

World Conference of Screenwriters

6-7 November 2009, Athens, Greece

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In "Scenario" authors reflect on their craft and on cinematic narrative. The annually published film and script almanac edited by Jochen Brunow not only contains essays and extensive workshop discussions but also features a journal in each edition in which an author recounts the course of working life in diary form.

Under the self-ironising title of "Travel Log of a House Plant", Dorothee Schön reports for this issue of "Scenario" on, amongst other things, the Athens World Conference of Scriptwriters. Scenario 4 will be published on the occasion of the 2010 Berlinale, this excerpt is published with the express permission of author and editor.

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The backdrop to the first World Conference of Scriptwriters couldn't have been more appropriate. The 180 writers were gathered on the Athens' Acropolis in front of a dramatic sunset. Together the authors from all around the world scabble across the stones and examine in awe the Odeon of Herodes Atticus with its five thousand seats. The Genius Loci is tangible.

This is where the history of drama began. The first Dionysian competition in 534 B.C. was won by Thespis as he stepped forwards from the chorus and complemented the performance with a story. This was the birth of the role of the protagonist. 139 years later, Aeschylus confronted the protagonist with the antagonist and tragedy came into being. When Sophocles added a third character in his tragedy four years later, thereby winning the competition in Aeschylus' stead, an age began in which legions of playwrights followed in his footsteps in an attempt to yield nectar from this art form so as to win flowerpots. Much like us scriptwriters.

Christina Kallas, the driven president of our Federation of Screenwriters in Europe (FSE), has once again set up a fantastic program. At the opening reception with the very smart and good-looking Greek Minister for Culture (nothing personal, Mr Neumann!) the colleagues take a closer look at one another. We've come together from thirty countries: apart from Europeans there are US Americans, Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, Argentines and Brazilians here. Famous Oscar-Prize winners chat with busy telenovela-writers and internet rebels converse with old hands of the silver screen.

A huge program has been set up for the two following days with alternating debates and lectures. Although at first an almost depressive mood spreads in the face of the unresolved issue of how we, as copyright holders, are to live from our work in a world of wayfaring digital piracy, the resilience and belief that we'll survive this turn-around finally asserts itself. Content will still be in demand after the gun smoke of the digital revolution has blown away. Alison Taylor, an American author, prophesises that we are the last generation to differentiate between television, cinema and the internet. In the future the word will be: a

screen is a screen is a screen. And it will be the “forty-five inch plasma” (“plesmarh” as the American intones it) of the domestic living room.

Nonetheless, nobody really wants to embrace the vision propounded by the British lawyer Anita Ondine, head of “Seize the Media”. In her world, net programmes will be financed by companies who consider them advertising in their own right without further requiring product placement or inherent content-related influence. She also believes that this need not lead to any cultural dumbing-down. To my ears, this sounds like someone celebrating multilingual stickers on Coca-Cola bottles as a cultural gain. Furthermore, she encourages us to share our material on-line and for free. Should that not lead to finding a suitable distributor, it would help, she says with a wink, to go for a meal with internet pirates. The fact that Ms. Ondine is a former risk-manager at Lehman Brothers sits well with her dubious cures. We nonetheless listen politely and think what we will.

What would a world conference of directors or actors look like? There are astonishingly few narcissists among the scriptwriters, though plenty of melancholics. Jaqueline Woodman, chairperson of the Australian Writers’ Guild, pulls us from our self-pity with her real fighting spirit. Nobody’s going to give us anything if we don’t have the strength to take what we’re owed. The cunning Robin Swicord, author of “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button”, advises us to seek proximity to the echelons involved with the financing of one’s work: “There should not be too much space between you and the money.”

The impertinences of our professional lives can only be counterbalanced by not only doing hack-work, he says, but by also working on projects which, though financially less rewarding, are ones which one cares about and which are personally more interesting. Doing this is as pleasant as “seeing a pregnant woman” enthuses Peter Hedges, author of “Gilbert Grape” and “About a boy”. He recounts how he had originally been an actor but had then begun to write so as to gain influence. Here the whole audience in the Greek Media Institute hall breaks out in spontaneous and not un-bitter laughter.

So what is to be done? An Israeli colleague enthusiastically describes how four attractive female writers had stormed a native live news show so as to demonstrate for their rights. Sounds great. Should I ask Ilse Biberti, the only other female participant in the German delegation, to join me in raiding “Today’s News” in Hamburg?

Unlike at festivals and meetings of people in the industry, where there’s always a subtle feeling in the air that people are trying to do business with one another, this congress really was a meeting of colleagues, fellow-sufferers and companions. The agreements on the joint representation of interests ended in the passing of a political declaration. The nights on the roof terrace of the hotel, on the other hand, with plenty of retsina and a wonderful view of the illuminated Acropolis, awoke in all of us the feeling of belonging to a family – a large family of story-tellers that has existed for two-and-a-half thousand years already.