

# IS KIDSCREEN WORTH IT?

This year's schmooze-fest featured the launch of the WGC Writers' Room

By Mark Dillon

The dust has settled on the 2018 Kidscreen Summit, and writers who attended expect a return on their investment in coming months.

Brunico Communications' annual conference is widely considered a must-attend in the kids' entertainment biz, and this year's record 2,070 attendees bears that out. Programming execs, producers, creators and other industry players from 50-plus countries convened at the InterContinental Miami (Feb. 12-15) to hear speakers and panelists from major production companies, research firms, and broadcasters, sip poolside cocktails and watch the presentation of the Kidscreen Awards.

Around 50 WGC members working in animation and live-action kids shows attended — a sizable contingent compared to years past. They were able to participate in speed-pitching sessions with broadcasters and investors, and, of course, could run into decision-makers anywhere around the hotel, and so were wise to have elevator pitches at the ready.

But you have to pay to play. Registration cost \$1,895 (all amounts in U.S. dollars), per person with a \$400 discount for past attendees and \$100 off for early enrollers. The Youth Media Alliance offered its members a savings of several hundred dollars. Master classes for industry veterans and mentor classes for newbies ran an additional \$250 each. And then there is airfare, hotel and meals.

So is it worth it?

"Writers should go if they can swing it," says Toronto's Amanda Smith (*Max & Ruby*), who has seen positive outcomes from her three summits. "The first year I booked a meeting to reconnect with a story editor I had met years earlier. The next week I was writing on her show."

The main advantage for writers is the ability to schedule many pitch and follow-up meetings and

quick hellos in a concentrated timeframe. Some like to touch base with foreign producers who may have work if the Canadian business slows down, but inevitably writers see fellow Canucks.

"I try to arrange meetings with West Coast and East Coast companies I wouldn't normally see," Smith says. As her career has evolved, her meetings have become more fruitful. With CBC and Boat Rocker Media attached to her half-hour teen series *Pass the Star*, she has more to talk about and more people want to speak with her.

Canadian writer Sam Ruano (*Reboot: The Guardian Code*) couldn't pass up this chance for valuable face time, as he currently resides in Bogota, Columbia, where his wife has a diplomatic posting.

"It was crucial for me to go," he says. "My goal was to stay on the radar. It's important to leave your writing cave and see and be seen. We're so focused on coming up with a great story and pitch that sometimes we forget we're selling a product and a brand, which is ourselves."

His main order of business was promoting his medieval fantasy series *Knights of Panterra* — in development with Omnifilm Entertainment and The Jim Henson Company — and to soak up as much as possible.

"The landscape is changing so rapidly," he notes. "You need to stay in touch with what YouTube is doing and what's going on with social media. What's going on with people who identify as non-binary or transgender, and what does that mean for kids? It's good to see what others are doing, what broadcasters are buying and what producers are looking for, so that you know how to change course."

Several panels this year targeted creators, including one on effective character designs and another titled Creating Convincing Teen Dramas.



Clockwise from above:  
Sam Ruano; Amanda Smith;  
Anne-Marie Perrotta

Meanwhile, the Guild launched the WGC Writers' Room, involving 20-minute discussions among three to five WGC members and an indie producer looking to flesh out a project.

The 11 sessions featured producers from Canada, Europe, Asia and Central America invited by WGC president Jill Golick, Natalia Escobar Bohorquez, the WGC's director of strategy and research, and WGC Quebec councillor Anne-Marie Perrotta.

"Canada has a great reputation for children's entertainment, yet many of these producers haven't had any working relationship with Canadian writers. They jumped at the opportunity," says Aaron Unrau, WGC manager of agreement administration, who helped manage the initiative.

Perrotta — whose credits include the live-action *Big Top Academy* and animated *Chop Chop Ninja* — devised the idea in part to promote the idea of writers' rooms for animation.

"You usually meet with the other writers for one to three days and then never see each other again," she explains. "But in live-action you collaborate with a bunch of writers and run with each other's ideas. We wanted to show animation producers how it works."

Perrotta was so impressed with some of the writers she invited a couple to work with her on development of a Canada-Denmark copro.

"To see them in action was fabulous. Until you're in a room with them, you don't know how they collaborate. Do they have great ideas? Do they try to talk over you? It's like dating: is it a good match?" she says.

Of course Kidscreen isn't the only opportunity for kids' writers. Other upcoming conferences include Brunico's Banff World Media Festival (June 10-13) and Scripted (Nov. 6-7 in Los Angeles), at which the kids biz is but one component, and MIP Junior in Cannes (Oct. 13-14), which is all about kids, but involves greater travel and expense and leans toward its sales market. ■