

FROM THE CENTRE

Karen Walton had had her fill of weekend workshop solutions to her professional writing problems. A radio-drama writer for years, the Alberta native was ready to enhance her skills as a screenwriter in order to find full-time work in the film and television industry. Her only hope seemed to be that of getting into the Canadian Film Centre's Resident Program. "I knew it would be perfect for me because the Centre is a full-time commitment," says Walton. "You commit to the residency, to your professional development. It's not like going to a festival and listening to someone speak for two hours and hoping you can take that information home and apply it to your work. The Centre is full-time hands-on practical and you're working, most importantly, with your own material. They're focusing all of their instruction and guidance and development through your own work so it's not a hypothetical conversation. It's a literal, practical conversation."

Indeed. Divided into the Writers' Lab, which is part of the core Residents Program, and the Professional Screenwriting Program, an intense three month program (from January to March each year) open to professional screenwriters who wish to hone their skills in writing as well as business and career management — affectionately referred to as 'boot camp' by the residents — the courses were developed by the Centre to help screenwriters enhance their skills and to then prepare them to work in the professional writing world. They were also created to steer away from criticism that the Centre was about developing filmmakers alone. "In the early days writers, directors and producers, regardless of their discipline, were thrown into a myriad of exercises in which they got to write, direct and produce things themselves," explains programs manager Kathryn Emslie. "I think that anybody

The Writing Programs at the Canadian Film Centre

Film Centre graduate John Greyson directing *Zero Patience*.

could learn from that, but what happened was that it made everybody feel that directing was the only avenue in which you could actually get your stories on screen. For instance, a Paul Quarrington [a past resident] would be inclined to direct his own material, or begin to develop his directorial voice, as opposed to working on his screenwriting voice. Five years ago we started to define which were the five disciplines and what the focus was going to be. We gradually pulled away from the idea that everybody had to do a directing exercise. Now the only people who are directing here are the directors who come through the door. Writers are the only ones who are writing and producers are producing."

Considered the backbone of the Centre's mandate of training filmmakers in

feature-film project development, story ideas, creative collaboration and production, the Residents Program has gone through numerous changes since the Centre opened in 1988. In 1996, The Feature Screenplay Development Program was divided into the Writers' Lab and the Professional Screenwriting Program. "In the earlier days residents were given a nice lump sum of development money to go away for a year and develop a script," explains Emslie. "We've had some great successes. *Camilla* being one, *I Love a Man in Uniform* being another, *Zero Patience* being the third."

For Toronto-based Semi Chellas, there's little question that the programs helped her develop her industry skills tenfold. Having just finished writing a movie for director Bruce McDonald, a dramatic feature for the



Interview: Pen Densham

CBC-TV, and currently working on another feature for Norstar Entertainment, Chellas may be one of the program's most successful alumni. "I wasn't even into film at all when I applied at the Centre," says Chellas. "In fact I was a fiction writer but I had written a short film, *Half Nelson*, which a director resident, John Fawcett, made a couple of years before. When I saw the film, I was excited to see my writing become part of a collaborative thing. So I became interested in it and the Film Centre encouraged me to join. I finished two-and-a-half years ago and that's how I make my living. I love it. It changed my life."

But Chellas is the first to admit that studying at the Centre isn't all a bed of roses. "Some writers have trouble with group situations and workshop situations and you have to have pretty thick skin to be there," says Chellas. "You're constantly writing things under amazing pressure, and then you get critiqued right away. It's a mirage of workshops and criticism and you're also working on a feature-length project. It's a hard go, but absolutely the Centre is a great resource of experienced people from different backgrounds and different agendas, so you get to participate in all that."

Which brings us to the selection process. Out of nearly 200 applications a year, the Centre's selection committee embarks on a gruelling elimination procedure in choosing the 25 to 26 residents. However the last two years has seen an increase in writers. "More and more we're seeing greater screenwriting talent coming through our doors," agrees Emslie. "The message is getting out that we're not just developing filmmakers. Writing as a craft onto itself is recognized and respected here and consequently we're seeing an increase in applications. I think also, as time goes by, more and more writers have been brought up with films and television. It's another form of language of expression that almost by osmosis makes them screenwriters almost by birth. They come to it naturally."

As for Chellas, her sojourn at the Centre proved invaluable. "I was completely blank about the language of film and I learned a lot," she says. "Unlike any other kind of writing, even writing for the stage, through working at the Film Centre and workshops we explored every aspect of that world of visual drama. I learned how films work and what you can do that you can't really do in any other medium. It was an amazing experience."

British-born, Toronto-raised Pen Densham made his dramatic writing and directing debut on the highly acclaimed CBC-TV project *If Wishes Were Horses*, which went on to win numerous awards. This led him to Hollywood at the behest of Norman Jewison where he was soon joined by his Toronto partner, John Watson. The two teamed as creative consultants on *Rocky II*, *The Coal Miner's Daughter* and many other films. They then formed Trilogy Entertainment Group and co-wrote the Kevin Costner hit, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*. Recently Densham wrote and directed *Moll Flanders* starring Robin Wright and Morgan Freeman. Pen Densham spoke to the writing residents at the Canadian Film Centre in May about the pitfalls of the Hollywood system of writing a screenplay by committee.

"In the Hollywood system, they regard writers almost like disposable credit units. They'll have someone who'll write the basic structure. Then they'll throw him off and bring in someone else who is funny, because the script isn't funny enough. They treat the story as if it was some piece of metal that can be twisted into shape by adding on other bits. There is never any sense of going back to the seed of a person's soul and telling a story from one person's vision. That seldom happens in the system. The Writers Guild of America has a mechanism or method of adjudicating script authorship. It takes all the drafts of the script by all the different writers and it then adjudicates who should get final credit. What it leads to is this: when you create a deal as a writer in Hollywood you are given a sum of money as a down payment and then you're given another sum of money if and when the script gets made and you are adjudicated as a credited author of that script. There are also rules in the Guild about the number of people that can be adjudicated. In one case, on *The Flintstones*, they used more than 20 writers. What the Guild has done is to create a horrific thing, an adversarial system between writers. As a writer, to get a larger sum of money, I actually have to try and push another writer's work off the page. So instead of collaborating and trying to take what another had done, to really hone and polish it, it's not in my interest to do that if I'm a selfish writer, because I won't get the credit and I won't get the big bonus at the end of the process. But the most valid thing (which doesn't happen often) is that the greatest scripts are not created by committee. They are created by one person's vision, one psychological synthesis of humanity through the telling of a story of a set of characters, so that you, as a writer, can make a statement about life, and that isn't what the system is designed to do.

"There is no respect given to writers in Hollywood. Writers, they are like Kleenex. You snap your fingers. You want one? Quick, give me one. Then you sneeze, throw it away, and get another one. They are the least celebrated, the least valued part of the process. No one goes out and cheers the writer. They always cheer the director, cheer the actor, but not the writer. Frequently they are not even allowed on the set, or not wanted on the set in case they disturb the director's dramatic vision. We [at Trilogy Entertainment] try to work with writers. We understand what it feels like to be somebody who gives birth to an idea and wants to raise it from the little child to the adult, that being the movie. We try and work with people who have a voice, who have a creative vision, so that when you give that script to an actor or a director, they see something special.

"The only thing you can do is write scripts that you absolutely care about. We would all love to create a box-office blockbuster, but if you knew what that was, then all those people writing scripts would only write successes. If you look at the movies that are most memorable, they're not a copy of anything. If you see the *Killing Fields*, there wasn't a movie like that the year before. The year *Star Wars* came out the studio was so insecure [about the film's success] it was trying to sell it as a tax loss to anyone who needed one. Columbia refused to make *E.T.*, the highest grossing movie of all time, because it thought the script was stupid. So Spielberg took it to Universal and made it there. Columbia made more profit from the tiny percentage it had in *E.T.* then it did from all its other movies that year. So nobody knows what will succeed. All I know is that if you make replicas, they're never going to be great movies. Great films come from one place, which is one person having a gestaltic, exciting, passionate moment of seeing something that he or she can create, within the screenwriting format, that's new for the majority of the audience."