



## Adventures in the Screen Trade

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# Adventures in the screen trade

The Binger Filmlab: where the screenwriting future is being made today.

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**F**ADE IN.  
With those words, a film script begins. Coffee-drenched months or years later, the annoying ads and trailers finally cease, the lights dim just a little bit further, you snuggle down into your cinema chair and surrender yourself to the story that will unfold on the screen before you.

After an hour and a half or so you'll emerge, sometimes irritable about that €9 wasted, but at other times

feeling like your emotions have been turned inside out. That the story you have just witnessed has radically changed your perceptions and allowed you to grow a little as a person. This experience happens when a wonderful story is told powerfully, and in Amsterdam, there hides a jewel of a place where stories are nurtured with incredible care before being turned loose into those darkened movie theatres all over the world.

The Binger Filmlab is housed on two floors of a

handsome old building at the top of Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal. You could easily miss it as it doesn't draw attention to itself, but even though many people who live here might ask 'Binger what?' on the international film circuit, mentioning the name commands immediate attention and respect.

Conceived as an idea in 1993, the Maurits Binger Film Institute opened its doors in 1996 as a post-academic training facility for film professionals to improve



both their skills and the quality of their projects. Ten years on, it has grown past its institute phase into the renamed Binger Filmlab, to more fully reflect the hands-on nature of what actually goes on within its walls. And it's no accident that it sounds a bit like another rather famous Lab in Sundance—there is an understanding between the two organisations that the Binger in many ways is Sundance Filmmakers Lab's European equivalent.

Around 40 participants attend the Binger's two five-month programmes each year: one stream for writers and script editors and the other for directors. Producers attached to a writer's or director's project can also attend either programme to follow their project's development.

From day one, it has always been an internationally focused facility, the thinking being that there is no better way to stimulate the local industry than with cross-pollination. To that end, even though all sessions are conducted in English, the accents could come from anywhere. On a recent visit, participants came from fields as far as Iceland, New Zealand, Hawaii, Romania, Serbia, Colombia, Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Italy, with a good selection from the Netherlands. While the ultimate techniques may vary in the end, storytelling is a universal process, and the diversity of the sessions often is the thing that helps stories grow and transcend their borders.

Just as the participants are professionals taking a few months off alongside their careers to focus on their stories, the core advisors are similarly people with very active professional lives. No dusty, tenured professors here, but rather key people from the international film industry who over the years have come to respect what the Binger is up to and who see their repeated visits as additional opportunities for learning and discovery.

Molly Stensgård, editor of, amongst others, Lars von Trier's *Manderlay*, *Dogville* and *Dancer in the Dark*, has conducted a number of workshops there. 'I like the atmosphere and the participants' attitudes. It's exciting work for me and it sharpens my own views on scripts and film,' she says.

Canadian screenwriter, author and New York University professor Ken Dancyger has been involved with the Binger since day one, helping writers at an early stage in their projects get a feel for what tone and genre might serve their story the best. Under his wise tutelage, a writer may discover that what they passionately believed was going to be a 'psychological social horror thriller' could perhaps work much more effectively by borrowing the story structure of a western. At this stage of the process it's not about being right or wrong, it's about discovering what tools a film-maker has at his or her disposal, and then deciding how best to use them. According to Dancyger: 'Great stories are about adventure and a sense that at the beginning you have no idea exactly where you may end up. A bit the way I feel each time I come to the Binger. It's always exciting and new, and I always leave with much more than I arrived with.'

Like Dancyger, other tutors come for short stints on focused sessions during the trajectory of a project's development. That could be a three-day intensive on logline and synopsis-crafting from British film industry veteran Christian Routh; 10 days of in-depth story analysis from Gyula Gazdag, Hungarian-American Artistic Director of the Sundance Filmmakers Lab; or a series of workshops examining structure and the heart and soul of film stories with author and dramaturg Dagmar Benke, co-founder of Script House, Germany's first film development agency. And that's not even taking into account the myriad of other professionals who take time out of their teaching schedules at the University of

Southern California, the University of California, Los Angeles, the UK National Film School, or fresh from the set of their latest production to add their expertise to the story-making process.

Binger's Artistic Director Marten Rabarts has been fine-tuning programme structure for the last six years, and can now confidently say that there is nowhere else like it. 'For film-makers this is an incredible resource, because our programmes are uniquely tailored to the individual projects on hand at any given time. People are given opportunities they would never get on a film set, to really immerse themselves in exploring many aspects of their project. Directors, for instance, often re-engage with material they might have written a year or so previously, and through investigation of themselves as artists, find how they can bring these discoveries to bear upon their work in fresh and interesting ways.'

The results are being seen far and wide. Many Dutch film-makers have passed through some aspect of the Binger's process; perhaps as writer and director tutors like Jean van de Velde and Rutger Hauer, or even as actors like Antonie Kamerling, Tygo Gernandt and Willeke van Ammelrooy, who have all acted in reading workshops of Binger scripts-in-progress. The local scene is being invigorated, and Binger projects are currently going into production in locales as far flung as New Zealand, Uruguay, Brazil, Germany and South Africa,

and as close to home as Drenthe. One thing the combined international experience of the Binger participants is able to make evident is that, by sharing our stories, we gain insights into neighbours we never necessarily considered as such. Very often, while one person is relating the absolute specifics of small-town life in a village in Argentina, someone from the other side of the world will be

shaking their head with a smile and acknowledging, 'The exact same thing happens in my town.'

The Binger is unique, and uniquely Dutch, largely thanks to the Holland Cultural Haven policy that has been in place for many years. It's the belief that artists who spend time in the Netherlands not only take teachings and inspiration away from here, but also contribute significantly to the Dutch cultural landscape. It's a give-and-take approach of cross-pollination, made evident by some of the upcoming Binger events that extend beyond the core five-month programmes. At the Netherlands Film Festival in Utrecht this month, the Binger will stage its annual public film personality interview, co-hosted by industry magazine *Screen International*. This year, Finn Halligan will interview widely acclaimed Bosnian writer director Jasmila Zbanic, who took the Golden Bear Award for her first feature *Grbavica* at this year's Berlin Film Festival. In early October Binger à la Carte, the side programme of short masterclasses and workshops, will offer a two-day class (taught in Dutch) with film writer Willem Capteyn. And in the coming weeks, to coincide with its tenth birthday, the Binger will launch a brand new website complete with individual pages featuring audio and video works from past and present participants.

Across the top of the building housing the Binger, stonework lettering reads 'GEBOUW 'T EINDE VAN DE WERELD', from the days when this building was actually on the edge of the harbour. Given the stories that are now being created within this building to then go out to light up cinema screens in every corner of the planet, perhaps it's time for a little retooling of those words cast in stone. Amsterdam's Binger Filmlab is truly a building at the beginning of the world.

# Interview with Molly Stensgård, editor for Lars von Trier.

**How did you first become involved with the Binger?**

I was invited to do a lecture at the Holland Festival in Utrecht in 2003. The Binger invited me to continue with them right after that.

**What do you actually teach at the Binger? Or perhaps, how do you teach it?**

I start with a lecture on my ideas on editing in general and my work with Lars von Trier. Then with the entire group present, I spend one to one-and-a-half hours on each participant's project based on their treatment, directors intention, earlier work, etc. They do a presentation, showing clips, etc. We discuss (and I ask about) the essence of their story (not what happens, but what is it about), characters, subtext, tone, mood, pace, how they imagine their written story transformed to film.

**Is there something that is unique about the Binger, something that sets it apart from other films schools, labs or institutions you have taught at?**

At other locations I mostly give lectures. The Binger sessions are different because they're actually workshops. I always try to get people working with *why* their story should be done and what the story is about—not what happens, but what it is about. That is often very personal, difficult kind of work. It is effective with Binger's workshop approach because each student has a project of their own to discuss. And because we are in a small group they get to experience the process several times, with their own project and with the others. Plus, the Binger has a focus on content first—aesthetics or form, second.

**I am often surprised that Amsterdammers I meet have never heard of the Binger, and yet I feel its international profile is quite high. Can you comment on that? If the Binger does register on an international level, what is the perception of what it is?**

I do also find the level quite high. It is debutants or up-and-comers that attend the Binger, but they are very good. I have no idea why Dutch people would be unaware of the possibilities that the Binger could provide them and their work. But I do think the Binger is also focusing differently now on its connections with the local industry, for instance by adding their Binger à la Carte programme, where people can do short series masterclasses besides the regular full-time five month programmes.

**As an editor you have tremendous power over how a scene can end up looking. Do you think in general that writers and directors perform their functions on the creation of a film with enough awareness of the role their editor can play?**

The directors I work with do. I can only talk about the Danish, but in general they are very aware of it.

**Are there special things regarding you and your relationship with the staff and participants of the Binger?**

Marten Rabarts is, for me, the most important connection at the Binger, because he's an absolute dynamo, he's enthusiastic, and I simply like him. His approach of helping the participants find the personal angle in their work, find why making film, and this particular film, is important to them is a solid through-line in the Binger's process. But I also find the atmosphere there very good and think the entire staff contributes to that feeling.