

Ellis Freeman's Writers' Gym Workshops at The London Film School in Covent Garden are designed to exercise the playful nature of writing in order to keep the storyteller, and above all, the audience interested in the often grueling experience of writing. Over eight sessions, Freeman, a professional screenwriter and instructor in LFS' MA Screenwriting program, uses a series of exercises to allow the writer to balance their conscious and unconscious influences, to enjoy the experience of research, and to overcome nagging issues such as writers' block. In [Writers' Gym I](#), Freeman helps to incubate and develop new ideas, and in [Writers' Gym II](#), he takes the class from treatment stage to a full script.

Says Freeman, "It's about the writer's process rather than theory, and it's about games and exercises as a way to stimulate your creativity and be playful in your work, because if you're not playful, even in a serious project, it starts to be dull." In his campaign toward making writing natural and enjoyable, Freeman encourages people to "make bold choices, be brave when they're writing things." His classes focus on creativity, story, theme, character, and as people develop a project over time, they have the opportunity to analyze their writing process as well as their week-by-week progress.

Freeman's curriculum comes from an eclectic array of sources: "I tend not to give people a reading list at the beginning of my courses. But the things that influence me are probably more people who've written on creative writing. I love this Zen poet, Natalie Goldberg: she wrote this thing, *Writing Down the Bones*. It's just about encouraging people to use their notebooks and be very free and spontaneous." Although Freeman acknowledges that screenwriting is filmmaking, he never loses sight of the fact that screenwriters are writers, as well, and encounter the same problems as other writers: "How many hours a day are we going to work? Are we going to work by handwriting or are we going to work on the typewriter? All the different, more practical issues. I'm mostly interested in this idea of creativity and removing blockages from people, and teaching them how to find their way out of their own problems by using notebooks."

Freeman doesn't shy away from pure film texts, such as Syd Field's perennial classic *Screenplay*: "I don't really recommend people hang on to that too long, but it is something you need to know even if you're going to dismiss it." Ultimately Freeman's concern is that, too often, spontaneity and freedom are largely removed from the writer's process: "I think when we were children and given essays to write, like 'The Enchanted Forest,' we just sat down and wrote them. I'm teaching people how to tell stories that they knew how to do before, but something's made them really inhibited, self-conscious, and afraid of it. There are many really good storytellers out there—children tell stories, parents tell stories to their children—we could take the strain out of it a little bit."

Furthermore, Freeman encourages writers to explore the world and live in order to have something to write about: "I try to get people away from the computer screen and away from their room even if it's just for some of the time. Most writers are solitary creatures, but on the other hand, I like to go out, research, talk to other people." Notes Freeman, this helps to refocus the writer's attention on others: "[Writers] forget that there's an audience there, and that's the most important thing. It really worries me when I see people that just want to write; they don't want to communicate with other people."

Ultimately, filmmaking is a collaborative effort, something else that Freeman doesn't shy away from in his courses. In fact, he highlights the participants' mutual struggle in order to let them help themselves: "Film writers in particular have to be very good collaborators. They should be able to cope on their own, but they must form really good working relationships with people. People who might be introverted or quite solitary are able to compare their experiences of writing: What happened when they were trying to write? When did they write? When didn't they write? What was the problem? What are they coming up against? By hearing other people's problems, you get to solve your own, as much as anything else."

Writing will never be an easy task, something that Freeman knows all too well, but despite its unpleasant side, he tries to make a difference in his students' process: "You've got to try to take the pain out of it as much as you can. But you can't eliminate all the pain of writing."

Freeman's former students have gone on to complete their own short films, or even join the MA Screenwriting program at LFS. Some Writers' Gym II alums have producers interested in their scripts. Freeman hopes to give the working writer the tools to carry on after the course: "In the end, I really want people to be as self-reliant as they can. I love people who squeeze their writing into their working life, because that's what Chekhov did, that's what Graham Greene did. If someone says, 'I'm going to take six months off to write my script,' they never do."

Freeman encourages writers to work in a way that makes writing accessible and approachable. After warming the class up with playful exercises, Freeman notes, "I enjoy seeing people go, 'This is fun, actually,' not just, 'a pain in the ass--why have I chosen this?'"

**November 2010**