

SPARK ARTICLE: March AFC News

"The idea of making a movie is to pack a lifetime of ideas and emotions into a two-hour form."

John Cassavetes

SPARK, now in its second year, is the national script program developed by the Australian Film Commission in conjunction with the Australian Film Television and Radio School. Created in response to a perceived under-resourcing for feature script development in the industry, SPARK provides writers, directors and producers with a unique opportunity to work intensively with selected advisors in a collaborative kick-start process.

The idea behind SPARK is to pack into one week several lifetimes of experience, intuition and intelligence from industry professionals with differing backgrounds and perspectives for participants with promising feature film scripts.

In February of this year one of the residential week-long workshops, part of the overall four-stage SPARK program, was held in Milawa, Victoria for twenty participants, seven advisors and three presenters with seven feature projects.

The impressive line-up of advisors and presenters included John Collee, whose screen writing credits include *Master and Commander: The Far Side Of The World*, award winning feature and TV writer Michael Brindley, writer/director Ken Cameron, producers Amanda Higgs and Lynda House, renowned script consultant Joan Sauer, Los Angeles-based practitioners independent producer Geoff Stier, screen-writers Gregory Widen and David Freeman and Sydney-based Creativity Coach, Helen Carmichael.

The equally impressive list of participants included writers Wain Fimeri and John Brumpton, directors John Ruane and Daniel Nettheim, writer/directors Tony Ayres, Matthew Saville, Sandra Lepore, David Lowe, Anh and Khoa Do, as well as producers Megan McMurchy, Trevor Blainey, who had two projects on the go at SPARK, Michael McMahon and Liz Watts, and first-time feature producers Anita Sheehan, Miriam Stein and Carolyn Johnson.

Malcolm Long, Director of the Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS) notes: "It is pleasing to see that projects chosen for SPARK feature our graduates Miriam Stein, Daniel Nettheim and Tony Ayres in key creative roles, while graduates Michael Brindley and Amanda Higgs are lending expertise as advisors."

Each writer had one-on-one sessions with advisors dealing with such issues as character development, structure, plot and creative work strategies. In the second half of the week, writers were joined by their accompanying teams of directors and producers.

Jackie McKimmie, Artistic Director of SPARK, says of her role "It's a bit like directing a film [or] being the conductor of an orchestra - with a good score and good musicians, it can be a great experience. [SPARK] is a hot-house environment where everything is focussed on getting to the heart of what the script is about and how to best make that work."

For Jackie, the greatest challenge for the role of Artistic Director is maintaining an atmosphere where everyone feels safe to take risks - both filmmakers and advisors. "Every morning I spent two hours with the advisors going over their sessions with the filmmakers the day before and how they planned to proceed that day. It's really rewarding, not just because you are talking about scripts with such talented people, but also because of the degree of generosity and collaboration that characterises those sessions. It is also extremely rewarding to talk to the filmmakers each

day about their work and how they feel it is all going, and to see their courage in being prepared to take on board feedback which is at times challenging and confronting.”

It is in service of this aim of creating a ‘safe-zone’ for writers that the SPARK program has evolved from ‘throwing a whole lot of ideas into the ring’ which can result in ‘brain-overload’ for advisors and participants alike to a more targeted approach. Four advisors were assigned to each project as opposed to all seven, as in the previous workshop, and a mentor system was instigated for the first time this year. For half an hour each day, participants could re-evaluate the feedback they were getting from other advisors, informally discuss their experience or just blow-off steam. For Jackie, the innovation of the mentor arrangement enabled her to identify issues before they became problems and allowed filmmakers to express themselves unreservedly.

One of the innovations of the SPARK program is the inclusion of sessions with Creativity Coach Helen Carmichael. Helen became involved in SPARK through Carole Sklan, Director of Film Development, and credits Program Director, Mariel Beros, for her new career. “I once trained as a therapist, thinking that might be a future profession. I researched the disciplines then available in Australia, and chose one called psychodrama, a method developed by Moreno, a contemporary of Freud and Jung. [Mariel] asked me had I ever thought of using one of my techniques - the Play of Life - on scripts.

“[Play of Life] was developed by my trainer, Dr Carlos Raimundo, a doctor, psychiatrist and psychodramatist who studied with Moreno and the Argentine school. It involves using little stages, dolls and props and in this way acts as a three dimensional problem solving tool that gives deep insights not only into the past, present and ideal future, but also the first step one needs to take in order to get there.”

If it is any indication how effective Helen’s technique is, one need only hear other SPARK advisors comments. Producer Lynda House credits Helen’s ‘Your Creative Best’ sessions as a “vital part” of developing “honest and stimulating relationships” at SPARK.

“I know from my work as a producer that dealing with fear and trust are important challenges. Having input from advisors who have no agenda except to make your screenplay better, having a variety of points of view from both Australian and non- Australian advisors and knowing that there are 6 days to work it all through with plenty of thinking time is a special treat. It allowed me to think clearly and openly without the weight that you sometimes carry when you know you have many years ahead.”

Tony Ayres, whose feature script *The Home Song Stories* was one of the selected projects for SPARK, reflects a similar sentiment but from the point of view of a participant. “The most valuable aspect of SPARK was the intense and highly intelligent spotlight which the workshop placed on my script, forcing me to test it from a range of different angles.”

Both Anh and Khoa Do concur but singled out their session ‘Perfecting The Plot’ with John Collee as “unforgettable”. “Our project is sooo much stronger than it was before. We can now say that it is a script we are confident to show around.”

From the position of being both writer and director, Tony Ayres did, however, feel that the focus was necessarily on the craft of the writer and not so much a benefit for him as director.

Though ‘writer-centric’, Megan McMurchy felt that being involved in SPARK as producer of Anh and Khoa Do’s project, *Footy Legends*, was very valuable. “We were able as a group to focus in a coherent and constructive way on the weaknesses in the script and challenge some of the narrative and character elements that we’d previously assumed were working well enough. A lot

of new ideas were thrown up for consideration, and some of them have really stuck. The new draft that will emerge post-SPARK [will] certainly have a richer, more complex narrative, and reach more deeply into our characters."

Amanda Higgs sees the involvement of producers as very important to the SPARK program: "Producers are story tellers too - it should be as much their creative vision, shared with other creative partners. There has been a tendency of late to rely on script editors, but editors don't have the same responsibility to the project. The creative drive and responsibility should rest with the producer, the writer and director. I think the decisions and instinct a producer has about the script will form the basis for all the decisions they make along the line, both creative and in the business of getting the film financed."

Matthew Saville, a recent recipient of two IF Awards and writer/director of the AFC funded short feature *Roy Höllsdotter Live*, credits SPARK with profoundly changing his own writing practice: "I will long remember [SPARK] as a watershed period in my life and career, and already sense a shift in my approach to screenwriting. I learned so much, all of which I can easily apply not only to the script we discussed during the week, but several that I have in various stages of development. Writing can sometimes be a lonely endeavour, and while solitude can be a necessity for a writer to maintain focus, the danger is the work suffers from this isolation. Without an audience, writing is meaningless, so it an important, but sometimes difficult part of the process for a writer to maintain a relationship between his or her work and its intended audience."

The next call for applications for SPARK 2005 will be announced in July of this year.

"And the hope is that...celluloid will change lives."

John Cassavetes