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SCRIPTLAND

When the writers gather in Texas, the words just flow

By Jay A. Fernandez
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AUSTIN, Texas — Only at the Austin Film Festival can legendary director-actor-producer Sydney Pollack wander through the 120-year-old Driskill Hotel's grand lobby entirely unmolested while "Mystic River" screenwriter Brian Helgeland gets mobbed by fans. As one repeat attendee put it, "This is the only festival where writers are treated like rock stars."

The lively event, which will close its 13th incarnation on Thursday, remains the only major screenwriter-focused festival on the circuit. The weeklong array of panels, pitch competitions, parties and screenings is all about honoring the ingenuity and allure of the screenplay and the writers who craft them (well, it's also occasionally about drinking, but that goes with the territory).

The tone was set early by the festival's kickoff screening of writer-director Jake Kasdan's "The TV Set," a comedy that stars David Duchovny as a television writer trying to make his first pilot after 15 years of industry sloggery. The film is a hilarious distillation of the compromises, exasperations and psychological ailments of the Hollywood writing life.

In addition to handing special achievement awards to Pollack, Shane Black and "NYPD Blue" co-creator David Milch, the festival also runs a screenplay and teleplay competition. This year's winners included "The Man in the Rearview Mirror" by Andrew Pagana and Justin Thomas, who cited Black's script for "The Last Boy Scout" as an early inspiration, and "What Would Fabio Do?," John Morning's comedy about four volunteer firefighters in East Syracuse, N.Y., who use the wisdom of pulp romance novels to seduce women.

What's so appealing about the festival is its street-level accessibility (and its street-level nightlife, which includes the Texas capital's raucous downtown 6th Street corridor). You can have a drink with Oscar winner Christopher McQuarrie as he passes along industry advice while Black roams about. Across the room the guys responsible for "Wet Hot American Summer" play cards around pillars of draft beer.

And one thing about writers, they love to tell stories. Using colorful language. Here are some of the most entertaining that I heard:

Best back story: Helgeland ("A Knight's Tale") doggedly pursued his Oscar-winning "L.A. Confidential" adaptation assignment at least partly because he had developed a guilt-infused "emotional attachment" to author James Ellroy after he attended a book signing of the novelist's "The Big Nowhere" in 1988, at which he was the only person who showed up.

Shrewdest comedy advice: The geniuses behind "Wedding Crashers" (Steve Faber and Bob Fisher) and the TV show "Stella" (Michael Ian Black, Michael Showalter and David Wain) passed along the invaluable wisdom that the following two things are always funny: (1) anything having to do with butts and (2) having something fall on someone's head. It goes without saying that anyone who combines the two will have a long, distinguished and highly compensated career in Hollywood.

Most deadpan studio anecdote: Jessica Bendinger ("Bring It On") was once brought in to adapt a dark coming-of-age story about a girl with anorexia who suffers through a date rape, among other things. The major studio head who owned the book rights pitched it by saying, "We think it could be like 'Bridget Jones.'"

Best line of dialogue: At an impromptu celebration in a scene in the middle of Kasdan's "The TV Set," Sigourney Weaver, as a network executive who's just received the ratings of their new Seth Green-hosted reality show, vigorously geysers a bottle of Champagne while shouting maniacally: "Nineteen share ... ! Here's to 'Slut Wars!' "

The guy it would be easy to hate: Russell Gewirtz was in real estate when he decided to try his hand at a screenplay. He took no classes and read no books — he merely downloaded a few screenplays to get a look at the format. He spent a year writing his first script, had a friend get it into some agents' hands, and sold it less than two weeks later. Spike Lee then directed "Inside Man," with Denzel Washington, Jodie Foster and Clive Owen, to \$176 million worldwide. "I don't know why they invite me to these things," Gewirtz said with a smile and a shrug.

One for the back pocket: In a panel on pitching, renowned story consultant Christopher Vogler ("The Writer's Journey") detailed the benefit of the "doorknob pitch." That's the "Hail Mary" idea you throw out in the 12 seconds you have on your way out the door after the pitch you were actually there to deliver bombs wretchedly. It's remarkable how often the doorknob pitch makes the sale.

How good lines get lost: Bill Wittliff ("Legends of the Fall") had written into the "Perfect Storm" script a funny/angry line: "The skipper couldn't find a fish if it was hanging on to his ... with both hands!" Director Wolfgang Petersen, a native of the German seaport of Emden, read the line, puzzled over it and informed the writer that fish don't have hands.

The worst pitch of all time: One screenwriter was pitching a detailed two-hour TV pilot only to have the meeting interrupted by news that an actor was killed on the lot. Despite the writer's protestations to postpone the meeting and another attendee's free-flowing tears, the network executive insisted that they continue by saying, "No, no, no — I'm riveted." The show was, uh, not picked up.

A matter of priorities: When she was working on "Pocahontas," Susannah Grant ("Erin Brockovich") was in a development meeting when she realized that she would need to create a new animal character for the script. One Disney marketing executive offered this advice: "Think plush."

The last word: While accepting the distinguished screenwriter award, Black ("Lethal Weapon," "Kiss Kiss Bang Bang") gave a palpably emotional speech in which he described the Austin festival as an inspirational "oasis" from Los Angeles, alluded to surviving his own past professional and personal crucibles and expressing deep envy for the hunger that the young aspiring screenwriters in the room were exhibiting. He then wrapped up by stressing that Hollywood would likely try to eat every single one of their souls.

Scriptland is a weekly feature on the work and professional lives of screenwriters. For tips and comments, e-mail fernandez_jay@hotmail.com.

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