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REWRITING SCRIPT SCHOOLS

A GUIDE TO NEW SCREENWRITING COURSES

ZONA MARIE TAN AND RACHAEL TURK CHECK OUT THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS TO AUSTRALIAN SCRIPT SCHOOLS.

Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS)
makeit.aftrs.edu.au

COURSE: Graduate Diploma in Screenwriting

DURATION: One year, part-time. First intake in February 2009

PLACES: Limited; entry is competitive and based on merit selection.

ELIGIBILITY: Developed skills as a writer in any form.

COST: \$11,500 (FEE-HELP available)

Breaking new ground with its slate of courses announced in late August, one of AFTRS' new courses is the flagship Graduate Diploma in Screenwriting. Designed especially for writers with existing skills and experience in other areas, this course will enable them to gain specialist knowledge and practice in writing for the screen.

According to AFTRS director of screen content Graham Thorburn, the course was formulated in collaboration with the Australian Writers Guild because the school wanted to "find a way to support and help writers learn screenwriting that wasn't plugged into a particular production methodology within the school."

In the past, this methodology had each student working in his specialist role on short films.

"It was a good idea in principle," says Thorburn. "But in reality it disadvantaged screenwriters. Even if the writer contributed hugely to it, short films are seen as a director's medium. In any case, young directors almost all want to write their own scripts – they see it as their opportunity to get noticed. So they try to control the film and get recognition as a writer/director because that gives them a chance of creating a career in feature films. As a result, the writers get put through a whole lot of pain for a script that's not very useful to them. I'm convinced writers are much better off working on more substantial projects."

With that in mind, the new course was developed with two main modules. The first has the student working on his own personal project as the course's centrepiece while guided by an experienced industry mentor; and the second is a commissioned project that complements the first module to enhance their understanding of core analytic craft skills and their ability to apply them to all projects.

"If you're going to make a living as a writer, it's very likely some of the work that you're going to do is commissioned," reasons Thorburn. "It's also sometimes easier to see where you're writing well or where you're not when it's a project that's not so close to you. So we've put those two components together."

Other parts of the course will include intensive periods of seminars, practical creative workshops and masterclasses through which students will gain core and advanced skills, and an understanding of the unique collaborative nature of writing for the screen.

Sydney Film School (SFS)

www.sydneyfilmschool.com

HEAD OF SCREENWRITING: Brian Hannant

COURSE: Advanced Diploma in Screenwriting for Short Feature Films

DURATION: One semester (15 weeks), full-time

PLACES: Five

ELIGIBILITY: Open to SFS graduates or people with prior screenwriting skills

COST: \$4,500

SFS currently offers two courses: the Certificate IV (20 weeks, full-time) and Diploma of Screen (40 weeks, full-time). SFS operates like a large production house that produces a certain amount of films every year, with all students involved as the extended crew. As part of these courses, students learn about directing, editing, screenwriting, producing, production and cinematography.

In 2009, they are introducing an Advanced Diploma in Filmmaking as well as a new Advanced Diploma in Screenwriting for Short Feature Films – an intensive full-time course intended to create high quality material with which the Filmmaking Diploma students might be able to work. A pilot program is currently being introduced, with the full offering to start next year.

Head of screenwriting Brian Hannant will be implementing the course. The idea is that before you can make a film, you have to write one. "The core of filmmaking is a screenplay; even documentaries, as with the current hybridisation the two pathways are on a convergent course," says Hannant. "And having a screenplay properly developed is essential. So many films have struggled making a film on a half-finished screenplay."

The aim is to write scripts for "Short Feature Films" which are categorised as 45-50 mins in duration, and would take approximately two weeks to shoot.

Though the 50-minute format (as was supported industry-wide by Australian Film Commission, SBS Independent and Film Victoria around 2002/03) can be problematic in terms of distribution, Hannant says it allows students the necessary room to make mistakes. "That notion of the 'first feature' carries a lot of baggage. You can make all your mistakes on a short feature and not have to face the opprobrium of the public for having messed up a first feature. We're thinking of the student development, not the marketplace."

OTHER SCRIPTWRITING COURSES

Metro Screen, Paddington NSW

www.metroscreen.org.au

COURSE: Introduction to Screenwriting (Beginner to Intermediate)

TUTOR: Roger Nelson