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, rehashed, and hashed again.

I had resigned myself to not adding to the hash when I ran into an old friend from law school. "QC," 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 finest food 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 like awake nights agonizing over that foolhardy decision you made?

Douglas Bowie recently completed writing Empire, Inc., a six-part CBC mini-series and, in spite of everything he says here, is currently working on a feature screenplay.

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 object 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 moviemakers — a large mass of dummies who think the actors make up their lines, and a small body of sophisticated who know the director does.
QC: And the reviewers —
ME: All terribly sophisticated. It amazes me how often I’ll read a Nobody reviews a film or TV drama without seeing the writer’s name at all. Critics who are guilty of this would probably have read his review of a film or stage play without mentioning the playwright. And it’s not just in reviews. It’s in general news coverage of films, every-where. It seems 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.")

QC: Your dinner's getting cold.
ME: The trouble is, even people who should know better think the screenwriter as essentially a creator of dialogue and nothing else. I’ve had a director ask me to write a script with a dialogue 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 moviemakers — a large mass of dummies who think the actors make up their lines, and a small body of sophisticated who know the director does.
QC: And the reviewers —
ME: All terribly sophisticated. It amazes me how often I’ll read a Nobody reviews a film or TV drama without seeing the writer’s name at all. Critics who are guilty of this would probably have read his review of a film or stage play without mentioning the playwright. And it’s not just in reviews. It’s in general news coverage of films, every-where. It seems 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.")

QC: But do Canadian movies really deserve. It bothers me that 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 important than a script writer as essentially a creator of dialogue and nothing else. I’ve had a director ask me to write a script with a dialogue 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 moviemakers — a large mass of dummies who think the actors make up their lines, and a small body of sophisticated who know the director does.
QC: And the reviewers —
ME: All terribly sophisticated. It amazes me how often I’ll read a Nobody reviews a film or TV drama without seeing the writer’s name at all. Critics who are guilty of this would probably have read his review of a film or stage play without mentioning the playwright. And it’s not just in reviews. It’s in general news coverage of films, every-where. It seems 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.")

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 is 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 a poet. The trouble is, even people who should know better think the screenwriter as essentially a creator of dialogue and nothing else. I’ve had a director ask me to write a script with a dialogue 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 moviemakers — a large mass of dummies who think the actors make up their lines, and a small body of sophisticated who know the director does.
QC: And the reviewers —
ME: All terribly sophisticated. It amazes me how often I’ll read a Nobody reviews a film or TV drama without seeing the writer’s name at all. Critics who are guilty of this would probably have read his review of a film or stage play without mentioning the playwright. And it’s not just in reviews. It’s in general news coverage of films, every-where. It seems 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.")

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 is 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 a poet. The trouble is, even people who should know better think the screenwriter as essentially a creator of dialogue and nothing else. I’ve had a director ask me to write a script with a dialogue 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 moviemakers — a large mass of dummies who think the actors make up their lines, and a small body of sophisticated who know the director does.
QC: And the reviewers —
ME: All terribly sophisticated. It amazes me how often I’ll read a Nobody reviews a film or TV drama without seeing the writer’s name at all. Critics who are guilty of this would probably have read his review of a film or stage play without mentioning the playwright. And it’s not just in reviews. It’s in general news coverage of films, every-where. It seems 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.")

QC: I admit it. Someone said that wanting to be a screenwriter was like wanting to be a co-pilot. I want 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 20 scripts for...
He was immaculately tailored, pink with prosperity. I was neither. "Hell," I said, "I'm not bitter. At the moment I'm enjoying the sweet smell of semi-success."

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: 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 to.

QC: Is there such a thing as a self-contained entity? There's a snobbishness about feature films which is unjustified, just foolish, based on their 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 lolling, lustfully after every tarty little feature that smiles seductively and then vanishes in the mist.

QC: Taking 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.

QC: We've got the resources to do this. Let people know this is the night for quality, entertaining drama - something worth staying home for, worth skipping Quirky for. Focus mainly on masterpieces from elsewhere. But this sort of thing week after week after week.

ME: I doubt it. Our films would have to 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 it that fellow with the camera backing up when he's not?


QC: Upbeat?

ME: Bittersweet and ambiguous. A real Canadian ending... Isolto voce)

FADE OUT. •

Cinema Canada - April 1982/37