

Spotlight on Screenwriters Join Reel Talk with Film DC

Leslie Green: Welcome to Reel Talk with Film DC. This is your host, Leslie Green, director of communications for the DC Office of Motion Picture and Television Development, also known as the DC Film Office.

This month we have Monica Lee Bellais with Women in Film and Video, one of our wonderful stakeholders of the DC Film Office. She's also the founder of the Spotlight on Screenwriters initiative that we're going to talk about today. It actually premiered just this past weekend and we were excited to come to that event.

You also brought a few of your featured screenwriters here today, and so we're excited to hear about their projects and what was the motivation behind that. Thank you all for being here today. We're very happy to have you here.

Monica Lee Bellais: Thank you.

Joseph McGloin: Thank you.

Jim Gossard: Thanks.

Leslie: Absolutely. As a long-time sponsor of Women in Film and Video, and also Script DC, the DC Film Office was, as I said before, really excited to see Script DC this weekend as well as the Spotlight on Screenwriters initiative which premiered. We'd love to just hear a little bit about what Spotlight on Screenwriters is, what Script DC is, and how it came to be.

Monica: Hi. The Script DC conference had about 150 writers. We also had I think 30 actors reading some of the scripts there. Then we had producers come in from LA and New York and other places. The conference was a lot of fun and people got to talk about their projects and meet other producers and see what's out in the marketplace.

Then the highlight of my part of it for the week and I was very excited about was the showcasing of Spotlight on Screenwriters. There were 39 scripts in the catalog with 39 writers and across all genres. Comedy, action, thrillers.

Jim: Science fiction.

Monica: Science fiction, and just a broad range of projects with interesting writers.

Leslie: The purpose of Spotlight on Screenwriters is really to get those talented screenwriters that we have here in the area exposure, right? It's to help get their projects out there.

Monica: Right, and get them on the map and collectively pool the group of writers and say, and get the catalog. It's basically a spec catalog, so it's something on speculation that it'll get picked up and get this catalog of 39 projects out into the marketplace.

Leslie: This is really an ingenious concept. This is one that is not even being done in New York and LA, which are the top production centers. What made you come up with this idea for DC? Why did you think DC needed something like this?

Monica: I'm actually from Hollywood, and so I had for years been making the bridge and connecting people, writers with producers in LA that I know. The reason why this came about was to collectively put everyone in one location so that it made their life easier for the producer to go through and look at it.

The idea of this catalog and the way it's laid out is there's a one-sheet, which is a movie poster, on one side and then on the other side, on the left-hand side is the writer's name, the story's log line, and the synopsis of the project. If the producer likes the project that they've looked at or the concept of this movie, then they can request a script.

We're not bombarding the producers with a bunch of scripts saying, "Hey, will you read this stack of 39 scripts?" We're saying, "Check it out like a catalog. If you like it, then we will send you a, WIFV, Women in Film and Video, will send a script." If they like the script then, then we will make the connection and the introduction from the producer to the writer.

That's how that works. That way we're not bombarding anyone and already the catalog was announced and sent out on Saturday, this past Saturday, and we've already, out of 39 scripts, today, which is Friday, we've already received four requests for projects.

I'm really happy about that, because this wouldn't happen otherwise. Because collectively of a talent pool, these really great scripts from these awesome writers would be sitting on their desk, and now they're in LA with interest. That's pretty cool. I'm excited about that.

Leslie: Very, very exciting. Very exciting. Speaking of the screenwriters' wonderful work, we want to just talk to some of the screenwriters about their projects. I have to tell you, our director, Pierre Bagley, was super impressed with not just the event and the way that it was put on, but also from the actual talented work that you all displayed there. Kudos to you for that.

I want to take some time to shift our focus and shift our conversation to what these projects are who you all are in the room. I do want to start with Sharon Burtner. She wrote the comedy "Skipping Backwards." Sharon, if you can just give us a little log line, a little synopsis of what that's about, that'd be great.

Sharon Burtner: My project is a dramedy, which is a comedy-drama mixture, about a women who tries to held her family together while her mother suffers from dementia, her developmentally challenged brother goes missing, and her husband clings to the dream of a failing café.

Leslie: Interesting. So you have a dramedy here, and you've gotten some pretty tough topics like dementia and you said there's a developmentally challenged brother that the main character is dealing with. How did you come up with this story? Also, I should mention that all of these stories of the screenwriters that are featured here today, they have some sort of DC focus or DC tact to it. How did you come up with that concept and how do you see DC fitting into that?

Sharon: Basically, characters pop into my head sometimes. I'm a novelist and I was wondering what these disparate characters were doing. Essentially I came to the conclusion that it's about strength and people that society often marginalizes. It's also about working together and family.

Leslie: How did DC fit into that?

Sharon: Yes. When the brother goes missing, he takes off on the towpath into DC and gleans inspiration from the various monuments. So that's, it has to be shot here.

Leslie: Very interesting, very cool. We also have Frances Cheever with the action "BC13." Tell us about that.

Frances Cheever: BC13, the log line is this all-airborne, premiere, combat-ready medical team is trained to save lives as well as take them. I spent almost 32 years in the United States Army and my story was inspired initially when I worked at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC with our wounded warriors.

Leslie: Wow. Very, very cool. Joseph McGloin, you wrote a comedy called "Socrates in Washington, DC." Tell us a little bit about that.

Joseph: Yeah. It's actually, I would call it a comedy drama, because it does have a lot of drama in it. It's also got a bit of science fiction because you can't have Socrates, the historical character, in Washington, DC without bringing him here through time travel. Just the idea of, he was a fantastic figure in western civilization several thousand years ago.

How would he fare in the capital of civilization, western civilization, for all intents and purposes, today, Washington DC? It was just the idea of, would he be able to do the same kinds of things? Socrates actually spent his adult life in his questioning of people.

What was behind it mostly was, what is happiness about? I had him continue that search when we came to DC and he encounters a number of people, and yes. Some of it's very funny, how he interacts. He's kind of baffled the national security forces. They don't know what to make of him.

There's a lot of possibilities there that end up, the drama part of it is, what's happiness about, really? And he discovers it for himself after having his own episode of having to understand his own relationship to happiness instead of just with other people. There's a lot of character arcing going on there, so to speak.

Leslie: Very interesting. Of course this has a DC focus to it. How did you come up with this concept? Why Socrates in DC?

Joseph: I actually melded two ideas together. I've always been fascinated by Socrates. I've been studying his life my adult life and I was actually pitching for a webisode series to Women in Film and Video several years ago.

I thought, "Well, it's Women and Film in Video in Washington, DC. Why not just bring Socrates to DC?" Then all of these possibilities presented themselves, so it became this magic idea to work with, in whatever ways I felt like was going to be the most powerful. Washington, DC is a great place to tell a story.

To me, story is extremely important. I think we've lost track of that. The filmmakers today are the storytellers and the storytellers help civilization go in a direction. I think some of the stories aren't necessarily as good as they could be. I like the idea of telling a good story that actually is helpful to people. Learning what makes happiness is an element of that.

Then it's just the idea that DC is a very interesting place. It's a fascinating place. I have him at the Lincoln Memorial, I have him in the capital. Lots of interaction there, and then in the White House with the president, with the female president. It just lends itself to all kinds of really fun and really interesting possibilities.

Leslie: It sounds like it, it sounds like it. I can't wait to see that on the big screen.

Joseph: Me either.

Leslie: Then last but not least, we have Jim Gossard. He wrote the action-thriller "White Dust." Tell us a little bit about that.

Jim: Yeah, so White Dust is a story of a grad student who finds himself implicated in a modern-day anthrax attack. He ultimately finds himself in the crosshairs of the FBI, the CIA, and then there's this survivalist black-ops group that comes on the scene and kidnaps him. The only way he manages to survive this is to actually start a small war, which he ends up staging in Harper's Ferry, complete with drones and a lot of action.

Leslie: Wow. You've got to have drones, right?

Jim: You've got to have drones, definitely.

[laughter]

Leslie: Had you written a story like this before?

Jim: Not exactly. I followed the original anthrax attack of 2001 and I knew people who were involved. I was actually watching it very closely. I was in Catocin, up at Catocin when they drained the pond looking for evidence and they found a turtle trap. I also interviewed people who were actively involved in this, in the original attack. It just kept my attention, and then I pushed forward with it, a different spin on it, and created a modern-day attack that could be pretty scary.

Leslie: Wow. Well these are all very, very exciting script ideas and actually scripts. I wish I could read all of the scripts that you have here, but one thing that I would like to share with our listeners is how they can, well, two things.

One, if they're a scriptwriter, how they can get their project in something like this. If there's someone who's looking for a scriptwriter, if you're a producer or a director or someone from Hollywood, like you mentioned before, Monica, how would someone get involved in this Spotlight on Screenwriters?

Monica: Through WIFV, which is, you could go to the website, www.wifv.org. There's a section in there for Spotlight on Screenwriters, and you can contact me through the WIFV office. We're

going to ramp up again in the spring and go through the whole process. Because screenwriting is a craft and it takes a long time to build your skill level up to a very competitive...

It's an incredibly competitive field. Not only once you get the script and once a script gets picked up, then there are 500 people on a film that have their fingerprints on your original story idea.

Your script has to go through a whole bunch of hurdles before it can even get made. Having the best possibly crafted project to give it to somebody for them to say, "OK, I'm interested in this." Then even once they're interested in it they're going to reshape that thing anyway to their vision of it. The screenwriter is the very first step of doing it.

And so last year, during this year I ran a whole bunch of workshops through WIFV to help the writers ramp up and get their work done to a level to submit the catalog. The way that this was set up, I didn't want it to be a competition.

What WIFV did is we said, "OK, fine. This is not going to be a competition and no one won anything. This is a community effort to say, 'OK, submit your script.'" If the script wasn't ready then we kicked it back. The writer had the opportunity to resubmit it.

The idea of that is to support the talent, and that's the whole reason why I came to the film office was, OK, we're in this community where there's amazing talent with...They're very creative, but they're also, their day jobs are very interesting and unique.

That's a difference. I worked in LA and before I came here I worked for James Cameron's production company. The writers are, I feel are the same level as of writers in LA. The difference is being logistically challenged in the DC area. That's why I wanted to put this together and say, "OK, as a community we're going to put all these writers in and then give them the opportunity to do it."

Going back to your question, in the spring we will wrap up again and start doing monthly meetings to help people build their craft. It's either from dialog, character arc, plot points. The various elements that are involved in a screenplay. Helping people break down their scripts and see what works and what doesn't work and what to cut out. Then polishing the script and then getting it into the catalog to get it out to the marketplace with it.

I am tremendously grateful for the film office for helping put this crazy idea together and I'm very happy with the success of it. That there are many, many Academy Award-winning producers that are getting this project, and some really big financiers too that are getting the catalog as well, and they're going through them.

I'm very happy for all the writers and I just want to help people get their stuff on the map. Thank you for having us here today and supporting this project along the way. It has meant a lot to not only me, but to everyone. Even the people that didn't get into the catalog, that didn't even make it in, they were still showing up at workshops and their stuff is still polished and next time they'll get in. I know they will. That's been a fun part.

Chad is sitting here very quietly. I want to point out Chad Bartlett, who helped so much on creating the visual fill of the catalog. Aesthetically it would be this beautiful piece that someone could get

and set on their desk, hold onto it, and not toss it out like a magazine. But actually it's a beautiful book, it's an art book. I think that's the first step in grabbing the producer's eye, and then to read it. Thanks, Chad.

Chad Bartlett: You're welcome.

Leslie: How could someone get a copy of the Spotlight on Screenwriters catalog?

Monica: This year we wanted to keep it a little bit intimate, so it's not out to anyone general. It's going, the folks that were in the catalog, they have copies of it. But the writers, it's going out to the producers. Producers and financiers, it's a limited edition right now. We ran 200, there's 200 printed catalogs, and they've gone out that way. It's not for sale to the masses. The idea is to shop, work around, to promote the screenwriters.

Leslie: Great. Thank you all for coming here today. You have some fantastic, fantastic stories that we can't wait to see come to fruition. I want to thank you as well, Chad, even though you didn't get to say much. But this is a beautiful, beautiful catalog and we have a copy here at the DC Film Office. We're passing it around to one another and looking at how slick it is and hopefully we'll be able to show it to some folks as well who might be able to pick up these projects.

Monica: Yeah, absolutely. Thank you so much.

Leslie: Absolutely. Thank you all for tuning in to Reel Talk with Film DC. Again, this is your host Leslie Green signing off. Please don't forget to check us out on the web at film.dc.gov. Like us on Facebook at facebook.com/filmdc, and follow us on Twitter, [@dcfilmoffice](https://twitter.com/dcfilmoffice). Catch you next time.