

## WHERE EVERYBODY KNOWS YOUR NAME

It's 2:23 A.M. You're nursing the last few swallows of rapidly warming Lone Star lager at a bar in the dead center of Texas. Even though last call was 30 minutes ago, there's always the chance someone will run to their hotel room's minibar and return with tiny bottles of tequila and gin. If that happens and you've downed too much booze already, you might forget your inhibitions and blurt out, "Because of the echo!"—the punchline from a dirty joke in 1987's *Predator*. And you'd look like an idiot, because Shane Black played the character who voiced that joke and he didn't even write *Predator* and Shane Black is sitting across from you right now talking about screenwriting.

Stranger occurrences have been known to



happen at Driskill Hotel bar during the Austin Film Festival. As anyone who's been to AFF can tell you, Texas' oldest operating hotel, is more than just the venue for much of the festival and its associated

screenwriting and filmmaking conferences. It's the festival's heart, soul, brain, and guts. From October 23 to 30, the Driskill—and its bar—is the humming, thrumming engine of the screenwriting trade. And it never shuts down.

"At times it feels more like home than home," says Terry Rossio, a regular fixture at both the AFF and the Driskill bar. "The couch area becomes an arena of Socratic debate operating by a weird kind of Darwinian principle—the more interesting the discussion, the larger the crowd that gathers. I'd attend the conference and be happy even without attending a single screening or panel."

The Driskill bar (just past the check-in desk—you'll need to walk through it to get to your room) is a cross between *Cheers* and the Ark of the Covenant; you're practically blinded by the amount of raw wordsmithing talent on display, but the atmosphere is so welcoming and enthusiastic that you can't help but feel as if you're already one of the gang. Like the alcohol it serves, the bar is a great equalizer. Writers with IMDB entries 50 credits long chat side-by-side with those yet to break in. There's confidence without ego. Respect without ring-kissing. Advice asked for, and shared, without the caste-system weirdness that often germinates during similar conversations in Los Angeles.

It's a pocket universe for writers, a place that exists outside the normal space and time of Hollywood pretense.

"It makes me feel like I'm part of a long continuum of writers," says Ed Solomon of the bar's atmosphere. "There'll be people whose work I've known for years who I've always wanted to meet,

### From Scribble to Screen

THE WRITING PROCESS ON DISPLAY AT AUSTIN FILM FESTIVAL—OCT 23–30.

At the Writers Guild Foundation, we work pretty hard. Outreach, events, running a library and archive... Just typing it makes you want to take a quick nap.

So last year we decided to give ourselves a much-needed break and head to the Austin Film Festival. We'd bring our unique culture-nerd sensibility to the "writers' festival!" It'd be a perfect match! It'd be like a vacation! We'd stay in a hotel and enjoy dinners out and see a whole new city!

We did all those things. And then, drunk with the heady satisfaction of having done six weeks of work in four days, went immediately to sleep. But here's the thing: It was utterly, absolutely, 100 percent worth it. So we're going back again this year! We'll be at the Driskill Hotel in downtown Austin on October 25. Our exhibit and panel series run the entire day.

We call our program at AFF SCRIBBLE TO SCREEN. We bring a handful of writers, who in turn bring the ephemera of writing with them: Early drafts of scripts to well-known movies and TV shows, studio notes, ideas written on legal pads and script margins, and more. Each writer discusses their work in detail, on its journey from jotted-down notion to final cut. Next door is an exhibit space, filled with materials from the library and archive that we maintain for the Guild membership.

This year, we'll have Lizzie and Wendy Molyneux of *Bob's Burgers*, as well as Linda Woolverton, writer of *Maleficent*, *The Lion King*, and *Beauty and the Beast*. We're still scheduling more writers, so stay tuned to our website for developments. <https://www.wgfoundation.org/screenwriting-events/aff2014/>

We're looking forward to repeating last year's success and learning even more about the process that crafted some of modern culture's favorite characters and stories—and the gasps of satisfaction that ripple through the audience as they learn the same. We're looking forward to some of the best brisket on Earth.

And, yeah, we're also looking forward to that nap afterward. —KEVIN OTT

and there'll be people who are still aspiring to get the first break, whose struggles feel so similar to mine, and everything in between. It makes me feel proud and ennobled to be a writer."

That atmosphere grew organically throughout the years because of the writer-focused nature of the Fest. As more writers realized the value festival organizers placed on their contributions, more of them flocked to Austin, ultimately landing at the Driskill bar, brains-deep in a two-hour-long, six-writer-wide conversation about dialogue, turning points, hidden exposition, and oh my god how is there still tequila left in this bottle.

"Some of the impromptu couch-and-barstool sessions here were as informative and inspiring as some of the panels," says Brian Pittman, a rising screenwriter who partners with his wife, Rachel Long. "In fact, we missed a few panels because this was the place to be."

"The bar? It's absolutely central to the experience," agrees Long. "It's the Times Square of AFF."

Robin Swicord and Nick Kazan have been attending the festival since 1994, at that time called the Austin Heart of Film Festival. They remember what Frank Pierson said when he first met Chris McQuarrie ("You can feel the eggs of all the movies this kid is going to make!") and learning Guillermo del Toro's four fundamentals of suspense and horror from the man himself ("Fear, hope, dread, and one more thing I'll tell you later"). During those early years, there were no crowds.

But as big as the gathering has become, it's still just a crowd of writers talking shop, says conference director Erin Hallagan.

"There's no velvet rope. It's interactive and welcoming," she says. "The Lawrence Kasdans are having barbecue with the screenplay finalists. The Vince Gilligans are having margaritas with the registrants."

Why isn't Solomon worried about AFF becoming too big to support its own atmosphere? Because it's craft-oriented, unlike other conferences that attract studio marketing departments hoping to reach fans.

"It's hard for AFF to be taken over for that reason," he says. "Those social metrics don't apply in that way."

Whatever happens, the conversations will be going on long after last call.

—KEVIN OTT

## Betting on a future with Amazon

The summer gathering of the Television Critics Association (TCA) revealed a plethora of new directions that television writers are pursuing to stay ahead of technological advancements. This is especially true for the seasoned broadcast TV writing talent—Eric Overmyer (*Bosch*), Chris Carter (*The After*), Jill Soloway (*Transparent*), Roman Coppola & Jason Schwartzman (*Mozart in the Jungle*), Garry Trudeau & Jon Alter (*Alpha House*)—now responsible for creating series for Amazon Prime, the subscription service that is commercial-less and completely free of the weekly episode tradition.

Emmy-nominated Eric Overmyer (*Treme*) has adapted crime novelist Michael Connelly's LAPD Detective Harry Bosch series. "[On Amazon], we



can take our time and really be a little truer to the realities of investigation than some network procedurals are, where everything is solved magically in a matter of moments. So we're not compelled to solve a case every week like we would be on network."

Chris Carter, best known for the popular *The X-Files* series, admits to being fascinated with the story development process afforded by Amazon. "*The After* is a science fiction thriller that gets to invent its world as it goes along. I have told Amazon that I have a goal of 99 episodes for this. I'm serious. There are a number of influences within this show and one is *Dante's Inferno* with its 99 cantos. I'm kind of using that as my model. When I was doing *The X-Files* long ago, we were behind or under the gun so much, and we had to get scripts out [but] not in necessarily a timely fashion. We're making this happen with Amazon. Our plan is to tease this out."

Jill Soloway, creator and director of *Transparent*—a comedy series about a monumentally dysfunctional LA family—is looking forward to the end of September when all 10 episodes are released simultaneously. "When we learned that

Amazon was going to release it that way, it sure affected the process in the writer's room. Yeah, we had some great conversations about what it means to end an episode, not with, 'We'll see you in a week,' but 'We want you to keep going right now.' And so that certainly had a lot to do with the shape of the season. We present the whole season with an act break around Episode 2 or 3 and a climax around 7 or 8, just like it was a five-hour movie."

Roman Coppola and Jason Schwartzman are grandsons of Carmine Coppola, one-time first flautist with the New York Symphony under Arturo Toscanini. The two cousins, along with Alex Timbers and Paul Weitz, are creating the comedy drama *Mozart in the Jungle*, a behind-the-curtains sojourn within the lives of classical musicians struggling to live their lives and establish careers in New York City. Both believed that Amazon was the best fit for them. "I can't recall the exact process," Coppola admits, "but our agent felt that there was something exciting happening with Amazon. It's a new player and new energy. When we presented our writing to them, immediately there was an excitement, like they said, 'Hey, let's do the show,' and there wasn't a lot of discussion of notes or 'Could it be this or could it be that?' It clicked. Ever since that point, it was all about just doing the work and making it happen, not a lot of discussion or trying to unravel it, but just moving forward."

*Alpha House*, created by Garry Trudeau, is the only one of these five series that has a track record with Amazon, having made its debut there in 2013. When the series was picked up for a second season, Trudeau admits to not knowing on what criteria Amazon based its decision. "We don't know. I mean, one of the interesting things about working for Amazon is it's kind of a black box. We don't know what the metrics are. We are just thrilled when they call and say, 'The audience likes you and we would like to put together another season.' So I know that sounds disingenuous, but it's true. We're not part of praising the show, how it's landing with the audience. We just try to make the best show we can."

—JULIO MARTINEZ