advantageous to a commissioning or executive career? Perhaps we women need to be better allies to each other; but of course, we all want to be hired on merit, not gender. David Kavanagh of the Writers Guild of Ireland said that the Irish Film Board (like most) purports to fund purely on merit, but a higher proportion of women is indisputably rejected. What then are the criteria of 'merit'? The debate goes on.

Other sessions that proved stimulating were those on 'Showrunning' (where the key North American factor is to have 'only writers' in the room) and 'The Scandinavian Phenomenon'. Many of us are avid fans of *The Bridge*, *Borgen* and *The Killing*, and were excited to have the opportunity to hear from some of the writers and executives. Unsurprisingly, they revealed that the main strength of their working process is a close and long-founded relationship between writers and a small core of key executives who trust the writer's vision and allow the show to end when the writer has no more to say in that story. The danger now is that the international success of these shows places a demand for more material and a pressure to recommission the same handful of names.

Guild members Gail Renard and Emma Reeves debated their experiences of 'Writing for Children and Young Audiences', while Lisa Holdsworth (juggling deadlines in her hotel room between sessions) was a great hit, discussing changed viewing habits and the future of the 60-minute episode. Bernie Corbett, Robert Taylor and Bill Armstrong spoke about copyright, negotiating and collective bargaining; and Grant Cathro and the estimable Andrew Davies did us proud in the closing session, 'The Solitary Writer and the Writers in the Room'.

All that and wonderful hospitality from our hosts at the Polish Filmmakers Association, International Affiliation of Writers Guilds and Federation of Screenwriters in Europe. I'm sure we'll remember the delicious (porcine) buffets, amazing cakes – and of course vodka! – just as much as the top-notch speakers.

Most of all, communing with writers from all over the world gave us a chance to see that we share the same challenges – and that, as Chris Keyser, President of WGA West said in his closing remarks, “we write alone, together”.

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