

How I Launched Rocaberti writers' retreats

British screenwriter and novelist Claire Elizabeth Terry on hosting retreats for promising writers in medieval European castles and preparing their projects for transition to the screen

INTERVIEW BY MIKAEL JACK
PHOTOGRAPHY BY IRIS HUMM



From left: Claire Elizabeth Terry at home in Sant Martí; as well as writing books, she has also directed a short film, *Thirty Minutes*



THE BIG IDEA

'I was fed up with the perceived "wisdom" that had been bubbling for years – that it's impossible for budding scriptwriters to get a film made. It's extremely challenging, but possible. Of course, if you do well in some of the good competitions, your scripts might end up in the hands of a hotshot agent. However, one of our Rocaberti mentors, Richard Botto – who founded Stage 32, a "Facebook" for writers and directors – is always talking about the power of relationships and making things happen. I wanted to help and encourage other writers to be proactive and give their scripts the best possible chance of grabbing the attention of Hollywood agents. Plus, the best advice from mentors who really have those connections and experiences – the things they don't teach at film school.'

THE PLAN

'I am woefully non-business-minded, which frustrates my son, Roberto – who's in charge of the retreat accounts – and I often wonder where his business acumen comes from. There was no strategy, that's the honest answer, and I don't treat it like a business – I think that might be part of its success. To me, it's a big literary house party, but I am serious about helping people

succeed. It sounds a bit "law of attraction", but you have to be convinced it will happen, then you work back and put the steps in place.'

THE LOCATIONS

'I didn't have any specific interest in castles or the 14th century to begin with, but have since discovered there's a history that brings something special to the retreats. To host the first one, in 2016, I was looking for a hacienda-style house in Spain. My friend Deb, who'd had experience with running writers' retreats, found a castle – Rocaberti Castle. I fell in love with it before finding out that it wasn't actually called Rocaberti; that was just the name of the family who'd previously owned it, but it stuck. Later, Miles Copeland (former manager of Sting and The Police), who already held song-writing retreats at his castle in France, asked if I'd like to host one there and, by coincidence, it was 14th century, too.'

FINDING SUPPORT

'I've received help from friends and family, and my cousin gave me a loan in order to help get the first retreat off the ground. There have been some nerve-racking moments when I've wondered if we can really pull it off, but I've taken the attitude of the theatre (my original training was in

stage management) and thought, "the show must go on." I'm now able to offer scholarships for each retreat, and we run a contest that's spread via our partners, including Final Draft.'

MAKING CONNECTIONS

'The castles are incredibly impressive and inspiring, but it's what happens in them that's at the heart of Rocaberti. We keep the retreats to a maximum of 16 mentees, so that there is enough time for them and the mentors to make real connections. At the last one, two mentors were holding court in the pool and there was non-stop talk about the film business. Of course, when those mentors meet with directors and agents, they're more inclined to introduce those writers who they've spent time with. So, those periods of downtime – including five days of meals, drinks and a party on the last night – are just as important.'

GETTING THE RIGHT MIX

'It's a very altruistic experience. The mentors aren't there to make tons of money or get loads of clients; they genuinely want to help writers reach the next level and launch their projects. (Since the beginning of this year, at least eight writers have projects in development with one of the mentors.) Regular mentors include producer Joan Lane,

who developed *The King's Speech*, Diane Drake, who wrote *What Women Want*, and David Paul Kirkpatrick, the former president of Paramount Pictures – so they're real experts. There's often as much opportunity for them as there is for the mentees, with the next big writer or project possibly in the midst.'

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

'At the moment, we host retreats in Spain, France and Italy, but I receive requests for Australia, South Africa, Mexico and the US. The castles are very inspiring and I'm not sure if taking the retreat out of that setting would remove some of its magic. It might be great to do it in the Australian outback, but would it translate? Maybe I'll try it.'

STAYING MOTIVATED

'I just feel it's what I should be doing at this point in my life, and I'll carry on as long as that's the case. Six years ago, I knew no one in the film industry, and going from being a writer on my own to having recently written and directed a movie has been a steep learning curve. To use another cliché, if I can do it, anyone can, and I would like to get that message across to people.' ■

rocabertiwriters.com