

Spark Information Session Transcript

Wednesday 24th June 2020

KIRSTY: Thank you everyone for coming along. I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands that we are all meeting on today - many different ones potentially, but in my case the lands of the Kaurna people - as traditional custodians, and to pay respect to their elders past, present and emerging.

It's really great to see so many people interested in this workshop. Hopefully tonight will be a great opportunity for you to ask questions if you have any, or for me to just share a bit more about what the intention was when we designed it and where we are hoping it will lead over the coming weeks. So thank you all for coming along, and feel free to jump in at any time if you have questions, or use the chat box. If anyone wants to follow up with me via email afterwards I am more than happy to answer specific questions as well.

I assume most of you have probably read the information page but to give a general overview: 'Spark' the workshop, came from wanting to give South Australian writers from all different disciplines, whether that's from screen, theatre, novels, journalism, comedy - whatever background you might be, the opportunity to develop concepts for television.

We recognise that there is sometimes a gap in access to marketplace here in South Australia. So, having worked on a couple TV projects over the last couple of years and working with Matchbox, and getting a real sense of what the opportunities for the marketplace are now, I suggested to the SAFC and to Matchbox that it would be a fantastic opportunity to, rather than working one on one with someone on a specific project, open it up so that more writers have access to that marketplace knowledge and get a chance to develop their ideas - and hopefully come up with concepts that they can then take on and pitch and get produced here in South Australia.

I am really passionate about working here in the state and about developing local talent. I also think that we have the crews, and the writers, and the ideas to create really world class work from right here in Adelaide. Sometimes those opportunities haven't made themselves available, so we're trying to fill that gap in the market. So that's where it came from.

Structurally, this is a course that blends together practical writing exercises as well as Q&A sessions with people from all different aspects of the industry, Matchbox staff, market (broadcasters) and also writers who are working professionally as full time, or as close to full time as possible, TV writers. So, giving access to ask different questions on topics from them every week, but it's really about doing.

You know when you read a book and you go "I know that", but it's not actually until you put it into practice that you know how to do that thing or take on that process? That's what this is about. It's about putting you through a fairly intensive process where you do a group task each week, as well as an individual task, and then give each other feedback as well as receiving feedback from me and Matchbox, and then condensing that into a reflection on the work you've just done and using that to move forward into the next week.

It's structured in a way where you'll come out at the end with a concept, or perhaps more than one concept, that really speak to not only your voice and your values and the kind of stories that you want to tell as a writer and are really excited about, but that fit in with the marketplace in Australia and what is a possibility to actually get produced and move onto something that will not just be sitting in the back of your drawer for the next 5 years.

The general structure is that every Thursday night for 6 weeks there will be a 3-hour session live on Zoom, just like we are tonight. The first hour will be with me and industry guests on a different topic each week. So, week 1 is all about voice, and your voice and values and finding a way to distil who you are as a writer and the kinds of stories you want to tell. Then, we will move through the 6-week process until we get to pitching and packaging that concept at the end of week 6.

The second 2 hours will be like my version of The Amazing Race, or a mystery cooking box, or whatever that might happen to be. You will receive a group task to do at the beginning of that second 2 hours, and by the end of the 2 hours you will have worked together to deliver and post that project online to the rest of the groups who are participating. Then, there will be an individual assignment that builds from that group assignment that you then post asynchronously by the deadline, and then give each other feedback on that work. Each process is designed to lead into the next one and hopefully build your concept or idea. It should be a lot of fun. I'm really excited about it and I kind of want to share what all the different tasks are now but that would take the mystery and the excitement out of it, so I'll leave it there for now.

That will all lead to at the end of the workshop, if Covid restrictions allow, an in-person pitch day where Debbie Lee, who is the Head of Development Matchbox Pictures, will come down to Adelaide potentially with some other members of the development team, and you will have the opportunity to pitch your concepts to them. There will also be opportunities throughout the session to have one on one meetings with me to refine those ideas even further and make sure they're in a place that feels ready to pitch as well, or to get feedback on specific aspects of the work throughout the sessions that you might be struggling with or you might want to go deeper on, or whatever the case may be.

I'm hoping that the process is not just about specific writing skills. I'm not a writer myself and probably not someone who is going to be teaching you how to structure a television show page by page across the series. The idea is that my background in developing work as a producer, and from a producer perspective, and then going and pitching to market, will give you tools and frameworks that you can then use in future projects and to develop future concepts. So, you will come out of it with a whole toolkit of processes and frameworks that you can use in conjunction with your writing skills. The people that you work with within the course will be writers, and there will be writers coming in, so there will be opportunity to build your actual writing skills and portfolio through them, not just through feedback from me.

As I said, I think what I'm really excited about is seeing what stories are out there. There are so many amazing people on this call already, I'm just looking at your faces and I think a lot of voices haven't had the opportunity to develop, or create concepts that tell stories that they're really passionate about. I've seen a lot of pitches come through from people in the past 2 years, and I think what can be really sad sometimes is that we have this sense of what Australian television is, and we look at that, and a lot of ideas are really shaped to a limited view of what we think will work

for the marketplace rather than really speaking to people's individual voices as writers. So, that's what I'm really trying to bring out. I would rather have everyone come in with something that they're really passionate about and try and shape that into something that gets made, rather than coming in with a bland reconstructed idea that *feels* like something that will get made. Those are the ones that end up being overlooked anyway, because they're the same as the last thing that got written, and the one the year before that.

So, what we're looking for in terms of applicants: writers of any background who have an interest in creating fictional concepts for television. You do need to be based in South Australia. This is for South Australian writers because I am really passionate about building the talent and IP we have within this state.

Because it is intensive and because it is a challenge, I'm really looking for people who are going to commit to the process and throw themselves into it, and take it as an opportunity to build their concepts and build their careers and be really proactive about being a part of it. The application form is quite simple, but it's an opportunity for you to show who you are and what matters to you. You might not be 100% clear on that yet, but it's a chance to speak to your voice as a writer, yourself as a person, where you'd like to go in your career, the kinds of stories you want to tell, and build a picture of who you are and what you might be: so that we can create a workshop of really varied voices and perspectives that hopefully build each other's ideas and help each other's concepts to grow.

The only final thing that I would say is: the most transformative experiences come when you're willing to put yourself out of your comfort zone. This will probably be a little bit unusual and a little bit challenging compared to a standard writer's workshop, but I have designed it that way on purpose, and I'm hoping it's going to be a lot of fun.

Does anyone have any questions at this point?

How many people are you looking to take on for this course?

It's about finding the right balance of applicants in conjunction with the capacity of what we can physically handle in terms of feedback. I think it will probably be in the range of 8 to 10, but we're not going to make a final decision until we get the applications and can access them all against each other and make sure everyone's at the right fit and the right level.

Is this something that you might consider running in the future or is it a one off?

This particular version is a one off as part of the Matchbox SA TV initiative, so it's being funded by Matchbox and the South Australian Film Corporation. But it is something that brings together all of the things that I am particularly really passionate about, so there is a possibility down the track that I would run different iterations of either this or similar workshops.

I was reading through the guidelines and reading through the application, and it's talking about having a published body of work. How important is that?

I think it comes down to... that we want there to be a market outcome for these projects. If you are someone that maybe has been dabbling by yourself in your bedroom and has never had even a short film produced from your work, it might not be the right fit as it would be hard to sell you as a writer in the marketplace. So, we're looking for people who come from a background where they have had some kind of professional endorsement of their writing, whether that's an MRC-funded script or whatever that might be. That being said, there is a section to submit a writing sample so I'm willing to look outside of that box. If you submit an amazing writing sample and I'm like "this person can write, I like their ideas, I think there is opportunity here for them" then I am willing to consider that as well.

You sound like you're expecting people to come in with a concept already. Is that true?

No, not true at all. Part of the process is going to be figuring out that concept. What I do want to see in the application ideally is a sense of what's important to you, what your values are, the kinds of stories you like to watch, potentially, or just the sense of the pathway you're on as a writer. Not a specific concept.

Is there a page limit on the writing sample?

There's a 20-page guide at the moment. I don't want full feature scripts or TV episodes. But if you do have a script that might be slightly longer than that, feel free to submit it if it's a 25- or 24-pager, if you want to round out your story or something like that.

I have some things that are ready to go but are not yet up and running, but also, they're not necessarily film scripts. Does that matter?

No. It doesn't matter. I am open to whole ranges of writing samples, whatever that might be. What I'm looking for, or what the guideline was around professionally published work, is just a sense that this is a career trajectory for you and you're taking it seriously, and it's something that you really want to pursue. You might be at a point where you're emerging and you're not necessarily at that stage yet, but you're almost there and you're on the brink of that.

You might be coming in from a completely different background in the creative arts, where you might have written for theatre, or you might have written a novel, and you're looking to go into the TV space. So it's more the sense of "this is something I'm really serious about and passionate about" because I want this to be a program that builds careers not just individual concepts, and helps to bridge that gap in South Australia of practitioners.

For the writing sample, would it be alright to do a few pages of different sorts? Like a few pages of theatre and a few pages of TV, to show variety?

Yeah. The application is an opportunity for you to present yourself in a way that you most want to and give me a sense of who you are. So, if you're really into romantic comedy and also horror and want to submit 2 completely different styles, or if you're into podcasting and experimental theatre and want to show me that range of who you are, then feel free to do that as well.

The application is an opportunity to be a little creative and out of the box as well. There's a lot of people in this room and unfortunately I do not have the capacity to bring every single one of you into the workshop, so it's about really showing who you are, what this will do for you, why it's important and getting that across.

Looking at the application, down the bottom there is a section for 'anything else'. Are you looking for a personal statement, not like a cover letter, but a statement of how you're wanting to approach things?

I'm going to decline answering that and say it's up to you, the individual, and what they feel belongs in that space. If you feel like a cover letter or personal statement is the best way to express what you want to say, then great. If it's something else, then feel free to do something else.

I'm travelling at the moment but can be SA-based for the pitch segment. Is it still okay for me to apply?

If you're travelling short term... everything is run online, so you can be anywhere you want basically, as long as the in-person component, you're here in South Australia. The main criteria is that on an on-going basis you're hoping to build your career in South Australia and are based here. So, if you happen to be travelling around the world as an Irish backpacker and are hoping to be here for the pitch session, then no, unfortunately not. But if you're travelling out of the state but are based here on a regular basis and this is where you would like to work in the future then yes, please apply.

Is there a preference towards the content that participants will produce, e.g. – narrative, fiction or docos? What market would they be targeting, e.g. – traditional, broadcast or online shorts?

I would suggest having a look at the Matchbox Pictures website. Ideally, what they produce is television drama. So, fictional content. We don't necessarily have the capacity to teach documentary making well in this particular workshop. I will say though, that part of this for me is about career building, as I mentioned. If you're at a point where you might not be able to carry a full television series at this point in your career, but I still feel from your application that you have real potential or whatever that might be, and you have a really interesting and unique voice, there may be some spaces available for people to work in shorter form serial space.

So, to create content for a web series rather than a full TV series, or to team up with more experienced writers to develop a television series work or whatever that might be. Don't feel discouraged from applying if you don't think you are an international showrunner just yet. We will look at ways to bridge those gaps and get the project across the line.