

SPARK 2004, a writer/director's perspective

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5 March 2004

The schedule looked intimidating; a straight week of intensive script meetings punctuated by gourmet meals, screenings and the mysterious 'Helen's Session'. We would be at a luxury hotel plonked down in the middle of rural Victoria, with no one to hear us scream and nowhere to go for miles around but wineries, restaurants and cheese shops. Welcome to Spark 2004.

This was the second year of the AFC's script workshop initiative. The previous event was in Hepburn Springs, but the venue burned down, so we were in Milewa – once Ned Kelly country – now covered in grapes. More than a little nervous, I drove down the coast and then over the blackened Victorian Alps to arrive in time for welcome drinks on Sunday 1 February.

The advisors and film-makers were a very diverse bunch, some familiar faces and many new ones. There was a strong contingent of AFTRS survivors. These included Tony Ayres, Sandy Lepore, Michael Brindley, Ken Cameron, Amanda Higgs, Daniel Nettheim, Mariel Beros, Carolyn Johnson and Helen Carmichael, as well as Miriam Stein and me (the *Cloudcatcher* team). Producers and directors didn't arrive until later in the week, so initially it was a select group of advisors, writers and split personalities such as myself. Seven scripts had been chosen out of over eighty applicants.

Each project was appointed four advisors, each of whom we would meet (officially) three times. There was also a mentor for each project to debrief and talk about non-editorial things, in my case the much-bruised but still passionate Michael Brindley. The advisors were carefully matched to scripts and film-makers. Because my project was huge, expensive and unwieldy, the organisers brought out the big guns to cut me down to size. These came in the form of Lynda House (producer of *Proof*, *Muriel's Wedding*, *Ned Kelly*), Greg Widen (writer of *Backdraft* and *Highlander*, writer/director of *The Prophecy*), Joan Sauers (who's worked with everyone from Lindsay Anderson to Francis Ford Coppola and written and edited many scripts and books), and Geoff Stier (associated with films such as *Sense and Sensibility*, *The Talented Mr Ripley* and *The Quiet American*).

My greatest fear going into the workshop was that I would be pulled in several contradictory directions. Despite the diversity of the advisors, this didn't happen. While the writers were having breakfast in the morning (at least those of us who believed in breakfast) the advisors were meeting elsewhere and making their evil plans for how they would mess with our heads that day. That's what we suspected at first anyway. Actually they must have been distilling what had happened the day before and building consensus on where each project was now and what needed to be tackled next.

While each advisor had their own particular issues with the script, there was also quite a lot of common ground. In my own case, the same problems kept cropping up in the first round of meetings, more problems and possible solutions were canvassed in the second set of meetings, then selected solutions were examined in more detail in the final meetings.

Unlike many of the projects at Spark this year, my script was at a very early stage of development – in fact I had used the Spark deadline as a motivation to get the first draft written. Having written the *Cloudcatcher* script to get it out of my head, and without any real expectation that it would go anywhere, I had thrown away most of the rules and theory I had accumulated at film school and concentrated on just getting it down. This meant that there was plenty to talk about, but also left me feeling embarrassed half the time that I hadn't already solved the problems we were discussing. On the positive side, I was very open to suggestions as to the path ahead, as the script was not yet set in stone in my mind.

I was most impressed at the amount of preparation the advisors had done. They had each examined the script on a deep level and were ready with suggestions and questions that showed they had really read and thought about the material. Generally the advisors loved the imaginative territory of the story but urged me to get the basic things right in the follow-up draft; character, logic, motivation, dimensionality, stakes.

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I tend to throw everything on to the page in early drafts, so it wasn't surprising that several advisors urged me to hone and simplify the script, work out the spine and stick to it, come hell or high water. All the readers found the first act (which I'd done the most work on) quite gripping, but many found it turned to smoke, or perhaps custard, as the script continued.

Cloudcatcher mixes genres with gay abandon, which bothered most of the advisors. Some of them started referring to it as a metaphysical *Vertical Limit*, which wasn't all that far from how I saw it. There was much discussion of the central character and his antecedents (including Kaspar Hauser, Chance Gardener and Bad Boy Bubby). One advisor completely missed one of the central ideas I was trying to suggest (that the story was about how fear causes over-protectiveness which causes more cross-generational problems) and expected a supernatural suspense story in the vein of *The Sixth Sense*, becoming disappointed when I went down a more whimsical, magical realism route.

The American advisors were at a complete loss as to how someone living in the country, especially the outback, could be boxed in, or imprisoned. For them 'the west' is the land of freedom and Huckleberry Finn, and no amount of discussion of Australian paranoia about open spaces, Woomera and *Wake in Fright* could convince them otherwise. Was this evidence of an interesting cultural gap there, or did I just not properly explain what I was on about?

There was also much discussion of rules, particularly the rules governing the magical elements of the story. As Greg Widen reminded me: 'if anything can happen, nothing is interesting.' Geoff Stier put it a different way: 'the reality must be real and the fantasy must have rules, or the audience will become impatient'. My long-winded and confused explanations of the reasons behind the bizarre events in the story did not convince these hard men of Hollywood, and they urged me to get this stuff straight in my head before continuing.

Pretty much everyone advised me to move away from metaphor and towards reality in the script. Another excellent suggestion was to keep the plot and the theme entirely separate, and consider the plot almost as an adaptation of the theme (plot and emotional journeys also work in tandem). Everyone wanted me to lose the 'window dressing' and get the core stuff right; work out exactly who the central character is at the outset, what he wants, what's stopping him, all the while keeping the symbolism strong and consistent. I also had to ensure that the side plots were anchored firmly to the main spine and not floating around like disembodied limbs.

There was much discussion of other films (books/people/places), as references and inspirations, and no pretence that creative works exist in a vacuum. Advisors reminded me that expectations must be paid off, or the audience will be disappointed. Information must not be held back from the audience past the point of frustration. The central character must be strong enough to pull an audience through all that happens. Don't turn a grand mystical vision into a smaller story, or the audience will feel ripped off. Make sure each character earns his/her keep. Don't steal the magic from the fear. Ensure there is a real antagonist. Allow the humour implicit in situations to stand by itself, without labouring it. Keep it urgent. Make the characters work for their knowledge, don't hand it to them on a plate. Don't slacken the pace with humour or sex. Keep the ethical and spiritual rules consistent. Always remember the central character's quest.

As well as the main advisors, each project had a short session with John Collee, the novelist and much-lauded screenwriter known for his work with Peter Weir and other luminaries. I wasn't sure how to prepare for this (there was no time apart from anything else) but John turned out to be a thoroughly charming and engaging guy who just wanted to walk while we told him our screen stories. It's always easier to pitch something to someone who's really interested, and John made the right encouraging noises as we wandered through the grounds and down the road into a winery with me explaining my convoluted film to him all the while. It was obvious to both of us which bits were redundant or confusing, particularly after we turned around and John started telling the story back to me as he'd heard it, together with some suggestions as to changes to make it stronger. Apparently this is how John works all the time. It sounds simple, but it's surprisingly powerful. I only wish we'd had longer together.

That evening, John must have been exhausted after doing this for hours, but gave an excellent talk about working with Peter Weir (who has an entirely different working method) on *Master and Commander*. (There were similarly illuminating stories on other nights from Greg Widen about working with Christopher Walken on *The Prophecy* and Geoff Stier re *Sense and Sensibility* and Emma Thompson, amongst other things.)

The other bonus guest at Spark 2004 was David Freeman, the latest script guru to emerge from the USA. David urged us to think of our characters in terms of diamonds, complete with masks and FLBW's (FLBW stands for fear, limitation, block or wound). Other new jargon included the 'slam' and 'Q&E' (quirks and eccentricities), but I'd better not go into it further here or someone might sue me.

A few negatives from Spark 2004 then:

- a couple of weeks out from the workshop, all the participants were asked to do some preparatory homework including a new synopsis, para breakdowns of the scenes according to dramatic function, narrative questions etc. This could have been better thought out so it was more useful to all concerned (in my own case the homework never came up in discussion with the advisors, although writing it did force me to hone my thinking about the script I suppose).
- for some reason the advisers were never given copies of our own original development notes, submitted with the Spark application. Eventually I distributed these myself, to avoid going over familiar ground and to show that we were well aware of some of the main script issues.
- there were no formal opportunities for networking between the film-makers. One of the wonderful things about Spark was that the participants were not competing with one another as is the normal case in a film festival or school situation. This led to some great discussions over meals and in the swimming pool about shared experiences and interests, but perhaps this could have been more formalised and less accidental. The informal screenings of each others' work were a wonderful thing, and could perhaps have been taken further.

In spite of these minor criticisms, Spark was a tremendous experience for me, both personally and professionally. It was what film school could be, but often isn't: a screenwriting hothouse with a foundation of mutual respect, far from distractions and with an aura of genuine creative excitement. I was afraid that the addition of producers and directors in the final days would damage the sense of community that developed between us all earlier, but the effect was quite the opposite, and it was a great thrill to get a strong sense that we were moving in the same direction.

I cannot close without mentioning the extraordinary contribution of Helen Carmichael to the Spark event. Helen's *Play of Life* sessions took the experience to a whole other level. I met her once alone and once with my producer Miriam. Having known Helen in her previous incarnation as a scriptwriting lecturer at AFTRS, it was a delight to see for myself what she's doing these days. Helen uses small puppets and props as psychodrama tools to help people address their dilemmas, creative or otherwise. If you have a chance to work with her, take it – you'll need some tissues!

Thanks to the AFC for inviting me to Spark 2004, particularly Carole Sklan, and thanks to Mariel Beros, Jackie McKimmie and Sally Lynch for organising this extraordinary event with such panache. Thanks also to John Lonie for urging me to apply after some years away from the world of scriptwriting, wandering the wilderness of history and interactive work. I left Spark with 12,000 words of scribbled notes and a head buzzing with ideas. Now you will all have to wait and see if I can write a follow-up draft or two to justify the tax-payers' expenditure.

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