**A “Writers’ Room” session examining possible storylines for AGNSW as it steps into the “story-world” of the Sydney Modern Project (an exercise facilitated by Ross Gibson — Tuesday May 5 2020, 9.00am - 12 noon)**

**OBJECTIVES:**This “writers’ room” exercise is a chance to try out a “visioning” method, for two reasons: (1) to see what fresh ideas or attitudes can come of it, and (2) to see if it is a method that Gallery staff think they could usefully enact in the future, without Ross being the “showrunner".

**THE EXERCISE**: “Writers’ rooms” are systems used by TV series producers in order to apply the richest, most surprising possible group-intelligence to the “story-world” of the series; the room has a number of writers working simultaneously and it is run by the lead-writer or progenitor of the series.  This lead-writer is the showrunner.  (The most celebrated example: David Chase was showrunner for all six seasons of *The Sopranos*, whose story-world is: “a Mafia family, whose *capo* is in therapy, in contemporary New Jersey".)

With the AGNSW exercise, over a three-hour period, we will run a writers’ room that has a chance to generate a profusion of possible stories that could play out within our particular “story-world”, which is: AGNSW, poised to step into its Sydney Modern Project in the peculiar city of Sydney, at this particular time that is so full of uncertainty and opportunity.  (In addition to generating a profusion of possible stories, we have the chance to synthesise one or two especially compelling story-lines.) Ross Gibson will run the room in this exercise even though, clearly, he is not really the lead-writer at AGNSW!

Running a writers’ room is a process of imagining surprising POSSIBILITIES within the story-world and then weighing them against the sensible constraints of the PLAUSIBILITIES of that world.  It is the showrunner’s responsibility to engender the free profusion of possibilities whilst always cross-checking the plausibilities.

**NUT & BOLTS — how the session will be run**: as with all writers’ rooms, the first thing is to settle on the story-world.  DONE!: the story-world is “AGNSW, poised to step into its Sydney Modern Project in the peculiar city of Sydney, at this particular time that is so full of uncertainty and opportunity”

Next, we need an intrigue or mystery that has arisen because of a disruption.  Maud has supplied this very good summation of the intrigue:

*If you still have a few bucks in your pocket after the lockdown, you want to step out of your home cocoon. Existential angst is at its zenith. You don’t believe the contagion hype but you’re not going to touch the door handles anyway. You’ve watched so much Netflix that you want it all to stream easy.  Keen for the real thing though. Object and human. Restless and, admit it, a little afraid. What’s going to tempt you out of your bubble and into the Gallery?*

Now … with the world and the intrigue (and the focal character?) established, we can begin generating story-possibilities.

There are techniques for generating the possible story-lines.  We will be referring constantly to the following “narrative drivers”, so that we can interrogate and activate a particular driver in order to see what ideas and emotions loom into the foreground when we do so:

SETTING   —  the time  &  place of the story

CHARACTERS

PLOT & INTRIGUE

MOOD (this exists in the story-world — i.e. in the setting and int he characters especially)

TONE (this is “exuded” by the storyteller or the story itself — e.g. a sardonic tone, or an earnest tone etc etc)

THEME/VALUES - A COMPELLING IDEA

As we work with these drivers, we remind ourselves that stories tend have *meanings* (i.e. stories are “semantic”); but importantly stories also activate and shape *emotions* for the hearer (i.e. stories are also “phatic").

One last observation about “drivers”  …  many showrunners pause often and consider the “P.E.S.T.L.E. factors”. Finding them less dramatic or evocative, Ross emphasises these factors less than the narrative drivers, even though he acknowledges they can be stimulating. The P.E.S.T.L.E. approach foregrounds: Politics, Economics, Social Trends, Technology, Law & Environment.

Clare has kindly agreed to be the notetaker for the exercise. The notetaker is a quiet and vital presence in a writers’ room. The notetaker is someone who not only catches every useful point and acts as the room’s memory but who also is able to discern patterns emerging and thus can make crucial, clarifying interventions from time to time.

PLEASE feel free to email ross.gibson@canberra.edu.au if you have any questions or concerns, as the session approaches.

Finally, if you are curious about the showrunning process and culture, you might like to take a look at: [https://qetz.al/thought-log/11\_laws\_of\_showrunning.pdf](https://protect-au.mimecast.com/s/dr_MCBNZkph7zj7lgSzgR9d?domain=qetz.al)  The article and writer are simultaneously fascinating and infuriating — a useful enough blend if you can resist the urge to throw the i-pad across the room.

For a more measured, long-read approach, you might like:  Kallas, C 2014 *Inside the Writers’ Room: Conversations with American TV writers*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

And here is the short blurb that was used for the 90 participants of the ACT Festival of Creativity workshop:

**Title:** "How to use stories to create plans in messy situations”

**Summary:**  This workshop will look at the ways stories can be used to understand disruptive situations and to create strategies for responding to them. We will examine the role of storytelling and story-listening in human consciousness and we will learn some basic storytelling techniques that can be used for grasping the present state of the world and for creating a vision that can guide future plans.

Finally … if you need a more thorough account of the methods and the philosophies of the workshop, I can send you a grant application that covers all that in a ten-page blob.  (But seriously … who wants to read another grant application?)

The workshop can be just a couple of hours duration (which gives a rudimentary sense of how to shake up the ideas and think outside the boxes), or it can be a day or two plus some report-writing … depending on how deep and detailed the /commissioning’ person wants to go.  It can even go on for an extended period, in business settings. (I’ve done this before in my work on various boards for cultural agencies such as Screen NSW and ACMI.)

Please don’t hesitate to ask questions, if everything above is only clear like mud.

Xxx

RG