

New Screenwriting Ministry Calls Christians to Influence Hollywood

Act One trains writers how to add a Christian perspective to the kind of work entertainment professionals want

Aspiring film and television writers in Hollywood are learning how to write scripts with a Christian view that will appeal to top decision-makers of the entertainment industry, thanks to a faith-based screenwriting program.

A faculty of writers, directors and producers who are Christians give aspiring writers a monthlong crash course on how to thrive professionally and spiritually in the competitive Hollywood environment. Started in 1999, their nondenominational

program—called Act One: Writing for Hollywood—has resulted in a growing community of alumni who work in entertainment and are adding a

Christian view to its products.

“We’re interested in people who want to be servants of God in Hollywood, who love film, not people who are coming here to take over, but people who are going to be part of [the industry], to love and write people into the kingdom,” said the program’s interim director, Marianne Savell.

Act One attracts about 30 students to Los Angeles each August. They keep an almost daily schedule of classes on dozens of topics such as “Structuring Your Screenplay ” and “Spiritual Perspectives on Screenwriting.” They even learn how to dress for meetings with producers.

The faculty includes feature-film writers and TV writers. Their purpose is not to preach to Hollywood but to teach Christians to write according to excellent, professional standards.

Lee Batchler, with his wife, Janet, co-wrote *Batman Forever* and the upcoming feature film *Smoke and Mirrors* starring Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones. Both Batchlers are teachers and mentors with Act One.

“What matters most to me as a teacher is motivating Christian writers to forget about chasing the Hollywood dream of success and instead concentrate on becoming really good at what they do,” Lee Batchler said. “I want to see faith-filled artists succeed in Hollywood, not because they’re Christians, but because they actually are among the best writers, period.

“The larger goal down the line,” he added, “is that within the next decade there would be a major renaissance of truly great Christian artistry in the secular media. A situation where Christian screenwriters get hired because they’re undeniably top-drawer at their craft, and that their Christian worldview then naturally filters out to the public through the fabric and spirit of their work.”

Writer-producer Dean Batali of *That ’70s Show*, and a former writer for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, teaches students how to write one-hour dramas. Batali came here 11 years ago because he believed Christian worldviews should be represented in Hollywood. He says the primary obstacle Christians face in the industry is their own lack of talent or training.

“In Hollywood it’s not about what you believe, but if you’re

good enough,” Batali said. “That’s where Act One comes in.

“Can those of us who’ve done it train the next generation to be better? I well up with tears at the end of my Act One times because it’s such a privilege to share with the students. I long to have them walking side by side with me. [But] we have to get good enough if we’re going to compete.”

While working for a production company, screenwriter Barbara Nicolosi found that the scripts she got from Christians had improper formatting, no sense of storytelling and terrible dialogue. She wrote a magazine article about the problem, and the result was the formation of Act One.

Cheryl McKay, 29, attended Act One after graduating from film school. She now works at a TV network and writes feature scripts on the side. “I don’t think I would have had the guts to move here without Act One,” she said.

“Act One is not just about being a Christian in Hollywood, but a focus on excellence,” said Andrea Nasfell, 28, who came from Kentucky to attend the program. “They teach that if you want to communicate a Christian worldview, you have to do it extremely well.”

Classes are held at the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood. The program also is scheduled for June in Chicago, and was held last June in New York.

Joel Kilpatrick in Hollywood