

Local filmmakers get much-needed boost in script development with intensive workshop series

Good films start with good scripts

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At the recently concluded T&T Film Festival, there was a renewed focus on local films. *Green Days By the River*, a local feature based on the Michael Anthony novel, opened the Festival and is still running at cinemas. There was also a fantastic response to short films like Maya Cozier's *Short Drop* and Shari Petti's *Sorf Hair*. Away from the glare of the Festival spotlight, however, there was an extremely important educational event taking place. The British Council teamed up with the T&T Film Festival to host development training for filmmakers in the form of a scriptwriting workshop with British script development consultant Ludo Smolski.



Ludo Smolski with the participants in the Script Development Workshop, which took place under the auspices of the T&T Film Festival in partnership with the British Council.

The decision to host the workshop came after the British Council held meetings last year with regional filmmakers who felt it was important to have a “stronger culture of project development”. This training is tremendously important as many local filmmakers are setting their sights on the international market. The September sessions formed the second part of the workshop series, as Smolski was here in March to begin work with the film professionals.

One of the 15 participants was Lisa Allen-Agostini, award-winning fiction writer and T&T Guardian Sunday Arts editor. She had high praise for the workshop. “I thought my experience as a film reviewer and a literary and journalistic editor could prepare me to be a script editor, but there was so much more to script development,” she said. “Script development isn’t just editing, however. The training emphasised the need for teamwork between producer, writer and editor; we learned the vital importance of marketing, how to write and deliver pitches, and above all how to manage the relationships within the team. I’ve seldom if ever taken part in a workshop so well executed, so engaging, and so beneficial.”

The experience was a good one for Smolski himself, as he believes there is a great deal of talent in T&T. In an interview with the T&T Guardian, he spoke about the potential for the local film industry.

Q: What future and scope do you see for scriptwriters in T&T? What prospects are there for someone from the English-speaking Caribbean getting their work out there and competing successfully in the international market?

That depends on how the film industry continues to develop, but there is talent here. There is a culture of making short films and if this continues and they travel to major international film festivals that will feedback positively into local filmmaking. I hope that T&T continues to find a way to make feature length films – if you stop it is very hard to start again. As competitive as the international market is, there's no reason why a T&T film shouldn't travel beyond the Caribbean and the diaspora. There are a wealth of stories here, and the talent to tell it, so with the right development and support it could happen if enough people want it. Public and private finance should be able to see the enormous cultural and economic benefits of a healthy film sector within the creative industry, and I hope ways are found for them to partner effectively to build it. I would also say that things are changing in TV now so rapidly that there is a likely outlet for writers and creative producers there too. It doesn't have to be Netflix or Amazon either (to start with). Flow are commissioning TV pilots through Caribbean Tales (Toronto-based film development project that focuses on Caribbean film) and I would expect more of these kinds of initiatives to follow. Online self-distribution models are also becoming a reality and will help raise the profile of the talent involved.

Having conducted two workshops in T&T what do you think about the local talent and what should people try to do next?

I think they're very talented! Filmmakers need be making films, but how you go about it is not always straightforward (in fact it never is). Local talent should be working hard on their projects to make sure the script attracts the money and the talent. I hope the workshop has given them a way of helping each other, and the wider industry, develop their projects and push them to the requisite level to do so. The T&T Film Festival is an absolute lifeline to not only see other work and meet filmmakers, but also interact with the global industry and present their own work in front of an audience. And of course, keep making shorts and entering them to the big international festivals with a strong reputation for short films. A laurel wreath from one of these does wonders for getting your feature script in front of the right people.

Recently, there have been several articles in the international press about the declining role of the critic - what do you think? How important is film criticism for a developing film industry?

I think that's fairly self-evident, at least in the UK. I would say diluted as much as declining. Competition for eyeballs and social media being the chief causes. It's a shame, as a plurality and of good, experienced and diverse critics is vital to the art. Buzz or word-of-mouth has always been the strongest driver of audience numbers, but criticism has a role to play in this too and helps us consider our responses to the work from useful – and sometimes challenging – perspectives. It gives us an appreciation of the work in context, be it historical, cultural or social, and they can

bang the drum for new and emerging talent that we might otherwise overlook, as well as introduce us to gems from the past. This can't be done in 140 characters in the same way as, say, a 1,600 word review from a critic like Anthony Lane in The New Yorker.
