

Ext. Manor house – day

A golden afternoon. Reflected sunlight from the lake ripples on white marquee walls and festival-goers wander to and fro in animated conversation.

A burst of raucous laughter from an open door. We hurry into the dark of:

Studio A – continuous

A short fat man in a rumpled black suit is running on the spot, sweating profusely under the studio lights.

Guillermo Del Toro

(Heavily accented and expressive)

...and I am running and people are watching the flesh move this way and that and thinking O-my-God he is going to die and the Chinese medicine is going crazy in my brain and I know I have this one chance to get back my notebook from the taxi – my whole film is in there.

This was the dream-like – and sometimes downright fantastic (thanks only to the power of the imaginations on display, of course) scene at last year's inaugural Screenwriting Festival. Over four days Cheltenham Film Studios provided a beautiful backdrop for a bold new venture – a gathering of writers and their friends in the film industry. For many of the writers getting together seemed in itself wonderful.

"I felt like a long lost traveller," remembers Bill Nicholson (*Gladiator*, *Shadowlands*), "who was wandering starving in the wilderness and stumbles upon a fertile oasis populated by people miraculously speaking his own language."

But the packed programme of events belied the country house languor of the setting. From one-on-ones for neophytes with professional script editors through talks by distinguished practitioners – Tony Grisoni, Jimmy McGovern, Nic Roeg and Allan Scott (to name only a few) – to illuminating sessions with those the writers have to please: Liza Marshall from Channel Four or David Thompson of BBC Films – whose lecture on the final afternoon played to a very lively full house – this was no period escapism but a fast-paced thriller.

The first two days were for 'new writers' – it was left to the participants to decide what exactly this meant – who were treated to an introduction to the legal side of the business, fresh-from-the-coalface discussions with top TV and film writers including Ashley Pharoah, Barbara Machin and Justin Trefgarne and an inspiring address from Julian Fellowes.



◀ The venue for the festival, Cheltenham Film Studios, is built in the grounds of the Manor House

Four days in Cheltenham

Olivia Hetreed looks back at the first Screenwriters' Festival and forward to this year's event in July

Phil Nodding (*Shameless*) came to speak on the first day and enjoyed it so much he stayed for the week: "I found it really useful and inspirational and enjoyed chatting to other writers and producers. I didn't find every single session useful but the majority were relevant."

David Pearson, organiser of the Festival, and his hard-working team had prepared the ground carefully and it bore fruit in *The Pitch Factor* pitching contest. Like a lonely hearts club reunion, it will be fascinating to see if any of the contacts made here have gone the distance when the Festival returns this summer.

The latter part of the week was for more established writers. Speakers and attendees mixed happily, enjoying the extraordinary summer weather, energised by the discussions taking place and the calibre of the speakers. Natalie Wreyford from UK Film Council, one of several Film Council representatives attending, enthused: "It was a very open, positive and professional festival, and it was therefore possible to have a better quality of conversation with both speakers and attendees than is often achievable in London".

David Pearson is now faced with the task of building on success. He is out hunting for sponsors but plans for the Screenwriters' Festival 2007 are already well in hand. "We listened to Delegates last

■ **Olivia Hetreed's screenwriting credits include *Girl With A Pearl Earring* and *The Man Of Law's Tale* (BBC)**

year and are building a programme that will include not only Panels and Q&As, but workshops, round table discussions, masterclasses, more screenings, live commentaries and much, much more."

Anthony Horowitz (*Stormbreaker*, *Foyle's War*), Diana Ossana (*Brokeback Mountain*) and Dr. Raj Persaud are among the guest speakers lined up already.

Headline events include a open spec script market – with the 30 best scripts getting high level industry meetings during the Festival. Every entrant is promised a five-page script report as well as the chance to make those contacts and get his/her movie onto the next level (see box for details).

Writers, agents and producers will be discussing best working practice, looking at initiatives such as the European Writers' Manifesto and the Writers' Guild proposed new contracts. The current dispute between long-time collaborators Arriaga and Inarritu (*Amores Perros*, *21 Grams*, *Babel*) only serves to show how fraught this area can be.

Hispanic Film will be in the spotlight with screenings and visits from some of the established and emerging superstars from those regions. Last year's Festival hit Guillermo del Toro has spent a good deal of the time since collecting awards for Pan's *Labyrinth*. Attendees were privileged to look at his notebooks and see the drawings and writing that sparked the film.

For me that epitomised the reason why the

SPEC SCRIPT COMPETITION

FEE: £68.00 (Not for profit, the fee will cover the script reader charge and postage to and from the readers.)

Rules and regulations:

- You must purchase a two-day Professional Ticket before entering.
- Open to people who have signed up for the Professional Days (two days) as they will need the flexibility to be seen one of the two days. See website for ticket prices.
- It is open to new writers or existing writers. If you have a spec script you want to try and sell, send it in.
- Script must be industry standard length, which is 120 pages or less.
- Send your script in, submissions by post only.
- Only one entry per person.
- Payment must be made in Pounds.
- Acceptance of script does not automatically mean you will get a 'one2one'.

Full details: screenwritersfestival.com

Screenwriters' Festival stands out from the usual Q&As, actor interviews and director profiles. This is a chance to listen to and talk with the people who dream it all up in the first place – and they turn out to be extraordinarily interesting, indeed authoritative. But don't take my word for it – go and see for yourself.

The Screenwriters' Festival runs from Tuesday 3 to Friday 6 July 2007 at The Manor by the Lake at Cheltenham Film Studios.

■ Festival website: screenwritersfestival.com

◀ Jimmy McGovern and Paul Hogart at the 2006 Festival

Planning to attend? The Guild office is interested to know about any members thinking of going to Cheltenham 2007

