

# Five Questions for Wendall Thomas

Presented by **MIFF 37°South Market & Accelerator**, celebrated LA-based developer, writer and lecturer Wendall Thomas, who has written and developed projects for companies including Disney, Warner Brothers, Paramount, Universal, Showtime, PBS, A&E and NBC, returns exclusively to Melbourne for more of her popular series unlocking the secrets of film writing with a series of four stand-alone all-day seminars.

We have a chat to Wendall ahead of the four seminars at MIFF 2016.



**This is the 6th consecutive year you've presented your *Talks Scripts* series with 37°South & Accelerator at the Melbourne International Film Festival. What keeps you coming back?**

I'm always thrilled to return. I feel the festival itself is completely unique, so there are always films here that I would not get a chance to see elsewhere, but mostly I return because of the wonderful hospitality and support of 37°South staff and the great writers and filmmakers I have the privilege to meet during my lectures and at the events. Plus, who wouldn't want to come to Melbourne - for the coffee alone?

**From *Broadcast News* to *Delicatessen* to *When Harry Met Sally* - there are hundreds of amazing sequences in film and TV - some of which you'll explore in one of your seminars this year! What are your five favourite sequences and why?**

As a film and TV lover, obviously I have hundreds of favorites, including the "Make 'em laugh" dance sequence in *Singing in the Rain*, the "Lawrence saves Gassim" sequence in *Lawrence of Arabia*, and the final shoot-out in *The Wild Bunch*.

As a teacher, there are a few I come back to again and again in terms of their perfect structures and which I'll include in the lecture. The "Funeral" sequence from the *Six Feet Under* pilot is not only hilarious, but deepens every single characterization and sets up plot points which will play out through the entire series, while the "Top Hat" sequence from *Bringing Up Baby* shows how to escalate physical comedy. The opening of *Breaking Bad* shows how effective a "flash forward" sequence can be, and the "Juarez" sequence from last year's *Sicario* illustrates how to

create visual suspense and structure sequences within sequences. I also admire the opening and closing sequences of *American Beauty*, which build both irony and emotion with images and voice over, and of course, there's *Frasier*...

**You are very involved in teaching different generations about screen writing - and all over the world! In your opinion, what are some striking differences you have experienced in screen writing cultures across the generations and around the world?**

I hesitate to make generalizations, as every student is unique. However, there are differences in the screenwriting culture between countries. In the US, there is no government funding for filmmaking or film training, so my students there must be highly motivated and commercially-minded—in terms of structure and subject matter—to survive in the industry. They pay for all their classes themselves and often for their films as well. They are also expected to do multiple drafts of their scripts on spec.

In countries where there is government funding for filmmakers, like the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand, often the scripts cover a broader and more interesting spectrum of the human experience, but since the number of rewrites is often tied to the funding and there's less of a culture of spec work, the projects are sometimes underdeveloped when I see them.

In terms of generational differences, the major difference I have seen recently is that, across the board, many students in their 20s seem to have a decreased interest in, or knowledge of, the film history. Often I just get blank stares when I reference anything made before 2000. I find this unfortunate, since it's vital to understand where your film fits into the genre and because you can learn so much about all aspects of filmmaking from great writers/directors from the past like Wilder, Hitchcock, Hawkes, Antonioni, Fellini, Bergman, etc.

**One of your sessions this year is on memorable TV relationships as in the likes of *The Good Wife*. This sure seems to be the age of "water-cooler TV" - why do you think this is and what opportunities and challenges does it present for screenwriters?**

Although TV is definitely "king" at the moment, to be honest, I think the "water cooler" days are over, perhaps for good—the recent finale of *Game of Thrones* notwithstanding. People are now obsessed with streaming on their own schedule and at their own convenience, and because everything, even HBO and network shows, is available on demand online, there are only rare occasions when everyone watches anything at the same time.

Even in the case of the finale of *The Good Wife*, I could only find one person to talk to about it, as everyone else was "waiting to catch up." I think there is currently so much content available for binging that there's actually less general discussion, and certainly very little "group experience" or "group response" the next morning to any single episode.

That said, there has been a huge shift in how projects are financed and seen as profitable—at least in the American system, as the technology moves forward. As fewer people go to the cinema except for "event" films, and as more people stream shows on their tablets or phones, the content will naturally go where the customers are.

Right now, most of my feature screenwriting students are taking the "television" modules as well, since there is definitely more writing work right now in that field, although I do feel the boom may be coming to an end, since there is just too much content at the moment for most of the shows to get any real traction.

Many shows are drawing from the feature world not just for directors and producers but writers as well, and many are hiring people based on a feature script sample rather than a TV sample (which is a new development), so I think pursuing feature writing can still help you in both arenas.

**5) What has been the most rewarding experience of your career? And the most challenging?**

Probably as a screenwriter on a day-to-day basis, the most rewarding thing is writing a scene or sequence that works, or even a line of dialogue I'm happy with. In terms of my writing career, the most satisfying thing has been selling pitches. I've been lucky enough to sell a feature idea, a remake, and a pilot during pitch meetings, and there's nothing like feeling you've made an idiot of yourself and totally blown it, but then finding out that you didn't.

In teaching, the most satisfying thing is seeing your students succeed. In the last few weeks, two of my students have sold pilots and another has signed with a major agency and I'm so very happy that their hard work has paid off. The most challenging thing is finding the best way to work with each individual writer—to point out things that might need to change or improve in their scripts in a way that will inspire rather than discourage. As a writer myself, I know tough notes can be hard to hear and I always struggle when I have to give them to someone else.

[Tickets are on sale now for Wendall Thomas Talks Scripts](#) presented by MIFF 37°South Market & Accelerator.