

World Conference of Screenwriters
6 & 7 November 2009, Athens, Greece

The Conference's welcome speech given by Christina Kallas, the President of the FSE, printed below in its entirety:

“Some 200 people from 30 writers’ organisations with more than 20,000 writers as members are assembled in this room. Now this is what I call a Writers Room!

Milan Kundera once wrote: 'Insofar as it is possible to divide people into categories, the surest criterion is the deep-seated desires that orient them to one or another lifelong activity.' He is talking about actors but I'm sure he wouldn't mind me rewriting it a bit. 'Every Frenchman is different,' he says... But writers are similar, wherever they happen to live and work—in Paris, Berlin, New York, or the back of beyond. A writer is someone who, in early childhood, decides to exhibit his or her soul and thoughts for the rest of his or her life to an anonymous public. Without being ready to do that, no one can become a writer. That basic drive (and not talent or skill) enables all of us to constantly challenge our insecurities while facing the empty screen during the first years of our working lives and persevere for the requisite number of years.

All over the world, screenwriters are similar—so it is not surprising that the problems that we face are also similar.

At the last FSE conference, the ECS, we started off by asking, ‘Do we have something in common? Do we have a common identity?’ and the answer was: 'Yes, we do'. We are not getting paid according to the amount and the value of our work. We are, in fact, supporting the film industry and the production companies by writing for very little money—and, ironically, in Europe, most state funds are used to also support those same production companies, but not the writers. We sign away our rights for all uses in so-called buyout contracts because it helps distribution, so we also support the broadcasters and the distributors. We pretty much never get a share of the producer's net profits and those of us who do not direct our own screenplays, often end up having to share our screenplay credit with the directors even when they just drop a few ideas into the mix. In that way we also support the directors.

So. We support the producers, the distributors, the directors... It's good to have so much love to give.

What was that line again: 'Love is not a feeling, it's an ability?'

Or, I have another one: 'When you love someone, it will all come back to you?'

Or how about this: 'I gave him my heart and he gave me a pen?'

All of them film lines, some of them written by people in this room.

So, back in 2006 we, European screenwriters, found out we had a lot in common—and now, looking at this room, full of writers from all over the world... I will drop the word European and just say, we, the screenwriters of the world, we have a lot in common. What about: we are kept away from production and post production, even to the obvious

detriment of the films. Our creativity gets crunched in the mill of development. We cannot guard our rights—and, irrespectively of whether we have the copyright system or the *droit d'auteur* system or the work for hire system, whether we are in Europe or America or Australia, whether we are allowed to waive our moral rights or they are—at least in theory—inseparable from us as creators, the bottom line is the same: In practice, screenwriters have no moral rights. Most of them do not even know what moral rights are. Which makes us different from all other writers.

Three years ago we asked ourselves, how long can we continue this way? We all love what we are doing, that's why we are here, that's why we continue to work as screenwriters. But we also need to make a living. And to protect our works and our right to create.

So we set out to do something about it. We've been trying to save the levies; help the collecting societies and funds remain in existence; persuade the governments to set aside more funds for development and to rethink their policy in terms of who they give the money to; help them to understand that they must trust the talent; raise the consciousness of our profession through the academies, the festivals, where everybody is focused on the directors and forgets who wrote the damn thing; the film schools, where some of us teach, provide the next generation with a different attitude towards screenwriting; persuade publishers to publish actual screenplays, instead of transcriptions of finished films so that people can understand what a screenplay really is and which part of the film has been conceived by the writer... We've been making progress—too slowly, but at least progress. And we've been watching the progress made by our colleagues around the world with admiration and some envy—especially the writers' strike in America, so ably led by Michael (Winship) and his colleagues. In the meantime our world is changing. We are all definitely at a crossroads. Digitisation is ripping apart and rebuilding every aspect of our industry.

We must adjust to this new world that's approaching. We must, for instance, make sure that the deals we make with domestic production companies recognise their potential to go global. This new world presents exciting new opportunities for writers, and we're going to talk about them during our conference, as well as the challenges. Faced with all this furious change, this is the time to take a look at what it means for writers. And we should take heart from the fact that while some other film professions, distributors, cinema owners, and who knows who else, are an endangered species, stories, and therefore writers, are now needed more than ever. Content is needed. That is the power we have.

So. Can this most powerful Writers Room ever assembled write that script?

My friends, meine Freunde, mes amis, φίλοι μου – it's time for the love to come back!"