

Wendall Thomas Interview

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 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 put a few questions to her, ahead of her arrival:

Tell us your five most memorable central characters – and, briefly, why?

Of course there are far more than five film characters I adore, but I would say in the last few years my favourites have been Ralph Fiennes's M. Gustav in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* and Tye Sheridan's Ellis in *Mud*, because they are so unique and fully drawn and clear. Both of them anchor their individual films and are a large part of why the films are memorable and engaging. Historically, I'm a sucker for Paul Newman's Frank Galvin in *The Verdict* for the naked vulnerability in his character; Sally Field's *Norma Rae*, for her flaws and her irreverence; and of course, Humphrey Bogart's Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* for his coolness and unforgettable one liners.

All's well that end's well ... what are the top three things for a perfect third act of in a screenplay?

Billy Wilder always said if there's a problem in the Third Act, there's a problem in the First Act, so one of the top three things to focus on is the set-up in the rest of the film. Have you led the audience towards the ending you're going to deliver? That means a strong central question for the story and the kind of character decision at the climax which will be satisfying, given the genre, tone, etc.

Next, I feel you need one or two "blindsides", things the character and the audience can't see coming, to keep things interesting enough for us to hold on until the end. I think another important aspect is actually speed. In the third act, everything should speed up, no matter the genre, and this is where many scripts run out of steam instead.

Black Comedy & Satire - how "national" is this sort of comedy?

I wouldn't say it's "national" at all really. The essence of black comedies and satire is irreverence – towards death, religion, institutions, social norms and expectations, etc. And I think that by and large, those issues are universal. I can't imagine that not being American makes the messages and comedy of *Dr. Strangelove* or *Network* any less compelling or funny, or not being British means that the rest of us can't enjoy *In the Loop*, or the fact that we might not be teenagers anymore means we can't appreciate the adolescent cruelty of *Heathers*. There may be some specific references that might be nation specific but if it's a great black comedy or satire, it should work outside its borders.

This sure seems to be the age "water-cooler" TV, even as TV audiences fragment. Why do you think this is and what opportunities – and challenges – do you think this poses for screenwriters?

I think this change has actually been an issue of money and the way things are financed and seen as profitable, at least in the American system, as the technology moves forward. As fewer people are willing to go to the cinema except for "event" films, and as more people are willing to stream or watch things on their 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. 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 television sample (which is new), so I think pursuing feature writing can still help you in both arenas.

Your favorite things about Melbourne?

Besides the ever fabulous MIFF and 37° Degrees South staff and the films and people they bring to the city, I'm in love with the State Library, the NGV, the way Flinders Lane winds down the hill and, of course, the wine and the coffee.