

Creativity as a craft

THE “WRITERS’ ROOM” AS THE KEY TO SUCCESS?

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In this article the authors describe the processes and structures in a “writers’ room”, the US-American work concept with which most of the highly praised and successful US TV series are developed – a concept that puts emphasis on efficiency as well as playful creativity.

Television has never been talked about or written about as much as it is today. Arts and culture sections in newspapers, viewers and program makers are acclaiming, for instance, Vince Gilligan’s *Breaking Bad*, Howard Gordon’s and Alex Gansa’s *Homeland* and Chuck Lorre’s *The Big Bang Theory*. Brilliant television. Everyone agrees on that. And even though, for example, notable series from England, Israel, Denmark, Italy or France are celebrating international successes, it is clear that no country worldwide produces as many high-quality series as the USA. The reasons why there is a steep decline in quality between US-American and most series from many other countries

are often quickly identified: greater financial means, the huge market, better writers and actors. But is that really true? Certainly, series produced in English are fundamentally easier to market than German or French language series. It is also probably unfortunately the case that in most countries it is harder to find the kind of courage, spirit of innovation and the capital with which Netflix with *House of Cards* (III. 1)¹ has shaken up the market.

Yet wouldn’t it actually be possible, for instance, to finance a series such as *The Big Bang Theory*, which engages just a handful of actors and is produced only in the studio, almost anywhere? Especially as the production costs in many places are significantly lower than in the USA. And in most countries there is certainly no lack of highly talented actors and actresses, either. So is it down to the writers? Is there a worldwide lack of creative professionals who would be in a position to write a complex entertainment series on the same level as *Homeland* or *Game of Thrones* (III. 2)²?

Irrespective of how we answer these questions, it is time to ask what all these great US productions have in common – apart from high budgets and stars. How were they developed and produced? And how and what can we learn from this? One of the crucial things almost all the successful US-American – and also many Scandinavian and English – formats have in common is that they were developed in a “writers’ room”. This term has been on everyone’s lips for some time now. However, writers’ room is still frequently connected with the naive idea that it is just a kind of teamwork involving writers sitting together in an office somewhere. The concept of the writers’ room extends far beyond this, though. It requires that all those involved in the development process of a series, from the writer to the producer, from the editor to the directors and actors, have very specific competences.

HOW IS A SERIES DEVELOPED IN THE USA?

Every series that makes it to the screen in the USA generally has a 2-year history behind it, predetermined by the television year that is divided into “Seasons”. If a network, for example, has allocated 3 slots in a broadcasting schedule for new series, on average around 500 projects are launched which are subject to a strictly structured selection process. Of these, around 20 are piloted and put through their paces with scores of tests. Then 3 projects are selected to be taken forward. It takes

also functions here as a kind of training system for future generations of series writers, familiarizing them with the system from scratch.

The story editor

The story editors plot, revise, construct outlines and are normally guaranteed at least 2 episode scripts to write. The story editor is approximately equivalent to the person who is known in many places as the series writer.

just about 14 months to get to this point. Only now is the writers' room set up, which consists of 6 writers on average. 9 months later, a series with 23 episodes has already been filmed, and parts of this have already been broadcast. A breathtaking speed that is barely imaginable in most countries of production – yet this is necessary if those countries do not want to lag behind the zeitgeist of modern television any longer.

In order to achieve this, a tightly organized working environment with clear hierarchies in all departments is needed. In this connection, the writers' room is the vital creative nucleus.

THE WRITERS' ROOM MODEL

The writers' room model³ is a work concept that grew out of the Hollywood studio system and was continuously developed over decades. It is strictly focused on efficiency and commercial success. All the writers always work together in one place and take most of the creative steps

together. On selecting the writers (who are mostly brought into the team by the so-called showrunner, who is almost always the creator of the series, too) it is important to allocate staff to different, clearly defined fields of responsibility and positions which simultaneously also anchor the hierarchy. The 3 most important positions in this context are:

The staff writer (frequently also called baby writer)

This is a position which gives young writers the opportunity to gain experience. The staff writer helps to plot the episodes, revises episodes or dialogues, but is not always given the job of producing his/her own episode script. Promotion to the next level depends on the quality of the work and engagement. If a staff writer produces good work s/he can immediately be promoted to story editor in the next season. Already we see here the first advantage of this system. It makes it possible for the next generation to do a kind of (well!) paid internship that prepares them for later assignments. The writers' room

The person presiding over everything is always: the showrunner

This position is most likely comparable with a writing producer. S/he is fully responsible for the content of the series. The showrunner is the link between all departments and the broadcaster. Nothing leaves the writers' room without his/her agreement. S/he not only influences the tone and style of the series, but also the spirit of cooperation in the writers' room. Many tasks which e.g. in Germany and other countries remain the responsibility of the editorial department or the producers are undertaken by the showrunner. S/he works closely with the producers right from an early stage and has significant influence on the casting. This ensures that the series does not fragment, and that at any one time during the development s/he is pulling the strings. As the majority of decisions around content are down to him/her, many of the long and often exhausting processes between each individual writer, broadcaster and producer are omitted. That gains an enormous amount of time.

THE WORK IN THE ROOM – TOOLS AND STRUCTURE

Let's presume some great material has made it through all the tests, been piloted, "greenlighted", and is now about to be implemented. A team of talented, exciting and technically accomplished writers has been put together by the showrunner and has moved into its offices. The time frame for submissions and broadcast dates has been set in stone, and the communication structures of all decision makers have been clearly established (this is only seemingly a banal subject, but to go into all the relevant implementations would go beyond the scope of this article.) So, what does this concrete, everyday work in the writers' room actually look like?

To achieve good results quickly and effectively in the short time available the writers' room model primarily focuses on craftsmanship with clearly defined rules, concrete requirements and the greatest possible dramaturgical clarity. What appears at first to be a matter of course can fail e.g. in Germany and other countries where the image of the genius writer being kissed by the muse and bestowed with groundbreaking ideas at his/her desk at home or in a coffee shop still prevails. But if we are to keep feeding the hungry market with new series, we cannot wait for the genius to regularly provide us with new, successful formats. To keep the machine running, great ideas are not enough for new series. There are as many ideas as there are grains of sand on the beach. Everywhere. You just have to grab them and have the courage to tackle them, too. Often, though, there is still a lack of the craft which is needed to implement these great, and even the unfortunately often not quite so great, ideas at least quickly, efficiently, with technical clarity and therefore with good prospects of success. For this you need well-trained writers, producers and editors who are

in the position to use the work model for themselves beneficially.

We will now briefly outline the essential steps and tools in connection with the concrete work of the writers' room, using, for the sake of simplicity, the example of a classic vertical crime series. Every writer in the writers' room generally has his/her own office, but for the fundamental production steps all the writers meet with the showrunner in the actual physical writers' room (Ill. 3). That is the creative heartbeat of the series. At first sight, though, it is not much more than a conference room. The walls are covered in whiteboards and, depending on the showrunner's management style, there is a combination of location photos, horizontal schedules, mood boards, casting photos, and anything that might be a source of inspiration. At the beginning of the work the showrunner makes sure all the writers are up to date to the same level – e.g. with the aid of a series bible or in team conversations. All the writers know all the parameters, know everything necessary about the characters and what genre and tonality they are working in. As we will see, the work model ensures they remain up to date to the same level during the whole period of develop-

ment. At the beginning of each episode there are rough ideas, arenas, milieus or a kind of log line, but there is as yet no real story – perhaps something like "Milieu: taxi driver / Crime: serial killer kills taxi driver" or "Milieu: university / Crime: drug dealing". A group brainstorming session can cover countless whiteboards with these extremely rough fields of material in the shortest possible time. The most exciting and appealing can be quickly selected from these and, if necessary, recombined: "Milieu: taxi driver / Crime: drug dealing". Which ideas are best suited to the format, which are worse, which hold more interest, which are more original? The possibilities of the format are already being explored here within a playful process. Ideas arise as quickly as they are rejected. It does not take too long, it does not take much blood and sweat, but it does get good results. The showrunner then arranges for the most convincing ideas to be plotted in a large group or in smaller teams. Yet even here it is not about laboriously inventing stories, as we are all still, to a large extent, used to.

The plotting follows a clearly prescribed scheme. For decades the "classic 4-act episode" was the dramaturgical heart of many US-American series, which have,



Ill. 3: The authors present a model of a writers' room at the IZI conference: notecards on whiteboards help to outline the scheme of an episode. Every notecard describes one story beat of the episode

however, in the meantime extended the model to 5- or even 6-act episodes. This was not done out of dramaturgical necessity, but simply because of the higher number of commercial breaks. Whether 4, 5 or 7 acts – the narrative principle of the series always remains the same. We all love these series because they narrate in such an enormous amount of detail and with such differentiation and depth. That is not only down to the enormous talent of US writers (which they undoubtedly have). It is also down to the dramaturgical scheme that prevails there, leaving the writers with no option but to simply narrate in detail and in-depth. In order to understand how important this scheme is for the work of the team we must briefly explain it – using the example of the classic 4-act episode for the sake of simplicity:

Each episode is typically divided up by 3 commercial breaks, which automatically leads to the 4 acts. The result is that for a 45-minute format (net) around 10 minutes of narrative time per act remain (if you subtract the prologue or teaser and the title sequence). Every act in turn consists of a number of “beats” (plot steps/development steps) that is determined immediately beforehand and is strictly prescribed. The number of beats determines the narrative density, the rhythm and the tempo of the series. If we assume there are 5 beats per act, that means we are left with approx. 2 minutes per beat. Densely narrated series such as *CSI* work with around 8 beats per act. By way of comparison: with many old crime series one beat sometimes freely lasted 7 minutes, giving the viewer no more insight than that the suspect, for example, had a sister. In this time the world in *CSI* has already turned 3 times on its own axis. At the end of each act there is the so-called act break (a turning point, a new direction or a dead end), i.e. a cliffhanger that has to keep the viewers hanging on over the commercial break. The result of this is that every act begins with a new direction and comes under

a new “heading”, as it were. In this way every episode can stay surprising and exciting and have numerous twists – in our example of a crime series every act would therefore also probably have a new line of inquiry (e.g.: Act 1: the brother of the victim is a suspect; Act break 1: it cannot have been the brother, but he tells the investigators that the victim was leading a secret double life; Act 2: the victim’s double life, etc.). Once they have internalized the system the “only thing” the writers have to do now is fill out all the gaps in the scheme. In practice this involves placing index cards on the wall which gradually allow the “bare bones” of an episode to emerge in accordance with the 4-act scheme. The advantage of this is that this basic concept can be grasped at a glance. Nothing is being written yet. Index cards can be quickly exchanged, thrown away, replaced and shifted around. Because at this point it is still only a question of schematic building blocks, throwing ideas out is not difficult, moreover, variants can be tried out quickly and elegantly. Episodes under development can be presented very simply. A new, proficient writer can be brought in during this phase without any problem, and can contribute to the plotting straight away. Criticism and tips (for instance, from the showrunner) can be quickly and easily incorporated. This is how in just a few hours good, experienced teams can, in a terrifically efficient way, develop complete episode plots which automatically narrate “in detail” and often also with a certain depth, thanks to the sheer abundance of beats that must be filled.

If the showrunner accepts an episode in this form, a beat sheet is created that approximately corresponds to a short step outline: short, schematic, act by act, beat by beat. The proportion of a synopsis or a treatment that is prosaic, or subject to personal likings within conventional development processes, is omitted. This is because those who are well trained in their craft

can already see from the beat sheet whether the episode will work, or not. Once the showrunner or broadcaster has accepted the beat sheet it goes straight into the script. Only at this point are the individual plot steps developed in the necessary breadth, depth and emotionality. Only now is anything really being “written”. With 8 beats per act, the writer is left with max. 1 to 2 pages of script to implement each beat. S/he is forced to concentrate on what is most essential. The art consists in developing this fullness in as absorbing, exciting, believable and interesting a way as possible on as few pages as possible. That is the craft of making a series. Incidentally, with purely horizontally narrated series, getting down to the point is significantly more complex. Character and story arcs are distributed across the episodes and acts during the plotting. The slots with beats and act breaks in the scheme must be filled. But of course television is not mathematics and the system is not 100% static. Sometimes an act has to have perhaps one beat fewer, or a beat must sometimes be one minute longer – nonetheless, a great deal of care is taken during the writing process to comply with the scheme that has been clearly defined beforehand. Ultimately, it is, *inter alia*, the always more or less identical construction of the episodes that also ensures the necessary narrative rigor of the series.

EFFICIENCY THROUGH TEAMWORK AND PERMANENT EXCHANGE

Another big advantage of the writers’ room is that each paper that leaves the room has already gone through an intensive selection process. All the writers have made their comments, revised other scripts, and polished dialogues. Should one day something get out of control during the writing process of the script, a competent taskforce of

colleagues is immediately available which is up-to-date to the same level, and which can step in. With respect to the production, too, new production-related requirements can be communicated and adjusted quickly and simply within this framework. And because filming and further writing will happen quickly, and soon also simultaneously, a permanent exchange takes place between production, direction, actors, cutters, the showrunner and everyone else who is involved, and within this all the necessary changes or adjustments are communicated directly. If, for instance, it becomes clear when cutting the first filmed episodes that the format works better when narrated more slowly, the beat specification is reduced. If the showrunner discovers an actor has a comic potential that fits in with the format, this is immediately communicated to the writers, who immediately create narrative material, etc. out of this (perhaps) serendipity. All the creative professionals know exactly what a beat, an act break and the respective specified dramaturgical scheme of the series which they are creating together is. The so very typical tedious rounds of discussion, first this, then that, then all over again, first rubber-stamping, then rejecting, etc. become in the writers' room model a permanent creative process that does not hinder the development but moves it quickly and efficiently forwards – because everyone knows what, why and how the showrunner has decided. No long-winded pursuit of consensus, no exchange or fueling of anxieties and misgivings, no “yes, perhaps, although”. The showrunner has full creative responsibility; s/he makes clear announcements; s/he decides, even if this means that if the series fails, the showrunner fails with it – and this happens by no means infrequently, even in the series wonderland of the USA.

In our workshops we often come across the skeptical view that such a schematic and distinctly industrial way of working would necessarily significantly

restrict personal creativity. Precisely the opposite is the case, however. The concept of the writers' room facilitates an enormous amount of artistic creativity within clearly defined limits, thereby releasing the maximum possible creativity.

IS THE WRITERS' ROOM A PANACEA?

Is, then, the writers' room the sole panacea everyone has been waiting for? Certainly not. A writers' room is of course no guarantee of success. But it significantly increases the chance of success. Besides the US-Americans and the British, the Scandinavians, too, have recently gone down this route – and their huge success proves they were right to do so. Back in 2006 we, the authors, were lucky enough to work with the German production company teamWorx and the broadcaster Pro7 on a series project that took the risk of betting 100% on the writers' room model. Not everything worked that time. Much of it would still have needed to be optimized, but one thing was clear to all us writers: there is no way of working that is more efficient, more structured and more creative. And incidentally, working with colleagues in this way can be a lot of fun – because in this way telling stories goes back to being what it unfortunately often no longer is: a playful process, despite all the seriousness. Of course, the television industry in each country has very specific structures which are not always 100% compatible with the writers' room concept. However – and this has been proved by the Danes, for instance – the system can be adapted to national preconditions. It would be more effective, however, if the respective production structures would adapt to the concept. It would be good if the broadcasters and production companies would summon up all their courage and get a bit more money together to go

the whole way and fully exploit the possibilities of the system. To achieve this, though, everyone must also be prepared to work on their own structures. It is possible anywhere to produce series that need not hide from the big US-American paragons – we are convinced of this! But that will only happen if broadcasters, companies and creative professionals pull together and are engaged. To use the words of an American consultant from our own writers' room time: “Work harder!” And that applies to all of us. ■

NOTES

¹ House of Cards, Season 3 (TVP): Sky Atlantic/HD, March 13th 2015, 21:00.

² Game of Thrones – The Song of Ice and Fire in the original version parallel to the US-broadcast from April 12th 2015 onwards on Sky Go, Sky Anytime and Sky Online. Either in German or English on Sky Atlantic HD from April 27th 2015 onwards.

³ The working processes presented here exemplify the fundamental, unchanging principles of the concept, but of course not every writers' room works in exactly the same way, and every showrunner also has his/her own individual style that determines the concrete shape of the writers' room.

REFERENCE

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THE AUTHORS



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