



## Quentin Tarantino

claims he builds his screen stories by drawing private ideograms into cheap notebooks, perhaps taking a cue from the late Waldo Salt, who thought out films like *Midnight Cowboy* by water colouring characters and scene ideas. Not a water colours kind of guy, Joe Eszterhas pounds out screenplays on his lifetime supply of Underwood typewriters while Anna Hamilton Phelan is supposed to have written *Gorillas in the Mist* on butcher paper.

Then there's everybody else, the computer-using droids who are relying more and more on the screenwriting programs that have proliferated since their first appearance in the 1980s. Writers are drawn to the software for many reasons, the simplest being that they get fed up massaging screenplays back into format after every revision, or enduring three a.m. confrontations with a final page that contains one line, "The End." In the case of production companies, the full-blown packages do so much beyond formatting, that to ignore them would be like snubbing digital editing software.

I was intrigued by ScriptThing, a program as full-blown as they get, after I read favourable comments about it in a trade paper, and then saw a demo of its capabilities. ScriptThing's fans range from Ron Nyswaner (*Philadelphia*) to the producers of *Suddenly Susan* and *Seinfeld* (along with movie format, the package includes sit-com, as well as stage play and multi-media for designing games

and CD-ROMS). In Canada, Atlantis, Alliance and Nelvana use ScriptThing, the latter company taking advantage of features built in for animation scripts.

The program's designer is himself a writer, not a techie with zero experience of screenwriting's creative and technical demands. Ken Schafer released his first version of the software, an add-on to WordPerfect, in 1991. Since then it has evolved into a standalone program, handling all word processing tasks, in addition to its many scripting functions.

Schafer says he designed ScriptThing for writers who hate learning new programs, and certainly even a technophobe can be up and running instantaneously, given the software's logically organized environment, only three "mandatory keys," and almost no typing to input repetitive text like scene headings and character names. On the other hand, learning refinements like the many ways ScriptThing can be customized to one's own tastes demands some effort.

ScriptThing is available for DOS, and a Mac version is about to appear. The windows version (which I've been using) offers more than the one for DOS, including WYSIWYG display and production features like the automatic generation of A and B pages. An even newer edition generates scene breakdown sheets by tagging production elements like props within the script, and allows for direct exporting of files to the widely used program, MovieMagic Scheduling. Naturally, ScriptThing for Windows also demands a faster processor and more RAM.

The first thing that struck me about the program was how quickly it yanked in scripts written in WordPerfect, holding format with almost 100 per cent accuracy. In fact, ScriptThing's ability to import and export screenplays from and to many other programs is one of its main attractions for writers, producers and script editors. As for the real-time formatting and pagination, this is the feature guaranteed to make any writer accustomed to word processor routines drool with excitement. Each page snaps instantly into shape as you edit, while sluglines,

action and dialogue that should be on the next page obediently zip down to it without any reforming procedures. While the erratic formatting of an improvised routine tends to slow down creative flow, this essential function speeds it up.

Other hot features are the program's "index card" display, which allows the writer to generate and edit outlines, as well as transfer the inputted text to the actual script; ScriptThing's ability to "cheat" the length of individual pages, or the entire draft, reducing it from say 120 pages to a better-playing 108; and print-out choices that yield lists of characters and locations, individual character's dialogue, specific scenes, and so on.

When it comes to the differences between ScriptThing and competing programs like Scriptware or Final Draft, it's virtually impossible to keep track of what each package is up to in its latest incarnation. Schafer himself says, "I think we do a lot of things better in subtly different ways. Because I am a writer myself, the design is more intuitive. It flows better when you're writing."

Compulsively thorough, ScriptThing also differentiates itself from other script software with its playful environment. The program's icon is a demon with a monitor for a head; there are many wise-cracking screen prompts; one menu choice gives you a chance to "cheat the government." Writers are reminded that if they aren't having fun, how will the audience? According to Schafer, a writing couple told him that one of the program's tongue-in-cheek features saved their marriage when it defused a vicious argument about a scene.

Eventually, ScriptThing users will want to make adjustments that maximize their comfort zone. You can sometimes feel the program is hyperactive, throwing out too many messages and popping up excessive menus that encourage you to avoid typing. But you can modify or disable almost anything you don't like, including the software's teasing jokes. The bottom-line is that ScriptThing has a natural feel to it, can be configured in endless ways, and will appeal even to those who like sketching preliminary outlines in hieroglyphics while sipping Gator-Ade by the side of a lonesome highway. ■