

Do some developers need to be taught a lesson?

by Sarah Olley

A trip to the Screenwriters' Festival was always going to be an interesting proposition for someone who works in script development. Apart from the opportunity to build new working relationships, there was also the more distant possibility of being targeted for freebies or harangued as a representative of the dark side; thankfully neither occurred.

As four days of immersion from the perspective of the writer, the Festival should be a top destination for developers. Working in a job where a sustained appreciation of the writers' perspective is central to our effectiveness, it can't hurt to have a refresher on the challenges writers face trying to implement feedback, or on the impact poor development can

have on the process. The horror stories on this front are legion. When an executive says, 'We love your poignant drama but can you make it into a thriller?' or a director takes a pen and strikes through a scene labelling it simply 'shit', how is a writer supposed to go away and do anything constructive with that?

These might be extreme, if true, examples but there are plenty of people out there offering guidance on your script when there might be little that qualifies them to give it. You'd think the idea of having some sort of transparent, professional standards in this area would therefore be welcomed by writers but here came my only unpleasant surprise of the Festival.

In an otherwise entertaining and enlightening speech about 'Input and where to put it', Sir David Hare (*The Hours*,

Damage), wondered if it were true that the National Film and TV School are now offering an MA in film script development and if so, it would seem to him to be an 'MA in bullshit'. 'It's something you're either gifted in or not gifted in and probably has something to do with your reaction to the world and how you've lived. The people who tend to give you the best notes tend to be people who know most about life, not most about scriptwriting, and so the idea that that could be an academic subject just seems to me crazy.'

You can imagine that the fact that I was one of the first to complete the course to which he referred did something to ruffle my feathers. You can also imagine I might have kept this fact to myself had the end of his speech not taken an interesting turn. Sir David Hare ▶

went on to outline examples of both good and bad development he has experienced and everything he advocated as crucial to good development was central to what was taught on the course. I realised that this was probably worth pointing out, both to him and the assembled audience (of prospective clients) as it's clearly easy to have a knee-jerk reaction against those who would presume to teach us anything about the elusive process of writing for the screen.

Is it true that a skill in script development is simply a natural gift and product of life experience, or like other aspects of film production that combine the creative and the technical might it, at least to some extent, be defined and taught? Though a little knowledge from the wrong source can be a dangerous thing, perhaps there are some central lessons about script development we'd want all developers to understand, if only so that the legion of horror stories might begin to be reduced to more of a platoon, say, or distant outpost of the mildly disturbing.

Nik Powell (*Little Voice*, *The Crying Game*) producer and Head of the National Film and TV School says: 'Of course much of it does come from innate talent and life experience. Without a doubt! But that doesn't mean (as with many things in life) that teaching cannot help as well! We might assume that anyone selected for a course at the National would already be able to demonstrate natural talent and development students could equally be selected for life experience too. Powell points out that the course is not an academic MA at all but a Diploma geared to 'teach people who have already been to university in most cases or are already working in the industry about the more practical elements of working as a script development person and the skills needed to work with writers.'

Founder of the course and Script Factory co-director Lucy Scher designed the programme to attract creative professionals from other industries into development, the type of people who are already good at communicating and might bring something different to the table.

'I do think the ability to communicate



I stick script reports not scene cards on my wall.

and having the wit to adjust your ways of communicating depending on the type of writer is somewhat innate, although you do become better at it with age and experience. It's not so much that you're teaching people what storytelling is for film - we all know that; we all see films and enjoy them; we all have a sense of what makes them work - it's about bringing forward and making conscious all that information and how we can access it and apply it in a useful and constructive way.'

Surprisingly the judgement of a respected and accomplished writer and the course's founder don't seem to differ that much in terms of who might make a good developer. It's possible then that there could be common ground in their ideas of what makes good development too. So why the assumption of guilt? One reason is that development remains such a shadowy and amorphous area of film production that as yet there are no clear

professional standards regarding how best to approach it. Fundamentally there seems to be an insufficient understanding of the fact that development is not writing; rather it is something that involves a quite different set of skills that aren't generally recognised or understood.

'In my opinion these screenwriting courses are designed so executives can come back from them and say knowing things to writers about 'character arcs' and 'three-act structure'. Its just jargon really,' says screenwriter William Boyd (*Chaplin*) in Alastair Owen's book of interviews with screenwriters *Story and Character*. 'I don't know any writer who doesn't regard these courses as laughable but they have to take the jargon on board because they know they'll go into meetings with people who'll be spouting it.' (*ibid*)

Powell says that like Hare he believes there are many so-called writing gurus out there who (to quote Hare) 'are

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Nancy Drew Warner Bros.

Looking for the nancy boys.

fleeing the young'. This is because courses on writing technique in themselves do not a writer make. In turn then, if a developer studies screenwriting without experiencing the reality of trying to apply technique to the process themselves, they may well miss the point about how good writing works and therefore how to facilitate it.

Until the National and The Script Factory began their Diploma in Film Script Development in 2004 there had never been a higher-education course in the UK focused specifically on the role of development rather than writing. It's therefore unsurprising that the concept of what that might be is yet to be widely understood or accepted.

'I think what is always very telling is when there isn't a job description for it, there aren't vacancies, there isn't any training and yet it's a really difficult, professional, interactive job that requires many different skills and the people with those skills aren't necessarily the ones to get the job,' says Scher. The fact is that if your script or treatment enters the system and people show interest, it will undergo some form of development, but the person taking on that role could be one of any number of potential candidates. 'It's an

absolute myth that any script goes straight from the writer to the director and is made,' says Scher. 'It has never happened and it will never happen so whoever does that process of working out whether the script is working - the producer, developer, co-writers, actors or whoever - they're doing development and it seems interesting to me how there is hostility around the name of developer while the director and the producer are considered to be honourable roles.'

For Hare, the secondary art of the screenwriter is in negotiating this process and working out whom to listen to and whom to ignore. One rule of thumb he advocates is that potential advisers should 'have to buy a chip to play at the casino'. In other words, in most cases advice is only worth listening to if it comes from someone who is financially or artistically investing in the success of that advice.

Naturally writers have to be prepared to listen to those paying for the project and the artistic vision of the (usually more powerful) director with whom they're working. A writer is also more likely to trust the judgement of someone who is putting their reputation (or their house) on the line alongside them. However, that legion of horror stories about

development clearly does include disastrous script advice handed down by producers, financiers and directors.

Writer Lee Hall (*Billy Elliot*) notes in *Story and Character* that 'if a producer tells you that something is wrong with a screenplay then there's probably a good reason for it, but never listen to their suggestions about how to fix it because that's probably the worst way to go'. In the same book another Oscar nominated writer Hossein Amini (*The Wings of a Dove*) says, 'One of the things I'm more and more wary of are those brilliant directorial ideas that haven't been thought through and can send the script in completely the wrong direction.'

Directors can be driven by trying to put their personal stamp on the narrative, producers may want it to be more commercial and potentially neither might know what is best for the story. Therefore, amongst all the many people who could be developing a script with you, perhaps what's equally important to know, as well as who's invested, is which of them has those as yet undefined skills that will facilitate you doing your best work. You could trust that you've been lucky enough to fall in with one of the naturally gifted but wouldn't it be better to have some way of telling?

For new writers, listening to experienced professionals like Sir David Hare could certainly help to define some hallmarks of good development. In common with the teaching on the diploma, one of his golden rules of development is that while it should help a writer identify where there might be a problem in their script, it should not attempt to provide the solution.

Hare suggests that if a writer or filmmaker asks for input, 'what you should be doing is trying to just gently point out where it is in the movie that they're not doing what they think they're doing and then they, because they know the thing so much better than you do, will find their way to the answers'. This is fundamental and yet much bad development takes the opposite path, with many different voices potentially weighing in at the risk of the writer beginning to lose track of what they were trying to say in the first place. ▶

Of course there will always be many ways you might attempt to 'fix' a weakness in a script but unless you're the person having to work through the consequences of these choices, how can you know you have the right one?

'It's much harder to write than it is to have ideas,' says Amini (*ibid*). 'The execution of ideas is worth far more than that great flash of inspiration! Rather than 'trying to become the writer without actually having to write,' (as Amini puts it), a good developer should instead take more of the position of a potential audience member and articulate for the writer where the impact may not yet reflect the writer's intentions.

In common with many writers, Hare suggests that a developer can do this most successfully if they avoid becoming embroiled in too much of the close detail of the script and instead give notes that provide more of an 'inspired overview'. 'They're so much more use than "Oh I think scene eight should follow scene nine," and "restructure here,"'

His example was when the novelist whose book he was adapting observed that a leading character both spoke less and was tougher in the book than in the screenplay. This is a note that goes to the heart of character across the narrative, yet leaves the writer to work out how best to address potential changes. Hare suggests that notes like this may make you feel a fool for not noticing this yourself but if you can see that they're right, you can rub your hands eagerly knowing you have something with which to get to work.

Such a note is also preferable because it demonstrates respect that the writer has the ability to tackle remaining issues with the script themselves. The closer the developer becomes involved in the detail, the more they begin to stray into finding solutions and trying to co-write and from here their more valuable ability, to retain a detached overview, is at risk.

Once again, in sync with Hare, the importance of the developer's role in helping the writer and other invested parties retain overview was another fundamental of the diploma. Embedded in the nitty-gritty detail of the writing, it's easy for a writer to lose track of this and



Unambiguous script notes.

'It's much harder to write than it is to have ideas,' Amini

even more so if new solutions and directions are being thrown in from all sides. Loss of perspective on the original reasons for wanting to write the script or on the core elements that everyone liked in the project, was the most commonly cited pitfall of development during the Screenwriters' Festival. This is perhaps unsurprising if everyone involved is scrabbling for different solutions rather than giving the writer the space to find and tell the story as they see it.

For Lucy Scher, good development is 'a process where the developer seeks to identify what is meaningful to the writer in the project and assist them to make it meaningful to an audience, so that the developer and the writer are on the same side'. It's a process that 'goes forward and backwards in equal measure' and requires those involved to have some trust.

If there are other invested parties, one of the most effective positions a developer can take is to facilitate the overall creative discussion, such as helping to establish agreement on core narrative

intentions and to ensure that sight of these is not lost. The developer can help represent the writer and attempt to filter or negotiate any destructive, overly prescriptive or misleading input, while assisting the writer to appreciate potentially useful suggestions or areas of compromise. If someone is maintaining this overview role, a writer can feel safer about confronting remaining issues with the script as there is much less chance for the existing strengths of the script to unravel and be lost.

For Hare, what much development seems to miss is that writing is equally as personal an art form as any other and is not predominantly about technique. There is only so far a writer can bend towards writing 'in another man's clothes' before the results begin to become hollow. He suggests that much pain and effort could be avoided if people in the industry recognised this and prioritised working out if they have a compatible vision for a project before they get too far down the line. Perhaps producers might also be



The Kingdom: Universal Studios

Don't speak while I'm interrupting ...

prepared sometimes to allow the writer's vision to stand even if it is not quite the approach they would have preferred. He observes that this kind of mature negotiation is rare however, with people more likely to dig in and want to force their own perspective through.

In this kind of environment it's again not surprising that writers often perceive development as a process by which idiots will attempt to straightjacket their story into a pat, formulaic, commercial mould and rob it of authenticity or complexity. Though there is an element of technique to screenwriting, just as there is to composing for example, this cannot really be imposed from on high or used like a simple blueprint. Naturally many writers have an uneasy relationship with anything that seems to set rules, fearing a loss of creativity. As Richard Curtis (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*), puts it in *Story and Character*: 'I don't know about three-act structure and I'm scared to find out in case it affects the way that I write.'

Whether it somehow comes naturally

to you or you've absorbed technique through years of experience of seeing how audiences respond to your work, to engage and compel an audience requires some technique. Without technique musical composition would be little more than free form sounds and writing would only be uninteresting rambling.

'I've learned that the process of writing is a tug of war where you're pulling in the audience from quite far away until you're face to face at the end of the movie,' says Curtis. 'A lot of film-making seems to me to be trying not to cut the rope so that they fall backwards and you have to pick it up again and drag them out of the mud. All sorts of mistakes can make the audience - whether you know it or not - lose faith in you and lose interest in the film' (*ibid*).

In this complex exchange it's a challenge to know exactly what to reveal and when in order to engage and play with an audience's expectations, and to confront and satisfy them while avoiding frustrating or disappointing them. This is why, from the script stage to the end of

the edit, there's always a potential benefit in asking someone who stands outside the creative process to take on the position of audience and give an insight into how well they're being pulled in and where they're being lost.

To an extent, a writer can take a step back from the work and analyse it but this is a bit like trying to hold two sides of a conversation at once and can easily become confusing, even crippling, and hence, perhaps, the fear of over-analysing or looking too closely at technique. If a writer has the opportunity to off-load the more detached half of this conversation to someone outside, yet still have them remain a benign influence who equally wants to help them realise their story, then this clearly has immense value.

Looking at it this way, it's inevitable that the developer's approach is going to be slightly more technical and analytical than instinctive and personal but this, in fact, is beneficial. If they understand the creative process, however, they can keep analytical jargon out of the conversation and talk to the writer more in terms of story and character.

As someone who came to development from a background as a short film-maker and editor, learning this approach to script analysis and development was, for me, a little like seeing the light. Having been on both sides of the development process, it was a relief to know that there was a way to escape the open season fumble for solutions and unlock the real potential within a script.

The approach to analysis taught on the diploma provides the developer with a way into the script by giving them numerous questions to ask themselves about how well the narrative is engaging its audience. For example, is there a clear sense of what the lead character has to overcome or achieve in the story? Are the obstacles in their way strong enough for the audience to become involved in their conflict? What does the outcome of their conflict tell us? Asking questions like these may reveal issues with the story and will help to clarify for the developer what the writer intends the story to be about, thus providing a more effective starting point for discussion.

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Do characters feel too one dimensional or too complex for the audience to connect with them successfully and if so why? Are there elements of the story that feel too convenient or out of place in this universe or for this character? Do we have enough information to keep up with what's at stake (or perhaps we're too far ahead)? Such questions concern technique but are not about hammering the narrative into rigid formula and hitting marks on certain pages. The developer is undertaking this process of analysis so the writer doesn't have to, and only brings to the writer's attention areas of particular success and those where more work may still be needed.

Development, of the right kind, can therefore represent a useful opportunity for a writer to test whether the solutions they've found are working or whether the developer can still see the cracks. Script development should become a more transparent process where new writers know what to expect from input and are better equipped both to take advantage of it when it's good and to negotiate when it's bad.

The reality that writing is rewriting and that drafts are likely to go well into double figures is something else that could be more widely understood. In balance with training better developers, therefore, the Script Factory also trains writers how to work with notes. 'The best advice I can give any writer,' says Scher, 'is that you know when a criticism someone makes is correct when it exposes your secret hope that they would not see it.'

She also advises that however good they may be, there's no way that everything a developer has to say about a script is going to be true. Therefore the dialogue should be one that goes both ways, with the developer also able to hear when they might be wrong. Once a writer has this in mind, all they need to do is be open to the process, listen for the chimes and choose what to take on board and what to ignore. For Scher the mark of a good writer is 'the ability to know what it is you're trying to achieve. If you know what you're trying to say and why you're trying to say it, the choices that you've



The Heartbreak Kid: Paramount

Ensure both sides are committed to the same project.

made can then be probed and you can be interested in the conversation rather than be defensive.'

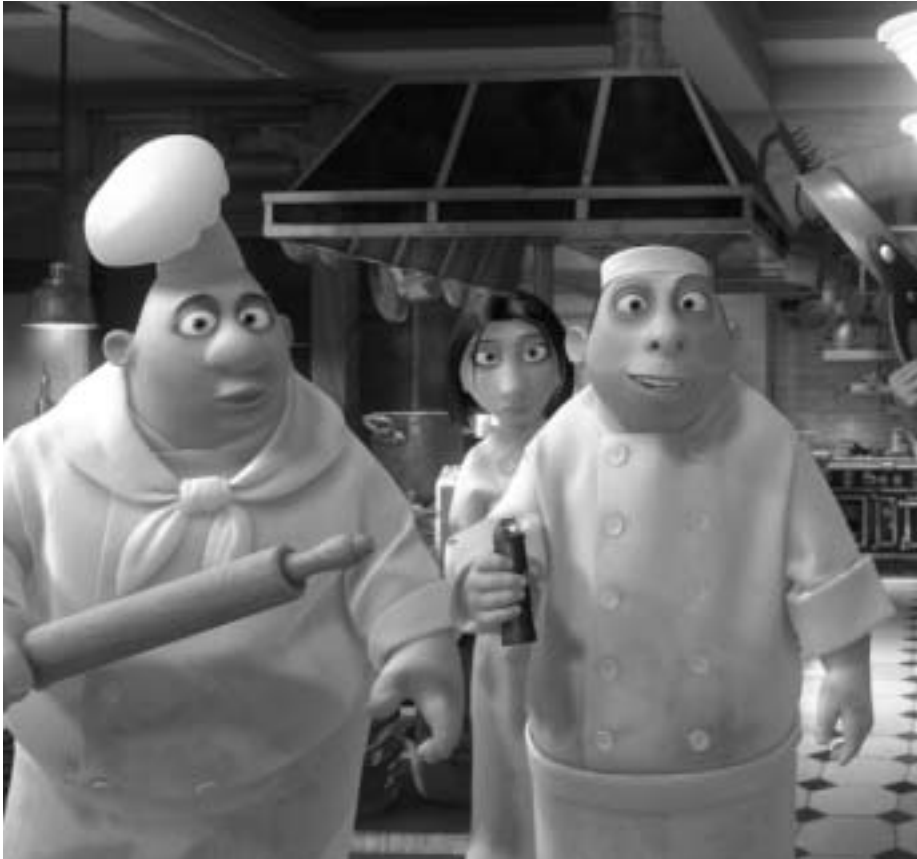
The fact is that despite the horror stories, development can be a truly positive process. As Amini puts it: 'The best thing about notes is that they're a great stimulus for writing another draft ... It's always hard summoning up the energy to write another one. If someone gives you fantastic notes they can be like a bucket of water waking you up to have another go.' (*ibid*). This is the final fundamental of good development upon which Hare, Scher and Powell, once again, turn out to agree.

As Powell puts it: 'It is as much the job of the script developer to inspire as it is to criticise: 'So much development just oppresses the spirit,' says Hare, 'It makes you feel uncreative and I've been in so

many rooms where you come out of the room with no desire to go back to writing the script at all.'

One of the main lessons of the diploma was, as Powell says: 'All good script editing starts with respect for the writer.' This involves respect for the difficulty of the work and for the fact that writing is much harder than having ideas; respect for the writer's ability to find their own solutions; respect for the writer's intentions within the script and for what has been achieved so far. If the developer respects the fact that the writer is the one who has to go away and implement the outcomes of development discussions, then, as Hare puts it, 'your basic job is to make the writer feel good about going back to work! If, as a developer, you're not at least trying your best to do that, then no matter how insightful you may be,

American screenplays tend to be far more polished than British ones because they have to be liked forty-million-dollars-worth as opposed to one-million-dollars-worth and most of the notes you get are about character not plot.' Amini



Ratatouille: Buena Vista International

How many cooks ...?

what use are you really?

Considering how in sync the teaching of the diploma seems to be with the recommendations of an accomplished writer, perhaps it is possible that the idea of defining, applying and teaching some clear professional standards in script development is not bullshit after all. It's more like an attempt to escape the bullshit and find a more productive way for the creative and technical aspects of the screenwriting process to come together with a potential outcome of happier writers and stronger scripts.

'Good development can be the difference between a film being made and not being made. I don't think for a second that it's always good but it should always be good and there should be a standard against which it can be measured,' says Scher. 'That was the idea of the diploma: to try to set the standard.'

Amini observes: 'I learned that contrary to popular belief, American executives are much more able than their British equivalents in terms of script development. American screenplays tend to be far more polished than British ones because they have to be liked forty-million-dollars-worth as opposed to one-million-dollars-worth and most of the notes you get are

about character not plot!' (*ibid*) Better development could have a significant positive impact on our industry.

Both Hare and Scher note that things are at least beginning to improve. 'There's certainly been an industry-wide effort to try to address this. Now when I talk to writers, their experience of development is much better than a few years ago when it was terrible,' says Scher.

After I nervously said my piece at the Festival, Hare wryly observed that some development executives do seem to be starting to realise that bombarding a writer with notes might not be the best approach and are attempting to wean themselves off old habits. However, there is still a long way to go to create a situation where writers are free from useless notes and there is recognition of film script development as a profession with a specific set of skills.

Scher goes on to add: 'I would like screenplays to be part of the English curriculum in schools so that future developers and screenwriters have the same advantage as novelists and playwrights.' Currently screenwriters and developers can start their careers without ever having read a script and that, says Scher is 'in a way as unimaginable as a

publisher choosing manuscripts without ever having read books.' If good writing comes from absorbing technique so that it seems to come naturally, reading good script examples, alongside continually testing your own work, should be top of the agenda for writers too.

I've had a glimpse of development from both sides of the table and know that if I were trying to write, I'd want to be able to find someone to work with who understood the following essentials: writing is difficult and it takes a while to work through and find the answers; development is a dialogue with the writer to assist them in realising their own creative intentions, not forcing through someone else's; a developer is there to provide an inspired overview and to help guide the writer (and other invested parties) back if they are going off-piste.

Development is not about becoming involved in detailed solutions or trying to write. It should come essentially from respect for the writer and the creative process and should not be lead by jargon and criticism but rather by an attempt to illuminate and inspire. Though a diploma doesn't mean that everyone who holds one is alike (just as all graduate directors or cinematographers are not equally talented), it could at least be somewhere to start looking. Like Hare, most experienced writers will be able to point to positive experiences of development alongside the bad but unfortunately they're likely to have many more of the latter. It's time to change that ratio.

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