

My dinner with Q.C.

by Douglas Bowie

For a writer each ring of the phone is a thrill of hope, the air instantly pregnant with possibility that this may be The Call, The Definite Offer, The Turning Point - an end to all this Mickey Mousing around. A tiny balloon of expectation pricked by the voice of an Electrolux salesman or a mother-in-law. Or Cinema Canada.

At first blush it seemed a simple enough request. Would I take a look at the industry from a writer's perspective? Reflect on what it's been like to be a screenwriter, a TV writer for (my god) ten years. Fifteen hundred words or so, replete with pithy comments.

Maybe it was the pith that did me in. A glance through back issues reveals an abundance of it - most of it pessimistic. It seemed pointless to write yet another piece with a title like "Lament for an Industry" or "Poor Hollywood Imitations" or "Cinema's Last Stand" or "Canada at the Crossroads (Again)" or "Sitting on the Foggy Edge Waiting for Godot" (or, for the past many months, "Waiting for Pay Dough.")

It's not that the Issues aren't Important - The State of the Industry, Where We All Went Wrong, How Come the Australians Can Do It and We Can't?, What Will Pay-TV Do To the Country Our Children Have to Live In? - but these have been hashed, re-hashed, and hashed again.

I had resigned myself to not adding to the hash when I ran into an old friend from law school, "Q.C." We hadn't seen each other in ten years, but we had been like twin brothers once. Now he was immaculately tailored, pink with prosperity. I was neither. He insisted on taking me to dinner at Kingston's finest restaurant where I picked at my dinner and pondered what might have been.

FADE IN.

INT: A PONDEROSA - EVENING

QC: (To waitress) A bottle of your best - loosely speaking.

ME: So, you look like chasing ambulances agrees with you.

QC: Think of it as jogging with a purpose. Actually you don't look as bad as I thought you might. For someone who presumably hasn't slept much in ten years.

ME: I sleep like a baby.

QC: You don't lie awake nights agonizing over that foolhardy decision you made?

ME: Decision - ?

QC: To quit law school and become a poet.

ME: A script writer.

QC: That makes a difference? Why would anyone who wasn't *non compos mentis* choose abject poverty and a never-ending struggle with writer's block when he had a sure-fire ticket to a lofty career, a loftier tax bracket and a

film, TV, a few for radio. About half of them have been produced.

QC: Only half?

ME: That's not such a bad percentage, believe me.

QC: So why don't I read about you in the paper?

ME: You do. As in the sentence "So and so (fill in one of a dozen names) says the problem with Canadian movies is that

doing. Someone said that there are two kinds of moviegoers - a large mass of dummies who think the actors make up their lines, and a small body of sophisticates who know the director does.

QC: And the reviewers -

ME: All terribly sophisticated. It amazes me how often I'll read a laudatory review of a film or TV drama without seeing the writer's name at all. Critics who are guilty of this would never dream of reviewing a stage play without mentioning the playwright. And it's not just in reviews. It's in general news coverage of films, everywhere.

QC: Your dinner's getting cold.

ME: The trouble is, even people who should know better think of the screenwriter as essentially a creator of dialogue and nothing else. I've had a director I worked with refer to me as "the dialogue man." In front of cast and crew.

QC: Presumably you set him straight on the spot.

ME: No. I needed the job. But the fact is that a good screenplay has everything a good film has - structure and pace, style and mood, visual elements, locations, emotion, and dialogue - not to mention telling the damn story. Don't yawn.

QC: No, no. It's fascinating.

ME: Often things that are right there in the screenplay are attributed to the director. Hollywood legend has it that Robert Riskin, who wrote *It Happened One Night*, got a little tired of this and finally handed Frank Capra a wad of blank pages. "Here," he said. "Give that the Capra touch."

QC: From all of this I conclude that it bothers you that you're not rich and famous.

ME: No, but it bothers me that the craft of script writing isn't given the respect it deserves. It bothers me that writing novels or plays is considered somehow more noble or serious than writing scripts.

QC: Presumably you were free to write plays or novels.

ME: It happens that I've always been more interested in film and TV. Why should I be penalized for preferring to work in what seemed to me the more dynamic, relevant, exciting medium? Why is writing a play which is staged in a church basement and seen by 27 people, 26 of whom are related to the author or someone in the cast (the 27th is the Globe and Mail reviewer) more inherently worthwhile than trying to write something that will touch or even just entertain millions of people?

QC: But do Canadian movies really touch or entertain millions of people?

ME: You're slipping in a Big Question while I've got my mouth full.

QC: You can't have forgotten Gorsky on Cross Examination.

ME: O.K. You're right. I can't honestly say the Canadian public has a strong



closet full of Saul Korman suits? Stop whimpering.

ME: Sorry.

QC: You have to admit it was an odd sort of ambition.

ME: O.K. I admit it. Someone said that wanting to be a screenwriter was like wanting to be a co-pilot. I guess wanting to be a Canadian screenwriter is like wanting to be a co-pilot in a country with one unscheduled airline which has managed only seven or eight successful manned flights - some of those with foreign pilots.

QC: I hate to ask how you've supported yourself. Driven cabs or - ?

ME: I've supported myself by writing. Period. Something like 50 scripts for

there are no good scripts." Editors keep variations of this on file and stick it in on slow news days.

QC: Do I detect a note of bitterness?

ME: Aren't you sensitive? For a lawyer yet. But no, I'm not bitter. Hell, at the moment I'm enjoying the sweet smell of semi-success. I think a screenwriter simply gets used to existing in an anonymous netherworld, out of which he's occasionally hoisted so some critic can beat him about the ears for the failure of a given film or, if he's feeling ambitious, for the failings of the industry as a whole.

QC: And if a film happens to be a success?

ME: That, of course, is the director's

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positive feeling about Canadian films.
QC: But they do have a feeling about them – a feeling that they're boring, they're depressing, and the people in them don't have tans.

ME: Christopher Plummer has a wonderful tan.

QC: But you're on the horns of a dilemma, aren't you? You want to work in a popular, relevant, exciting medium when most Canadians – if they think about Canadian movies at all – consider them about as popular, relevant and exciting as the postal service.

ME: Mmm. It's a toss up.

QC: Maybe you should have gone to Hollywood.

ME: Maybe. Maybe not. I'm sure there are just as many unproduced scripts floating around down there.

QC: And complaining writers?

ME: Who's complaining?

QC: If you did get something produced then wouldn't the quality be better?

ME: In features, probably. But I think TV drama, with occasional exceptions, is actually more ambitious here, far less locked into tired old formulas. On *Empire, Inc.*, for example, I've had the freedom to do pretty much what I wanted for six hours. I certainly wouldn't have that writing for *Love Boat* or *Fantasy Island*. That's Holiday Inn writing – no surprises.

QC: So what would God do with the Canadian film industry if he had the money?

ME: Not to mention brains, guts, foresight, taste,chutzpah – and Harry Cohn's ass. Well, maybe he'd stop constantly harping on the "feature film industry" as if it's a self-contained entity. There is a snobbishness about feature films which is unjustified, just foolish, based on their track record in this country. We shouldn't be talking about developing just a feature film industry, but a whole creative pool flowing freely between features and television and perhaps theatre as well. This isn't a new idea with me. If you read old copies of *Cinema Canada*...

QC: Are you kidding?

ME: Anyway, Sidney Newman said in an interview back in 1974 that the obsession with feature films was naive. We were trying to run before we could walk. A thriving feature industry doesn't spring full-bodied from the head of Zeus or a section of the Income Tax Act. It grows naturally out of an amalgam of writers and directors and actors working in a viable TV drama and theatre.

Surely this still applies today. We've tossed away misguided millions trying to emulate *Jaws* or *Star Wars* and ended up getting drowned or lost in space. But *Flamingo Road*? We don't have to try to emulate that. We could make it hide its head in shame. That's where the void is. That's where the opportunity is. There's a whole middle ground between the Cheez Whiz of *Knots Landing* and the

ethereal reaches of *Masterpiece Theatre*, ground ripe for occupying. That's where our better filmmakers could find an audience. That's where they could be directing their talents, developing their talents, instead of palely loitering, lusting after every tarty little feature that smiles seductively and then vanishes in the mist.

QC: Taxing your metaphors a bit there.

ME: Pierre Berton comes to mind. I'm sure there are others. Make this an oasis of quality entertainment where the best Canadian writers, directors, actors could work without feeling they were slumming. The base is there. The CBC does all sorts of good shows. But they come on randomly. Different times, different nights. They're not habit-forming for an audience.



So how would all this happen?

ME: I'd like to see the CBC show the same kind of boldness and imagination it's showed with the ten o'clock news, and *The Journal*. Stop going head to head with *Masterpiece Theatre* every Sunday night. Pick a different night. Establish a beachhead. Package it. Promote it. Let people know this is the night for quality, entertaining drama – something worth staying home for, worth skipping *Quincy* for. Focus mainly on mini-series which have a better chance of hooking and holding an audience. Find a host, someone with credibility and a national following.

QC: That's a short list.

QC: We've got the resources to do this sort of thing week after week after week?

ME: I doubt it. Our films would have to alternate with a selection of some of the best series from elsewhere. But this might actually help, because what would be sold to the audience would not be Canadian stuff, but good stuff, period. And gradually this juxtaposition might impress on people that the Canadian series they were watching this month was every bit as good as the British or Australian one they watched last month. And this damn stigma on Canadian films might begin to fade.

QC: But if the audience thought the

Canadian shows weren't as good – ?

ME: I don't think that would happen, and for a reason you'll understand – the precedent exists. Thirty years ago all this doom and gloom about films could have applied to the publishing industry. Then the Canada Council was formed and now there are CanLit stars everywhere. Twenty years ago we could have been talking about the record industry. The Canadian content regulations came along and now April Wine is a household word.

People don't buy the books of Richler or Atwood or Davies or a dozen others out of a stiff upper-lipped sense of patriotism. They don't go to hear Bruce Cockburn or Rough Trade or Dan Hill or dozens of others out of a sense of duty. They choose to go. They want to go.

Given the chance and given time Canadians have proved themselves perfectly willing to tune in, turn on, buy Canadian, whether it's Pierre Berton's books, or a Rush album, or *SCTV*, or *As It Happens*, or a Stratford play, or *The Beachcombers*. All of these reached a point of acceptance where, if anything, their Canadianness became – not an albatross – but an added plus, an extra filip of recognition or identification or whatever.

Sidney Newman had a test in that article I mentioned. Although a film industry can be given an essential boost by a tax shelter, in the long run it stands or falls on whether its practitioners prove themselves capable of captivating a mass audience. Well, we can name dozens, probably hundreds of Canadian artists in other fields who have met that test.

QC: But no filmmakers.

ME: Yet. Maybe David Cronenberg is progressing in that direction. And doesn't it say something that our most consistently commercial filmmaker is also our most consistently, relentlessly personal. But my point is that I refuse to believe, it makes no sense to believe that our filmmakers as a group are somehow less intelligent, or less dedicated, or less talented than our novelists or musicians or comedians or dancers. So, given time, and given an outlet –

QC: They too will come to enjoy Honour, Riches, Fame and the Love of a Devoted Public.

ME: You said it. I didn't.

QC: Why is that fellow with the camera backing up like that?

ME: That's an end shot. Pull back. Credits rolling. Music playing.

QC: Upbeat?

ME: Bittersweet and ambiguous. A real Canadian ending... (Sotto voce) Listen, uh, now that we're off camera, tell me honestly – do you think I should go back to law school?

FADE OUT. ●