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Experts at Screenwriters Festival call for new Code Of Practice

Danny Plunkett in Cheltenham

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The status of screenwriters in the film industry and issues raised by the Screenwriters Manifesto have been a frequent subject of debate at the International Screenwriters Festival in Cheltenham, UK (July 3-6).

After two days catering to emerging talents, Oscar-winning writer William Nicholson (*Gladiator*, forthcoming *The Golden Age*) opened the main festival Thursday by renewing his call for writers who want more of a voice in film productions to become producers.

He argued that through creative collaboration with producers, and taking greater risks on projects, writers could secure their place in the industry.

In a panel following Nicholson's keynote address, David Kavanagh, chief executive of the Irish Playwrights and Screenwriters Guild and an author of the manifesto, said that the document had come about partly in response to plummeting budgets for European films and the corresponding fall in writers' fees; as well as producers' attempts to secure excessive copyright in material.

Paul Brett of Prescience Film Finance, backers of titles including Keira Knightley-starring *The Edge Of Love*, argued that in the film industry change would be effected by individuals taking decisions and that writers would do well to learn the art of negotiation in order to improve their lot on a case-by-case basis.

A later panel, which included writer Tony Grisoni, and producer Finola Dwyer debated the possibility of a Code of Practice covering working relationships between producers, writers and financiers.

Peter Carlton of Film4 agreed that although every production is different, depending on the personalities involved, a Code of Practice covering script development and payments could be a welcome development.

The possessive "film by" credit has come under sustained attack in various discussions at the festival, with writer-director Rowan Joffe (*28 Weeks Later*) asking whether anyone has ever described a Mozart composition as a "symphony by Georg Solti".

The first two days of the second-annual Screenwriters Festival included sessions featuring *Harry Potter And The Order Of The Phoenix* writer Michael Goldenberg describing his 'indie film style' working relationship with director David Yates and producer David Heyman; BBC Films head David Thompson talking about that company's leanings toward comedy; *Kidulthood* director Menhaj Huda describing funding for films featuring under-represented communities; and director Simon Hunter showing footage from his forthcoming *Mutant Chronicles*.

The festival continues today, and will end with a final address from director Stephen Frears.

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