

I would highly recommend the NPA events and in particular the Screen Lab courses with Charles Harris, writer/producer/director and film-industry trainer. Harris - the originator of the Screenwriters' Workshop and subsequently ScreenLab - knows a good deal about screenwriting and expresses it well.

This particular workshop was called Putting the Story on the Screen and was aimed specifically at the action description area of screenwriting (i.e. the bits between the dialogue). It was one of a series of workshops run by ScreenLab that are designed to take the writer through the process of creating a script from first premise to marketing.

The delegates further defined the workshop title with the following list of aspects they would like covered and Harris proceeded to cover them:

- the difference between playwright and screenwriter
- cutting and overcutting
- pithy writing
- manipulating without directing
- psychology of action, style, voice
- making it a good read, not literary, seeing not telling.

Harris said that if we want to write better screenplays and improve our action descriptions, the place to start is reading. We should apparently read three feature scripts a week for a year. There are links to useful sites for downloading scripts from the ScreenLab website: www.screenlab.co.uk. (The whole site is worth checking out.) He also suggested going into any remainder bookshop, like the Bookends chain, where scripts are to be found for a song. Foyles and Borders have excellent film and script departments and you can always try Off Stage.

He advises us to read the screenplays of films we haven't seen and then watch the movie so that we can see what was done with it. He says we will see that most scripts have to be overwritten slightly for the reader. The point of the script is to grab the reader and drag them into the story. If it's written sparsely, like a shooting script, it will often be criticised as a thin movie, needing more characterisation.

So although you need to write the script so as to make it as close as possible to how

Putting the story on the screen

Janice Day reviews Charles Harris' one-day workshop

you want the film to look, be aware that it will change in the cutting room and write just a little more than you need in order to provide a good read. Such a balance is subtle and difficult to achieve. At times Harris seems to be contradicting himself: don't write it too long, it will be cut; don't write it too sparsely, it will be criticised by the reader.

At other times during the day I did feel that had I been a complete beginner, I would have found his instruction a little confusing.

Most trainers will pick a stance and stand by it so that if you attend enough courses with different trainers over too short a period of time, you will probably need hospitalisation and may never recover. However, Charles Harris displays an impressive mastery of both the creative form and the industry in which the form struggles to be produced, which I found refreshing. He presents all sides of the argument so that, in his own words, he offers us a 'toolkit that I've amassed so that you go away with a load of questions - not necessarily a load of answers or dictates from the guru'.

And it works. What's more, he has an excellent formula for proving that it works. At the beginning of the day we were set the task of writing a scene. We then put it aside and rewrote it later in the light of what we had learned. A few brave volunteers read out both versions. The difference was stunning. So, the only possible conclusion to be drawn from that - and even a blonde writer can work this out - was that we must have learned something.

Harris' gems of wisdom included the following:

'Never write something because you think it's pretty or nice to have in - for example, phrases like: "a spray of roses" or "light falling" - if it's not dramatically important to the script. It must be dramatically relevant at the time it's needed. You have to have a clear difference between artistic desire and dramatic desire.'

Also...

'Common faults in scripts are where they are too mechanical, fixed, prescriptive; too banal; having the wrong tone (e.g. a thriller script that isn't thrilling); untrue; forced, over-egging the pudding; out of character; predictable; distracting...'

and

'The first draft is often full of energy but a mess. Subsequent drafts are tight and working but the energy has disappeared.'

Throughout the day we performed the exercises, we listened, we looked at scripts and the film clips that accompanied them; Harris answered our questions and covered our list of demands from the course and all the while expertly controlled the room. I left at the end of the day, with improved confidence in both my projects and my ability, not for the pub with the others but eager to get off to bed with a good ... script.

Charles Harris is currently running the latest series of ScreenLab for Euroscript at Warren Street, details on www.euroscript.co.uk. This includes his series of Saturday workshops, see his website: www.screen-lab.co.uk