

‘It’s been incredible. It’s basically a year of film school in the space of a week’

Skye-based producer Chris Young has a vision of a film and television talent school on the island. **Brian Ferguson** reports on the pilot scheme, which saw six promising filmmakers mentored by some of the best in the business

It is gone 11pm on a rainy Sunday night on the Isle of Skye and a gaggle of teenagers are huddled outside a pizza restaurant.

Gathered in the wake of rumours that one of the stars of *The Inbetweeners* is dining in their village, their detective work and patience is rewarded when actor Joe Thomas emerges to pose for photographs.

Eagle-eyed observers of Cafe Sia's Facebook page may have later spotted some other familiar faces dining with Thomas, including his co-star from *The Inbetweeners*, Hannah Tointon, film producer Andrew Macdonald, musicians Donald Shaw and Karen Matheson, and River City star Tony Kearney.

For the gathering's instigator, it will become the regular new normal in Skye if a vision of a new film and television talent school comes to fruition in the next few years.

When I visit the island that has been his home for almost 20 years, Chris Young, the producer of *The Inbetweeners* is in the midst of overseeing the week-long pilot for a project he envisages being his long-term “legacy” for Skye.

Inspired by Robert Redford's Sundance Institute in the United States, Young's talent school is up and

running just 18 months after he set out his ambitions for the project at the Glasgow Film Festival.

The concept is fairly simple but according to Young, producer of the first Gaelic feature film and BBC Alba's first continuous drama series, *Bannan*, is unique in the UK. His new Young Films Foundation has identified six rising stars of the Scottish filmmaking world and aims to help them get their latest projects off the ground via a week of intense workshops and masterclasses at his long-time base at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the island's Gaelic college, which has its own TV studio.

Backed by initial funding from Film 4, Channel 4, MG Alba and Creative Scotland, Young delved into his extensive contacts book to bring the likes of Robyn Slovo, producer of *Morvern Callar* and *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, Georgina Lowe, Mike Leigh's long-time collaborator, *The Night Manager* screenwriter Francesca Gardiner and Portuguese director Victor Gonçalves to Skye for the fledgling venture. Along with the six participants, invaluable experience is also secured by the new generation of actors, writers, producers and directors Young has developed working on *Bannan* since it went into production in 2013.

Young says: “Writing, producing and directing talent doesn't get enough opportunity in Scotland.

“It feels there is a place for new talent to discover what they can do and fulfil their full potential. This is a kind of springboard for that.

“It's all about relationships — film and television is such a collaborative medium. Skye is such a unique place. I really want to bring professionals from around the world who are at the top of their game and have them interact with young new wannabe talent. It is as much about the people as the projects.”

More than 100 applications were received for the initial residency programme which I dip into for a couple of frenetic days, with the six participants — Caitlin Black, Pauline Boyle, Rory Gibson, Robin Haig, Chih-Peng Lucas Kao and Tormod Macleod — selected after pitching to an expert panel at this year's Glasgow Film Festival. No previous writing, directing or producing experience was necessary, although all contenders had to be based in Scotland to be eligible.

Fascinatingly, half of the projects were merely ideas when they were pitched in February, while the others have been in various forms of development for years.

Black, 27, who works in the advertising industry in



Glasgow, is pursuing her first writing project in *Blue Badge*, a six-part sitcom inspired by her mother's own experiences of training to be a Scottish tourism guide.

She says: “I literally had the idea the week before the deadline to apply for this. “When I find out that I'd got through to the next stage I was just gobsmacked. Pitching was terrifying but exhilarating. When I heard I'd got a place I started making a full-blown ‘bible’, including what the story is about, who the characters are, casting ideas, its visual style and so on.

“It's been so fast-paced during the residency, but I've got so much out of it. We are not just in a show and tell situation, as there are some really incredible people here

with us that we can learn from. We're really at the forefront of the whole week.”

Boyle, 34, who has worked for a number of television production companies in Glasgow, is working on a drama series, *Arcane*. It focuses on an award-winning journalist forced to go freelance who stumbles across a story about the sinister influence of a drug network in the city.

She says: “I've only been working on my project for about six months. I really developed the character for the application process.

“At that point I knew that I wanted to write my own story, that it would probably be a crime thriller, and have a woman as the main character. I knew I didn't want her to be a detective, but I wanted her to be in that whole world.

“The story is really inspired by everything that's been going on in the news recently. As a society we don't really trust anyone or anything anymore. But I'm interested in what happens when you don't have a strong press, if it collapses or isn't properly funded, and if there are no checks and balances on big institutions. My dad was in the police and I think that's probably what's drawn me to the world of crime.”

The feature film that Gibson, 29, from Ayrshire, is planning will explore the

“taboo” over intimate male friendships via a story of a young man haunted by the death of friend in a car crash. He says: “I really want to look at an intensive relationship between two young guys. I feel like it's something we don't see very much on film. I am really interested in notions of masculinity, what it is to be a man, what that friendship should be like.

“I hadn't actually written anything when I first read about the course. I wrote the project specifically for the residency. I really only had a theme for something I wanted to write a film about. I thought it would be good to give myself a goal.

“I was really pleased to get on the course. I didn't really know what to expect. We weren't really privy to what was going to be going on until a couple of weeks beforehand when we got a timetable. It was only then we realised there were some really significant people involved.

“It's been incredible. It's basically a year of film school in the space of a week because of the intensive learning curve.”

Tormod Macleod, 25, from the Isle of Lewis, has drawn on its heritage of summer ceilidh dances to create a backdrop for his “boy meets girl” drama, which is set in the 1970s.

He says: “I've probably been

thinking about the idea since I left school.

“I initially pitched it as a film, but I'm definitely seeing it more as a three-part series now.

“I didn't have a script when I pitched in Glasgow and still don't have one, actually. I have one episode now, but didn't want to carry on writing too much in case things changed or different ideas came up during this week.

“It's been so insightful. It's been amazing to hear so many people talk about something you've written. It can't but help us. They have been through this themselves — they will know if something works or doesn't work.

“It's been good hearing when someone says they like what you've done — even if it has a ‘but’ after it. “It really feels like it will be about pestering people to get it made.”

Haig, 38, admits she leapt at the chance to apply for the course on an island close to her home in Dornie, on the Kintyre peninsula.

Her planned feature film, *Beyond the Silent Glen*, is inspired by her upbringing in a glen scattered with ruins from the Highland Clearances.

Haig, who has already won a BAFTA Scotland New Talent Award for a short film she made with Taggart star Blythe Duff, says: “I've

had the story for *Beyond the Silent Glen* bubbling away for a number of years and had already taken it from an unformed idea to a story outline stage at a previous filmmaking residency, when I worked with a historian and a story developer.

“It was really exciting when I heard about this residency on Skye because it's literally on my doorstep.

“I felt this course would allow me to really interrogate the story and the characters, get my story to a better place to allow me to write a full treatment, and get the exposure that I think I need to bring on board a producer and writer.”

Lucas Chih-Peng Kao's psychological drama, *Goodbye Eli*, about a Taiwanese woman who adopts a friend's identity after coming to visit her in Edinburgh, will be drawn on the 33-year-old's experiences of relocating to the city.

He says: “It has been burning in the back of my head for the last few years, but it's taken me a while to assemble it into something that I think is presentable.

“I was born in Taiwan and spent 10 years there but have now been in the UK for more than half of my life.

“I also know a lot of women from Taiwan who say they feel a sense of freedom when they are in the UK.

“I think you have to tell



Writer/director Mairead Hamilton and Chris Young mentoring Pauline Boyle



Chih-Peng Lucas Kao pitches his film idea, above; writer Olivia Hetreed during a scriptwriting session

stories about something you know or something you are familiar with. If it connects with you then you can connect with the audience.”

Young, who will unveil the next batch of episodes of *Bannan* at the Edinburgh International Film Festival on Sunday, already has his sights set on the course returning in 2019 if he can secure funding.

He says: “It feels like a success and it feels like we're addressing a huge gap. I don't know of anything

else in Britain where this is happening. “So many of the mentors have already told me they want to come back for a whole week next year.”

Bannan star Mairi MacLennan, one of four actors who helped workshop scenes on the six projects, says: “For anyone interested in acting, writing, producing or directing, it's been such a good opportunity. Hopefully this will be the first of many.”

Joe Thomas adds: “The participants have all got very different ideas. They're all at

quite an advanced stage and definitely all have something about them.

“I was on holiday when Chris rang me to tell me about the course. I really warmed to it right away as he has put so much into developing the industry on Skye. If it becomes an annual thing I'd definitely like to be involved again.

“It feels like I've learned as much as anyone from being here. Chris has bought so many interesting people together — I've never come across anything quite like it.”