

Screenwriter's Heaven

Welcome to DreamAgo . . . A MAGICAL PLACE
WHERE WRITERS ARE LOVED AND FED DAILY.

This is a fairy tale. So, naturally, there's a castle. And this castle is set majestically, as it should be, high in the Swiss Alps, surrounded by vineyards, with a narrow road that winds gently down the mountain to the town below.

And in this castle writers are treasured above all other creatures. Screenplays are considered worthy of deep and abiding love, and the improvement of these screenplays is the highest of occupations. The residents of this castle wish writers only the best, even when the writers can't hear them! No one in the castle feels competitive, and hidden agendas are strictly prohibited.

Like I said: This is a fairy tale.

Except that it isn't.

It's a real place: Sierre, Switzerland. And a real castle: Chateau Mercier. And a real writing workshop, with the marvelous name of DreamAgo. DreamAgo is a nonprofit organization, now in its 10th year. Its mission: to nurture and promote movies that make a difference.

It's the brainchild of Pascale Rey (above), a screenwriter and script doctor born in Sierre but now dividing time between her home in Paris and teaching screenwriting seminars everywhere, from Senegal to the United States to Madagascar. She speaks four languages fluently and loves writers in all of them. Her dream was to create a place where writers with voices and stories from disparate cultures could meet and learn from each other in an atmosphere of nurturing and support. And, in DreamAgo, that's exactly what she's achieved.

My husband and writing partner, Christopher Beaumont, and I heard about DreamAgo from a notice in the WGA Calendar about a panel on "Writing for Foreign Markets." We both love to travel, and the idea of living and writing somewhere else in the world sounded romantic and fun. As the old saying goes: "Life begins when the dog dies and the kids move out!" Well, the kids had moved out with the dog... so, why not?

The "Foreign Markets" panel proved

informative but, alas, nobody hired us to write *Joanie Loves Chachi in Minsk*. However, we had the good fortune that evening to meet Pascale, president and co-founder of DreamAgo. We also met the director of DreamAgo USA, Maggie Soboil, an actress and satirist from South Africa who has herself created a unique approach to scriptwriting called 3D Screenwriting, a technique she has taught to writers around the world.

Pascale and Maggie invited us to a DreamAgo lunch the following week in Venice (California, that is; with DreamAgo, it could just as well have been Italy). At the lunch were about 30 writers, directors, producers, as well as other film professionals in attendance. Each person we talked to described the heaven they had experienced in Sierre. They gushed about the whole DreamAgo experience: the nurturing, the love, the inspiration, the in-castle chef who prepares gourmet meals every day and every evening. And these were not just new kids on the block. This group had several seasoned WGA members,



men and women with formidable credits.

Everyone was so giddy that Chris, at one point, leaned over and whispered in my ear: "Time Share?" Our code for something that sounds too good to be true.

But when I checked the website, we discovered that they were still accepting scripts for 2013. Chris and I had just finished a feature script and thought it might be right for DreamAgo. Their mandate is to find and develop scripts that deal with human connections, with a special emphasis on subjects that are frequently neglected by the big studios. Our story, *Give Gina Montana*, dealt with the unlikely romance between a kind but mildly mentally challenged man and an extremely tired and heart-weary Las Vegas hooker. Would that fit the criteria? We didn't know, but we were willing to try.

The workshop was to be held the first nine days in May 2013. Several times, when we were making travel plans, Chris would "forget" and bring up that first week in May as a good opportunity to get away. I would "remind" him that we couldn't go because we had to remain available for DreamAgo. To his credit, he never actually laughed out loud.

I kept visiting the website and was excited when they announced the consultants that would be attending. It was an amazing group: David Seidler (*King's Speech*), Shawn Slovo (*Mohammad Ali's Greatest Fight*), Arturo Arango (*The Waiting List*), Lindy Davies (script consultant to *Finding Neverland*, *Away From Her*, among others), Yves Lavandier (acclaimed French "script doctor" and author of *Writing Drama*). And a longtime patron and supporter of DreamAgo, director Stephen Frears, would be there for a few days.

In early February, we got the call. We made it!

A Castle of Dreams

Our arrival at Chateau Mercier was like one long, fabulous approach shot: Each time the road curved, we got another glimpse of this magnificent fairy-tale castle. Arriving at the massive entrance, we were greeted by the warm and wonderful DreamAgo team and the marvelous staff of the chateau. A dozen or so journalists and photographers approached us.

Steve Waverly, one of the American writers, put it best: "When we arrived at the castle and saw all the people waiting to take pictures of us, shoot videos, give us gift baskets, I kept thinking there must be someone else behind us. I mean,

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Checklist to DreamAgo (www.DreamAgo.com)

WHO IS ELIGIBLE?

Any writer, no matter where he/she comes from, with a powerful script written in English, French, or Spanish, may submit to Plume & Pellicule. There is an entry form to fill out on the website. You will need to include a synopsis, a log line, and the full script. (You don't have to be a WGA member to submit, but the script must be registered with the WGA.) They are accepting submissions for 2015 from August 15 to December 2014.

DreamAgo offers a program in conjunction with the Writer's Guild of America called "Artist's Residency." WGA writers are invited to submit a short synopsis for a feature film. The chosen writer is awarded a six-week stay, including travel, per diem, and lodgings at a small chalet on the grounds of Chateau Mercier, in Sierre, Switzerland. For more details: <http://www.DreamAgo.com/residency/>

WHAT DOES IT COST?

You are responsible for the entry fee, for getting yourself there as well as providing one translation of your script. The workshop, accommodations, food and wine are all included at no charge. You'll find complete instructions and fees on the website: <http://www.dreamago.com/plume-pellicule/plume-pellicule-online-submission/>

HOW ARE THE SCRIPTS SELECTED?

Four reading panels (in France, Switzerland, Spain and USA) select 10 screenplays from all over the world. All evaluations are "blind." Writers' names are removed from the cover page. The goal for DreamAgo is to choose scripts that "transform, provoke and entertain the audience while dealing with issues vital to us all."

ONCE THERE, WHAT?

DreamAgo is composed of two parts:

1) "Plume et Pellicule" ("Script to Screen" in English) The "Plume" is a seven day seminar/workshop (nine if you count "arrival" and "departure" festivities) held at Chateau Mercier. The "Pellicule" is a mini film festival that takes place each night in the town of Sierre, with screenings open to the public and presented by one of the writers, directors, producers, or actors from the chosen film. Afterwards, guests are invited back to the castle to join the writers for dinner, a Q and A, and often to stay a few days in the castle.

2) "Meet Your Match," a post-workshop program that facilitates meetings between writers with finished screenplays and producers from around the world.

Every writer must read the other nine selected scripts and prepare his or her notes and suggestions before arriving in Sierre. During the seminar, each writer will meet with every other writer for at least one hour. In addition, DreamAgo invites "consultants" (established professional writers, directors, teachers, casting directors, etc. with extensive experience) who have also read the scripts and give notes during a two-hour meeting with each writer.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTERWARD?

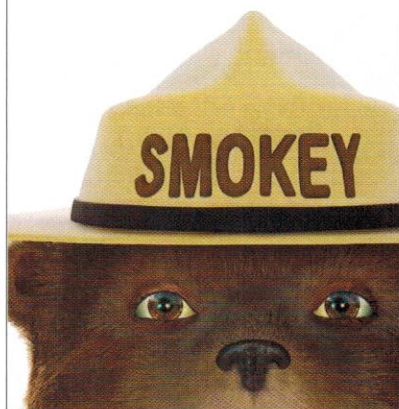
Writers are given two months in which to incorporate the notes and rewrite their script if they choose and then resubmit it. If their script is chosen, those writers are eligible for the "Meet Your Match" part of DreamAgo. Meetings are arranged between writers and producers from both U.S. and European production companies and take place in Santa Monica during the American Film Market (AFM).

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Tools, continued from page 31

they couldn't be doing all this for a group of writers! Even as we were escorted into the castle and interviewed and showered with affection, I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. But it never did."

Inside, we were welcomed with wine and appetizers as we met the other writers. Of the 10 scripts chosen, three were from the U.S., three were from France, one from Argentina, one from Costa Rica, one from Columbia, and one from Cuba. At the risk of sounding too spiritual, there was a wonderful energy in this place. The mix of sounds, the different languages and accents: *Magic*. Because we had read the scripts in English, it was interesting to hear different accents and fun to put a face and a language to each script.

We had, of course, read all of their scripts, and they had read ours. It's a strange feeling. Until a script is actually in production, writers frequently find themselves in rooms full of agents and execs who have *maybe* read the coverage. This felt like the exact opposite of that old joke: A writer asks his agent, "How'd you like my script?" The agent replies "I don't know; I'm the only one who's read it." It's hard to wrap your brain around the thought that every person in this castle has read your script. Okay, maybe the busy chef and castle staff are exempt, but everyone else!

Pascale introduces us all to "The Monitor," a huge TV screen set up in the main hall of the castle. On it is the schedule of our meetings. And she makes it clear that nobody is to be late. Everyone is free to choose their own spot for their meetings, either in the castle itself or on the spectacular grounds, but be on time.

We also meet the DreamAgo "team"—Pascale's amazing group of assistants, coordinators, videographers, and translators who make all this run smoothly.

And then comes our first dinner. Incredible! (If you have to know one word of French, this is the one to know here.) It's not just a gourmet meal; it's a *fantastic* gourmet meal. And chef Antonio will be spoiling us this way for the next eight days. Already we don't want to go home, and we just got here. The evening ends just shy of midnight. How European!

Rude Awakenings

The next morning we're awakened by the Chateau Mercier alarm, a magnificent but completely tone-deaf peacock who lives on the estate. And so it begins.

Each day we have hour-long meetings with one or two of the other writers. The notes are thoughtful, perceptive and, best of all, helpful. It's not that we necessarily agree with them all, but they all give us something to think about. We also meet with the consultants for two hours each.

Our first is with Shawn Slovo, who manages to put a loving touch to her sharp insights and gives us the answer to a question we had been wrestling with when we were writing the script. Our story is tender but, in the end, it's a comedy. Shawn suggests ways in which we could put more "grays" into some of our characters and still keep the humor.

Later in the week, our two-hour meeting with consultant David Seidler gives us a huge insight into how to start our story about six pages later without losing any plot. We get a similar note from Arturo Arango from Cuba. When we tell Arturo how obvious it seems now that he and David have pointed it out, he tells us a great anecdote about two Master Chess players who are completely stuck, unable to figure out their next move. The timekeeper happens to walk by and casually moves a player's bishop for Check Mate. The Master chess players, so deep into the details of their strategy, couldn't see the obvious move. "It can be the same way for writers," said Arturo. "Sometimes it takes an outside perspective to show you where to go."

Lindy Davies, a script doctor and acting coach from Australia, shares her remarkable technique of going deep into our characters as if we were acting the roles. It's a great help in learning how to trust a moment in a scene, without so many words. And our last "consultant" is Yves Levandier, from France, who specializes in capsulizing screen stories into a good logline. It's only a tool, but it's a good one. A great logline does not a great script make,

but if you're having difficulty with your logline, it might mean that your story needs to be shaped more carefully.

Yves, who considers American scriptwriters the masters of the logline, liked ours: *Can a slow man find true love with a fast woman?*

Regarding the consultants, Pascale asked that they do not discuss the scripts with each other. This way, there is no chance of creating a consensus, consciously or unconsciously. Each set of notes is from that consultant and no one else. So, if you get the same note from several people (another writer or one of the consultants), you know that it has bumped each of them, and perhaps you need to take a closer look at that aspect of your script.

The days are long, they're wonderful, they're fun, they're intense, and they're incredibly powerful. By sundown, our brains are a bit fried. You've given and received countless ideas, suggestions, and "fixes." Of course, the better the notes, the more energy you devote to seeing if they work for your script. Sleep is not an abundant commodity. Mind you, every day there's been an exquisite lunch and dinner, complete with dessert and perfectly paired wine. And the weather has not just been perfect; it's been Swiss Alps Perfect. So, nobody's complaining.

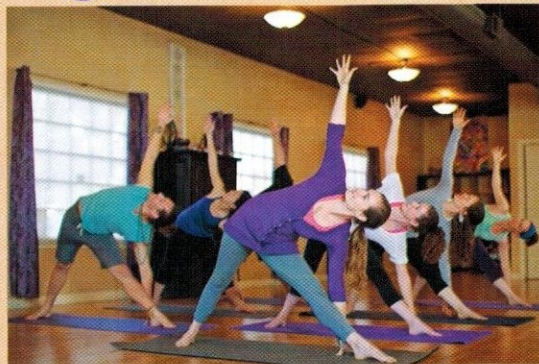
The night, however, is still young at the castle. Every evening we take a walk down the hill to the town of Siere where DreamAgo has commandeered the local cinema for a week-long film festival—which they also open to the good citizens of Siere free of charge. Every night there is a film, accompanied by a guest artist—the director, producer, or star of the film. Stephen Frears introduces his now classic *High Fidelity*. Another night is spent chatting with the prolific French producer Louis Becker about his wonderful love story, *My Afternoons With Margueritte*. Pascale managed to sneak in a print of *Wadjda*, the Saudi Arabian film about a girl who longs for a bicycle. It's a simple story made by an incredibly courageous filmmaker, Haïffé Al-Mansour, who is there to tell us what it's like to film an entire movie hidden inside a van because women cannot be seen doing such work in her country.

Our last day arrives. No notes! No work! Pascale has arranged for us to spend the day cruising Lake Geneva and visiting the towns of Montreux and Vevey. The bus that takes us to the dock at Lake Geneva has a full cappuccino machine onboard. I am *sooooo* going to miss this place! Vevey, the home of Charlie Chaplin, is picture-postcard beautiful. And the flowers of Montreux are in full bloom. The writers swap memories of the week, tearfully saying their goodbyes. In between all the hard work, all the talk of plot and character development, and all the rest of it, friendships have developed during this different kind of week.

Part reality. Part fairy tale. **WB**

Casey Maxwell Clair and Christopher Beaumont are partners on the page and in life. They live in Los Angeles and between them have written sitcoms, dramas, and screenplays and have published two books.

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