

## A SPECIAL SPARK AND TWO CAREERS DOVETAIL by Helen Carmichael

In February 2003 I had the good fortune to be invited to participate in SPARK, a new feature film script development program initiated by the Australian Film Commission (AFC) in conjunction with the Australian Film, Radio and TV School (AFTRS).

For me it marked the culmination of some thirty years in the film, radio and television industries as a scriptwriter, script consultant, co-producer and scriptwriting lecturer as well as the beginning of my new career, launched a few years ago, as lifecoach and counsellor.

All my life I have been fascinated by learning and its practical application: creativity, in other words. How does it work? How can one make it better? As a dancer, a cook, a dress designer and a writer I experimented with these questions. But it has been as a teacher and a lifecoach where this passion has really found expression. I love to see people happy and doing what they're born to do. I love to work with people who approach things like an artist – with courage, discipline and inspiration - and who treat their life as their main work of art.

### THE PLAY OF LIFE



As a counsellor and coach I work with people from all walks of life, of all ages. They are people who want to change their lives for the better. We work mainly one-on-one over a period of time. SPARK was a completely new way of working for me, and in some respects, probably also for the participants.

At SPARK we were given the opportunity of being part of a concentrated creative environment for a short period of time – one week, to be exact. The group was made up of gifted and dedicated professionals.

If the overall aim of the workshop was to help the participants develop their projects, my work was to take a new and lateral approach, complimentary to the traditional methods of professional feedback. In my role of Creativity Coach we looked at ways to achieve clarity on any script, team relationship, or career and/or personal issues that might be affecting the writers' work.

To do this, I used a dramatic technique developed by Dr Carlos Raimundo called *The Play of Life*, coupled at times with my years of experience as a scriptwriter and consultant/teacher. *The Play of Life* technique is active, involving miniature stages and figures. Research has shown that it bypasses the brain's neo-cortex, providing a language-independent communication method. It is able to present pictures, insights and solutions to problems and situations in a highly creative, dynamic and multi-dimensional way.

From my perspective, the most interesting aspect of the workshop was that we were focusing on the very fundamentals of creativity – the blocks as well as the inspirations that form the basis of any work of art. The work revealed that often an artist's difficulty or block with a certain aspect of their project – in a writer's case, say character or plot – does not always stem directly from the piece itself or from their want of craft or experience. It can be a side-issue – emotional or mental or both - which once uncovered, allows the energy and inspiration to flow again. At SPARK, the focus fell in several areas:

- **Script Issues:** Through their sessions with the advisors, some of the writers had found that their relationships with their main characters were not as deep or three-dimensional as they could be. In our work together we were able to deepen understanding of characters and/or break through creative blocks, thereby opening the dialogue, so to speak, between characters and authors. This in turn led to insights in **plot development**, since, as we know, character is destiny, and by knowing the character better, the plot becomes richer, clearer, with a more appropriate structure and rhythm.
- **Team Relationships:** Some participants were experiencing communication blocks in their creative teams. Others were hazy about the optimum direction and timeline for their project. By the end of the session, writers, producers and directors had clarified more creative points of view

as well as identifying new ways to approach the situation for a positive outcome.

- **Career Direction and Balance:** Some participants were finding that the worries and pressures of survival as a creative artist were getting in the way of their creative focus. Gaining clearer perspectives on the overall picture (where they were, where they wanted to be, and the first step in how to get there) helped them clear their minds and bring the energy and focus back to the project at hand.
- **Increased harmony and focus of the workshop as a whole:** Most of the advisors also choose to try a session. Over the years, I have noticed that this results in increased overall harmony and focus of the workshops – not only in the case of SPARK, but also in the European script labs where I have worked.

## POST SPARK

There are many other areas where the technique can be used to practical advantage. At SPARK, some participants expressed interest for the future working on individual scenes and dialogue.

In my professional life since that first SPARK:

- **On Board the Same Boat:** I have worked with key team creatives at various stages of a project in group sessions. Here the technique is used to explore and define the film, uniting everyone in a common vision.
- **Directors** I have worked with have developed not only deeper appreciation of the script in terms of theme and character motivation, but also new insights on overall visual style and how they might shoot various individual scenes.
- **Producers** work together with writers on scripts in development. Some have subsequently used the notes provided post-session as a stimulus to further work with script consultants. Some producers have also used the technique to improve their communication with writers and other members of their teams.
- **Production managers**, often the meat in uncomfortable and many-tiered sandwiches, have found the technique useful in examining difficult situations and how best to communicate and solve issues in a creative way.

- **Expectation and Realisation: Producers and Directors** can work together or separately on individual projects: defining their relationships and expectations of each other and/or various members of the crew, as well as how to best approach the various stages of production: script, scheduling, budget, promotion, post, music etc.
- **Musical Directors** have used the method to solve problems in directing rehearsals as well as improving their own artistic expression.
- **Maintaining Momentum:** And finally, artists who have been working in their industry for years and experienced the contingent ups and downs, have found the method valuable in finding renewed confidence, energy, inspiration and vision for the future.